

LEARNING ABOUT MY MOTHER

By Delsie Olson Cousineau



Prologue:

I often wondered about my mother who died when I was two years old. Who was she? What was she like? Over the years, I gleaned information from friends and relatives and have written it down to share the memories of the life of Elin Irene Jarf.

Elin Irene Jarf was born on November 17, 1897 in Kumi, Finland. She emigrated to Canada with her brother, Alfred's wife (33 years old) and Alfred's children, Elisa (Sirkka Lissa) (Beth), Kaivo (Kaino), 2-year-old twins, Lauri (Lauri), Maria (Meeri), and Timari (Ilmar).

Jarf family picture: Alfred, Elin, Gustaf, Jenny, Lena Stina Glad, Meeri, Alma and Lauri



Left: Post card from my mother to her family in Kotka, Finland.

There was no boat traffic on the Baltic Sea from Finland due to the war so in order to reach a ship travelling to America, they travelled north by train to Sweden and then Norway.

They sailed on the Frederik V111 departing from Kristiana, Akerhus, Norway and arrived at Ellis Island on August 03, 1915.



Mother's first Sprague home, Alfred Jarf's homestead log cabin

The Jarfs were Swedish Finns. Their first language was Swedish and for many Jarfs, it was their only language.

Excerpt from my sister, Anna's book *Palette of Praise*.

Elin's first job was on a farm further west of the Jarf homestead but winter snowdrifts high enough to cover the dwellings and summer dust plus grasshopper plagues quickly discouraged her. She then applied and was accepted to work in a doctor's home near Thunder Bay. There she learned how a conscientious, middle class family managed to run a home, how to cook in Canadian style and, of course, to speak English. She reciprocated by teaching the children some Finnish songs and dances.

But Elin longed for her own family and one day happened across an ad in the local paper, placed by Olaf for his mother. In short order, she packed her belongings, said a reluctant good-bye to this family with whom she had been so comfortable and headed for Sprague.

She married Olaf Bernard Olson, on March 22, 1917. They had 8 children, Edwin, Ida, John, Anna, Alma, Adolph, Delsie, and Roger. Edwin died from Diphtheria in 1927.



Sketch by Anna Olson Hunter

During the Depression there was a shortage of food and the garden didn't do well. One winter, turnips cooked in every way that could be imagined, were the staple diet. Another time tomatoes grew well but they had a shortage of potatoes so they were pleased to trade with the Ostroms. When the large gunny sack was opened it turned out to be tomatoes! Mother was extra sad because she had traded with someone who spoke her language and they still had a misunderstanding.

One important and much used skill she had, involved nursing the sick and giving first aid. Her first job in Canada was giving home care to Dad's paralysed mother, Anna Gunderson, a job she continued after she and Dad married and his mother lived with them. During that time five children were born and needed her care. She nursed John and Edwin when they had diphtheria. Their siblings were told to stay out of the room but Ida snuck in to see Edwin shortly before he died. John recovered but lost a whole year of school and had to learn to walk again.



Adolph describes her as busy, special, clever, she knew everything and seemed to have a university education. She loved company. People felt free to visit. They would come in from the north and stop for coffee and a visit although many of them scarcely spoke English. She spoke English well with less accent than Dad's. When Uncle Jarf visited they practiced their Finnish.

When our mother returned from a trip to Winnipeg, she always brought a treat of cinnamon buns and fresh coffee bought at Eaton's. That smelled so good. Sometimes she bought gramophone records to play on the wind-up gramophone. When Adolph once asked John if he remembered her bringing him a record for his birthday, a glimpse of that delighted boy showed in his face as he remembered the special present. He smiled, and replied, "Yes, Johan Persnippen." That was the name of the tune, a Swedish schottische. She also bought some Wilf Carter records. She liked the pop tunes and sang along. Anna remembers her singing "Moonlight on the River Colorado". Alma remembers "Ramona".

They always had a real Christmas tree. Of course, there were no artificial trees then. They decorated it with real candles then sat around admiring it for a while then they had to blow them all out for the sake of safety.

Adolph remembers the one switching she gave him. He was running across the garden then through the house. She warned him, "Don't run across the garden!" He continued his rounds and she found a stout switch to use on his bottom.

