

Going Home to Norway

by Tony Hanson

The first brick wall I confronted when I began my genealogical research was my grandmother's heritage. She was the only grandparent I ever knew, and I loved visiting her in her small home in Northern Wisconsin. Sadly, she died long before I became interested in my family history. All she left me was a burning desire to visit Norway.

It took a while, but I finally found a life partner (my wife Kathleen) who loved the idea of going to Europe as much as I did and so in 1992 we embarked on our first "trip of a lifetime" together.

For some reason I felt compelled to document the trip and wrote this in my journal while we were on a train heading for Oslo:

"Norway! Have just crossed the border at Kornsjø. Am seeing a lot of trees, hills, lakes and rocks. I have seen several vistas of wooded hills around beautiful lakes that remind me of the parts of Wisconsin that I love so much. As much as I love mountains, water and scenery like this, I have to believe that heredity has something to do with it. I feel like I am coming home."

Years later, I would discover that our train had passed through Sarpsborg and that we were less than 18 miles from Skiptvet, my grandmother's birth place, as I wrote those words. That still gives me chills when I think about it.

I got the genealogy bug in 1999 and started researching my grandmother's past. Some family members recalled her saying that she was an orphan; others said she claimed that she had been raised by gypsies. All I knew for sure was that her name was Inger Marie Dahl and that she had been born in Norway.

Repeated questioning teased out a

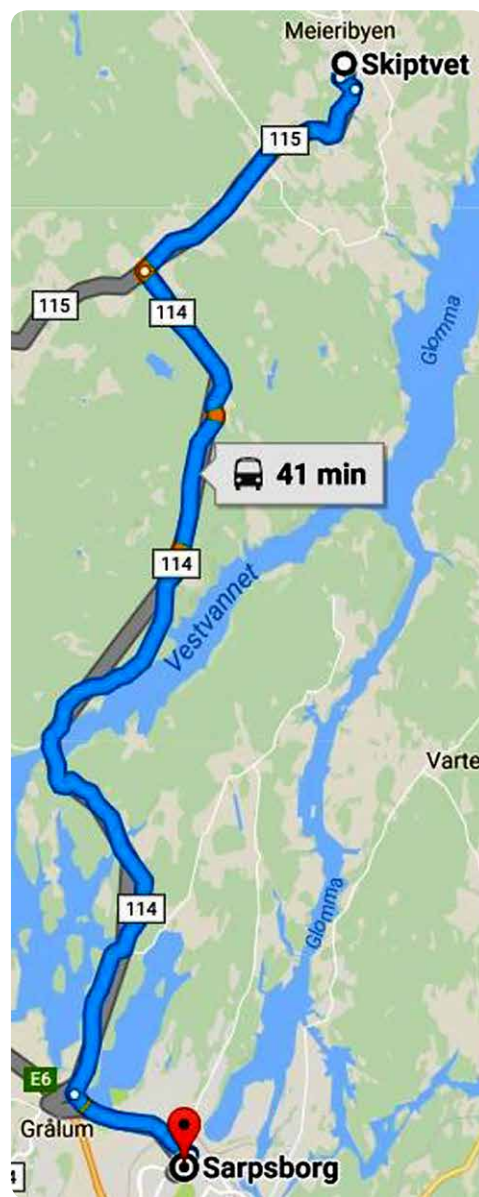
few more "facts" from my family. According to my mother, my grandmother's passage to America was arranged by a doctor in North Dakota with the understanding that they would eventually be married. Instead, she rejected the offer and worked to pay off her debt. My older sister, who shared a bedroom with my grandmother whenever she stayed with us, remembered her saying that she had been raised in a town called "Rakkistad."

My research eventually turned up a ship's record that showed an "Inger M. Dahl" arriving in New York, heading for North Dakota, whose nearest living relative was Mr. Anton Syverten from Rakkestad, Norway. Norwegian shipping records revealed an "Inga Marie Dahl (Antons)" from Rakkestad sailing out of Kristiana (present day Oslo). Church records from Rakkestad documented her 1886 birth to Anton Martin Syverssen and Laura Larsdatter, the birth of two brothers and two sisters, as well as the death of her mother when Inger was 5 years old.

Additional research eventually revealed that Inger's husband, Anton Edwin Hanson, descended from a long line of ancestors from Nesna in Northern Norway.

By 2006, I felt that I had learned enough (spoiler alert: I hadn't) to justify another trip to Norway to visit Rakkestad and Nesna and so Kathleen and I headed off for yet another "trip of a lifetime."

