

Neil and Anna Sideen's Journey  
By Elinor Barr

Neil and Anna Sideen's eldest daughter, Mary Berglund, worked as a Registered Nurse in the CPR town of Ignace, Ontario, from 1940 until 1970. She pioneered the role of nurse practitioner, working closely with doctors in Dryden, and Ignace named its health clinic the Mary Berglund Family Health Centre in her honour. I am her daughter, and my story is about her parents' emigration from Sweden to Stanley, Ontario, a farming community near Thunder Bay.

Neil Sideen (1877-1959) was born Nils-Jonas Pehrsson, the fifth child of Katarina Nord and her husband Pehr Jönsson. He kept his patrilineal name Pehrsson until after his eldest brother took the surname Siden during compulsory military duty. The family lived beside a little lake, one of a myriad of lakes and rivers flowing into Storsjön in the northern province of Jämtland. Storsjön translates as "the large lake". When Nils-Jonas was five, his father died of pneumonia after a winter moose hunt on skis. Their home and property were sold at auction, and his mother had to go to work as a maid, taking her 3-year-old daughter with her. Little Nils-Jonas was "farmed out" as a child labourer, and the four older children had to go their separate ways too.

When he was eighteen, Nils-Jonas joined the Swedish cavalry, afterwards signing up for a second tour of duty. During his time in the service, he changed his surname to Siden, learned to write poetry and to train horses. It was while he was stationed at Frösön, an island offshore from Jämtland's capital city, Östersund, that he met his future wife.

Anna Karlsson (1872-1941) was born in the family home, Gräfsåsen, the eldest of four daughters of Karl Karlsson and his wife Johanna Jönsdotter. Gräfsåsen was located in a suburb of Östersund. When Anna finished school she went to work for a furrier in Östersund, travelling around the countryside buying furs and also sewing furs. She brought three fur coats to Canada, also a very nice letter of recommendation from her employer. Her sisters learned a trade too, Kristina to use a knitting machine, Maria was a milliner, and Brita became governess for an upper class Swedish family.

Tragedy struck three times when Anna was in her mid-twenties. Her father was a diabetic, although this disease was not yet known. He returned home in a diabetic coma one evening, but still riding his horse. The horse ran into the barn and her father's head hit the casing of the barn door, killing him instantly. It was 1896, and her mother died two years later. Her father's brother was appointed executor. Unfortunately, he was a drinker and a gambler, and lost the entire estate in a game of cards.

Nil-Jonas and Anna married on the fourth of July 1900, in Östersund. At that time a Scottish entrepreneur named Miller, who had lost his timber rights in Jämtland, planned

to move his entire logging operation, including staff and equipment, to Newfoundland, which was not yet part of Canada. The ship he chartered was to leave from the port of Trondheim, Norway. Nils-Jonas signed a contract to enter the company's employ, and with Anna left Östersund travelling through the mountain pass to Trondheim. On the ship a Scot asked Nils-Jonas his name, and told him he'd never get along in the new country with a name like that. He should have a good Scottish name like Neil. And that's how Nils-Jonas became Neil.

The ship was bound for St. John's, and Anna was very seasick. She was so grateful to Mary McLeod, the Scottish nurse who took care of her during the voyage, that she determined to name her first daughter Mary. The logging operation was set up in the interior, a new community called Millertown, but the couple was not happy there. After Anna gave birth to a son, the little family left on a small ship headed for North Sydney, Nova Scotia. Neil got a job as a carpenter, but all too soon the baby died. Heartbroken, Anna and her husband travelled west by train to Port Arthur on Lake Superior. They lived in a Swedish hotel where Anna worked as a chambermaid until Neil heard of new farmland opening up at Stanley. That the land agent was a Swede made the transaction much easier, since neither Anna nor Neil spoke English at that time.

Sideen Family Farm



The story goes that when Anna and Neil took the PeeDee train to Stanley in 1902, Anna saw cows feeding on a green hillside across the Kaministiquia River and immediately said “This is where I want to live”. Neil was able to get a homestead on the river's floodplain, and it was here that he, along with helpers, built a log cabin while Anna stayed with the land agent's brother and his wife. The cabin was finished in a month, just in time for Anna to give birth to a daughter in her new home. She called her Mary, as she had promised.



Neil signed the legal documents as Neil Siden but found that English tongues did not pronounce it right. So, he added an “e” to make it Sideen. Under the name Neil Sideen he wrote a poem about the Kaministiquia River, in English, that was published in the daily newspaper. The couple brought up three more daughters and four sons on their farm in Stanley. The barn, silo and wagon shed are gone now, but the two-storey home Neil built above the floodplain still stands, a monument to their hard work and perseverance.