She was a good gardener. The children had the job of picking potato bugs off the potato plants and dropping them into a can of Paris Green.

When older brother, John, went out to work on the harvest, Adolph was given the job of milking the cow. He thinks his mother probably helped him.

All agree that she was a cheerful person and an exceptional cook. She swapped recipes with friends. Her favourite spice was cardamom. When she made white sauce, white pepper was a necessity. Black pepper would make black specks in the sauce and that wouldn't do.

When one member of the family needed socks or mitts, Ida and Mother would each knit one in an evening so a new pair would be ready for morning. She got dress patterns from Mrs. Mann and made fancy dresses

with embroidery on them for Alma and Anna. She also made a fancy blue dress for Ida when she was a teenager.

Mother liked to dress up on occasion and had a nice navy dress and navy shoes with a little heel. She also had a good dress that was probably blue crepe with a lace collar. Her brown hair had a natural wave and she wore no makeup.

A skating party was held on the river near Kleven's, about a mile from Sprague. Ida was about 12 at the time. Because it was such a cold night Ida's friend talked her into wearing an extra pair of socks in her skates. After skating a while, Ida's feet were cold a situation made worse because the skates were small on her and they were cramped because of the extra socks. As soon as she got into the cabin to warm up, one of the women ordered, "Everyone with skates on get outside!" Being an obedient child, Ida did as she was told. When she finally was allowed in and took a skate off her foot thumped on the floor frozen solid.

The woman heard and saw it, then commanded "Run right home!"

Her feet thumped all the way home. When Mother saw them, she quickly cooked a big pot of porridge, placed it in two pillowcases and put Ida's feet into them. When she withdrew them, they discovered ice sculptures in the shape of her feet. Ida spent a long time in bed and suffered a lot of pain. Her feet turned black. People warned that they would need amputation. Mother quietly continued the porridge poultices until the feet healed, somewhat misshapen but pink and healthy.

In order to have medical care during the later part of her pregnancy, and the birth of her baby, my mother stayed with Bud Early and his wife in Winnipeg. Roger was born December 23, 1938. One bitterly cold night in January, my mother arrived home by train with the baby. Home was about a quarter of a mile from the station and no one was there to meet them! They didn't know she was coming. Our neighbour, the postmaster, Jack Mann, was at the station with the large, hand operated, sleigh that he used to bring home the mail. He hauled her and baby Roger home on the sleigh along with the mail.

Mother was so ill, she had to take the train back to Winnipeg. She died there in hospital January 10, 1939 from Uremia.

Before she left, Mother told Ida, "Look after the baby." It was an order Ida took seriously. When a young couple came to the house with the intention of taking the baby, Ida refused to let Roger go.

Ida stayed home for a few years keeping house and looking after the little ones. After that, Anna and Alma took time out of their young adult lives to do that job. Some years Ida or Anna, took the youngest, Roger and me, to live with them in their homes. Mother had a short difficult life. She left behind 7 children. She must have instilled the importance of a family because, somehow, we were able to remain as a family and always kept in touch with our siblings.



IDA'S LETTER ABOUT KEEPING ROGER

Roger, this is how you ended up being my baby.

In December 1938, when you were about nine days old; mom became very sick. Mrs. Emes (the Public Health Nurse) was called and came over about five a.m. The next morning, Dad carried her down the steps and they arranged a small bed for her to lay on. The last words I heard her say, "My feet are cold." So, I took off my new Christmas gift of rabbit fur slippers and put them on her feet.

They pulled her on a sleigh to catch the six o'clock train. There was so much snow. We waited every night for news of how she was. On about the eighth night at nine-thirty, Dad came home from meeting the train and said, "She's gone!" What a shock! All five of us kids just stood there unbelieving. Dad walked back and forth wringing his hands saying, "It's hopeless!"

Then a number of folks started dropping in and standing around murmuring to each other. I was sitting in the front room holding Roger. Delsie was upstairs asleep. Pete Mills and Ruth came to me holding out their arms and said, "We'll take him."

I said, "No, you won't!" They were astounded. Guess they thought they were solving a problem for us, but it never entered my mind to separate our family. I never gave my sisters, brothers or Dad a chance to say different. I still hope it was the right decision.

Ida Bacon