We flew into Oslo, rented a car, and made the one-hour drive to Rakkestad. It is not large enough to have a tourist information center, but it was big enough to make



Traveling through Sarpsborg on his first trip to Norway, Tony was only 18 miles from his grandmother's birthplace.

finding the church and cemetery difficult. As we sat in the car in the center of town, Kathleen asked me what I had hoped to accomplish. Apparently, "We just did it" was not the correct response, because I soon found myself being herded into what we thought was the city hall to get some help.

Fortunately, we had found the library instead. The librarian told us they had a part-time genealogist (Eva) who was normally not there on Tuesdays but had come in anyway. Eva generously gave up her planned paperwork and spent most of the afternoon working with us. We returned to Oslo after making plans to revisit the library the next morning.

We arrived on Wednesday morning to find the genealogy area full of volunteers and began uncovering some really fascinating information about my grandmother's family. About an hour after we had arrived, Eva sat back and said, "I think I know your cousin ... I grew up living next door to your cousins. You have very many cousins in this town." She then pointed out the window to a man who was working on a problem with the library's sewer and said, "That man is your cousin!" That clinched it for me!

Phone calls and text messages were exchanged and I soon found myself in the presence of several Norwegian cousins, descendants of my great grandfather's second marriage. Their resemblance to my Wisconsin cousins was striking.

I later learned that my grandmother had been raised by another family and left Norway when she was 22. No wonder she felt like she was an orphan.

We left Oslo feeling extremely fortunate and made the 14-hour train trip to the North to visit my grand-



Library volunteers at the Rakkestad library help Tony trace his Norwegian roots.



Syverssen cousins and Tony (on right) in Rakkestad.



Another Syverssen cousin poses with Tony.

father's hometown. We stayed in Mo I Rana, the nearest town with a hotel, and drove our rental car to the small coastal town of Nesna the next morning.

My research had revealed the name of the farm where my grandfather was born (Herset). It is marked with a sign next to the only road into and out of Nesna, a town that turned out to be even smaller than Rakkestad. Following an unproductive visit to the cemetery, we headed out of town, certain that we had used up all of our genealogical good fortune back in Rakkestad.

We stopped to take a few pictures of the Herset farm and watched as an approaching car arrived and pulled up at the house. My wife urged me to go down to talk to them, but I foolishly resisted. "Who is going to know anything after a hundred years?" I recall saying. Finally tiring of the roadside argument, I gave in and we drove down to the house.

The couple we encountered (Ellen and Ernst) was reserved but very nice. After I explained that my family had lived on the farm at one time they had a few quick exchanges in Norwegian, shrugged their shoulders, and invited us inside for some coffee.

It turned out that some American relatives who had just departed Nesna that morning had been in town all week. Ellen made coffee in the kitchen while Kathleen and I showed Ernst the information I had



Tony with the Herset farm in the background.



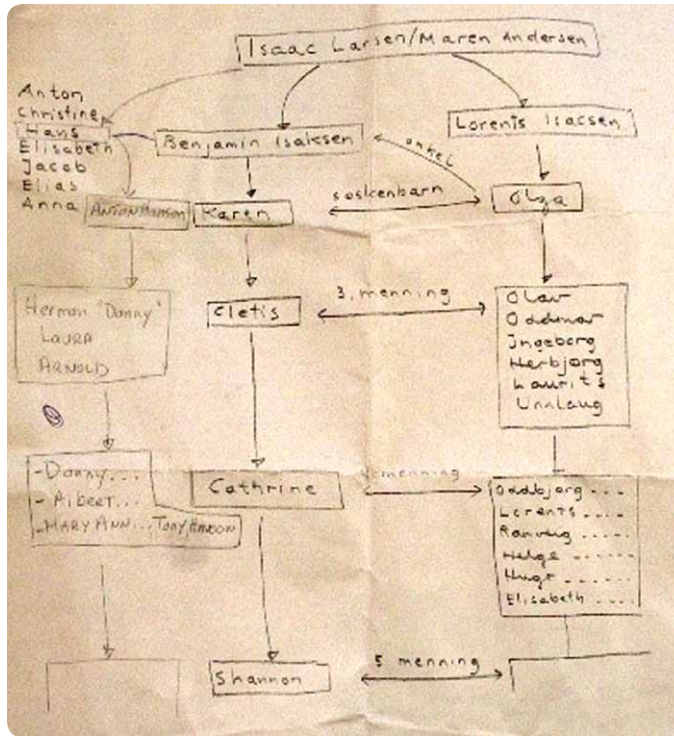
Tony with a few of of his newly found Larsen cousins.

about my family. Ernst produced a piece of paper with a hand-drawn tree of Ellen's family. As we examined it, I recognized several names and pointed them out to Ernst who then yelled into the kitchen, "Ellen, I think this man is your cousin!"

Ellen joined us, bringing the coffee and food, and the first of many cell phone calls and text messages began. Ellen's mother Ingeborg, who lives in a house on the farm, arrived. She watched as we confirmed the relationship and exchanged information about our respective branches of the family. Ingeborg is my second cousin once removed, so Ellen is my third cousin.

Ernst was amazed ... "You came to Nesna without knowing about any of us?" (Yes). "You didn't talk to anybody in town?" (No). "You just stopped here because of the farm name?" (Yes). Finally, he just shook his head and said, "You are very lucky!" I couldn't agree more.

Over the course of the next two days, we visited an endless stream of



Ellen's hand-drawn family tree is shown with Tony's branch added.

homes and farms, met many more cousins, drank a lifetime's worth of coffee, and ate a ton of Norwegian pastries. Kathleen later said she had never seen me look so happy. We spent our last night with Ernst and Ellen on the very property where my grandfather

and his father were born. We departed on the Hertilgruten (the Norwegian coastal cruise line) to begin our trip back home. While planning the trip, I had been focused on the past and imagined myself standing at the stern of the ship as it sailed south from Nesna, contemplating long dead relatives while retracing the route that they took on their long journey to Trondheim, through England, and eventually to North Dakota.

Instead, I found myself overwhelmed by the present and the warm, swirling memories of vibrant communities that were home to relatives whose existence I had been completely unaware of.

Footnote: Kathleen and I returned to Rakkestad and Nesna in 2017. I am happy to report that Norwegian hospitality and generosity has not diminished over time. ★

About Tony Hanson: Tony is genealogically bipolar – his father was the son of Norwegian emigrants, and his mother's grandparents all emigrated from Germany. He began to research his family in 1999 and is currently serving on the Board of Directors of the Dallas Genealogical Society as the Past President. Now retired from a 32-year career with AT&T, he enjoys traveling and is an avid amateur photographer.



Norwegian coastal cruise ship.

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Starstripes



Going Home

*Walking in
Your Ancestors'*

Footsteps



Contents

Features

- 5** Ancestral Paths: Galveston, Texas, to Marstal, Denmark
by Jeannette Piecznski
- 8** Connecting to My Maple Tree in Canada
by Devon Noel Lee
- 11** Going Home to Norway
by Tony Hanson
- 15** TxSGS Recognizes Quality Research, Writing,
and Websites with 2017 Awards
- 18** DNA Ethnicity Estimates (BioGeographical and Admixture
Estimates): Why the Differences?
by Debbie Parker Wayne, CGSM, CGLSM
- 24** Going Home: TxSGS Members Share their Experiences
by Susan E. Ball
- 35** Preparation a Key Component for Ancestral Adventures
by Sandra Crowley
- 37** Your Adventure is Over — Now What?
by Sandra Crowley
- 39** Photo Analysis Reveals Likely Reason for
Moss Family Homecoming
by Russell A. Rahn
- 43** Discovering What's between the Dashes
with The Portal to Texas History
by Dreanna Beldon
- 46** Holiday Wishes
- 48** TxSGS Annual Business Meeting Held Online 21 October 2017
- 53** Introducing New Officers for the 2018 and 2018-2019 Terms
- 58** New District Map Balances Partner Societies
- 59** Settling Accounts: Lewis C. Manson in Colonial Texas
by Beverly E. Stimson

Columns

- Editorial Policies **2**
- From the Editors' Pen **3**
- New Members & More **4**
- Book Review **17**
by William D. "Bill" Buckner
- Partner Society Roundup **74**
- Texas Heritage Certificates **78**
- TxSGS Society Leadership **80**
- TxSGS Policies **82**



Why Name our Journal Stirpes? Pronounced "STÛR'PEZ," it perfectly describes the core understanding of our passion in researching ancestry and family history: The phrase "... to my heirs, per stirpes" means that the legal heirs share their inheritance based on their relationship to the deceased." (See full story in *Stirpes*, 2016, Volume 55, Number 3-4)