

THE LIFE STORY OF OSCAR SWENSON

On nearly any given morning, in the sleepy little village of Newfolden, Minnesota, Oscar Swenson can be spotted making his way uptown. He walks the four blocks from his apartment nearly every day -- to get his mail, to get his groceries for the day, and -- most importantly of all -- to have some coffee with any "old jiggers" he happens to encounter along his juant.

At 82 years of age, Oscar may not be a spring chicken either, but his personality and general good health seems to make him a classic example of the old adage "You are only as old as you think you are".

Oscar William Swenson was born on April 27, 1904, in Stettler, Alberta. Stettler is a small town in Canada, and is near the city of Edmonton. His family farmed there, and Oscar can remember that coal and natural gas were so abundant that his family dug enough coal from the river bank nearby to heat the house comfortably even through the frigid tundra-like winters of Northern Canada.

When Oscar was 4, his parents, Gullick and Christina, moved their family to Athabaska Landing where they lived for 6 years. The Swensons owned a hotel in Athabaska Landing and Gullick owned a taxidermy shop also. Oscar helped the family whenever he could, and remembers that by the time he was eight or nine years old he was cleaning heads and such things in his father's shop.

At the time Oscar Had six brothers; Sam, Richard, Martin, Hilmer, Albert and Art. He also had three sisters; Hilda, Lena and Ann. You can tell Oscar has fond memories of Athabaska Landing by the stories he tells of his years there and by the excitement in his voice when he tells them. He tells of playing baseball with his brothers and other kids at the town baseball diamond. He tells of sliding nearly a mile downhill onto the ~~Peace~~ ^{Athabasca} River on a toboggen during the frigid Canadian winters and then walking back uphill to do it again. Of all the memories he holds dear though, those he probably enjoys to talk about most are those of his father.

Although Oscar did not see the Red River Valley until 1917, his father had homesteaded in East Valley Township, near what is now the village of Holt. Before he sold his homestead and emmigrated to Canada in 1900 - or "When Hilmer was a baby" as Oscar put it, Gullick did much to improve the township. One of his achievements was to dig the first well in the area with a well drilling machine operated by a horse circling the device and deepening the hole.

Gullick's move to Canada had done nothing to stifle his inventive mind either, as he is credited with discovering a safe, perpetual light for the town of Athabaska Landing. Electricity was still not available, and Gullick decided to use a copper pipe and the wealth of natural resources in the area, to create a lamp which never dimmed. The pipe had a small hole in it and when driven into the ground in the correct spot it tapped the reserves of natural gas just below the ground.

Although life for the Swensons was very good in Athabaska Landing, Gullick and Christina ^cdecided it was time to pull up stakes and move on again. They sold the hotel and taxidermy shop and used part of the money to travel across the border and into America.

When they first moved down from Canada, the Swensons spent six months in the town of Evansville, Minnesota, where Gullick and his oldest sons - Martin, Sam and Richard worked for a logging company.

In 1915 while the family was still in Evansville, Lewis, the baby of the family was born. Shortly after his birth their next move took them to Big Fork, which was also in Minnesota. Each move seemed to bring them closer to where they wanted to spend their lives and after only one year in Big Fork, the family moved once again. This move led them to a small farm eight miles out of Holt, Minnesota.

Their time in Holt was a period of great ^{is} grief for the Swenson family. First, Oscar's oldest brother, Sam, who was only twenty-four, died of pneumonia on the farm. A little over a year after Sam's death, another of Oscar's brothers was killed during a German bombing raid on a bridge in France. One ~~day~~ ^{month} later, on November 11, 1918, Germany surrendered and Armistace Day marked the end of World War I.

It is hard to imagine the reaction of a family anxiously awaiting the return of their own, only to find he too had been taken by this "War to end all wars".

Gullick bought a farm in East Valley Township in 1919 and Oscar remembers that he was happy to settle down and farm again.

Since his father was always working on a new machine, or hunting, or traveling, Oscar and his brothers found themselves doing most of the milking, planting and other farm jobs. But they weren't alone! Gullick hated manual labor and would often make bargains with neighbors under the terms that he would shoot game for them, or let them use his machines, and they would repay him with work hours rather than cash or goods. For Gullick this agreement worked very well, as he was a master hunter, and had guided many European nobles on hunting expeditions into the Canadian Wilderness.

Oscar is proud of his father's abilities and worked hard to emulate them. Although Oscar, like many children of his day, had only an eighth grade education, ^{he} was very clever and had an extremely keen mind. He could fix anything, was able to quickly understand electronics - which at that time was a virtually new field - and seemed to be a born administrator and leader.

Oscar and his brother Albert were both interested in electronics and had bought parts and built their own radios - they enjoyed building them, listening to them and there was a demand for the product but they could not sell them because of a little known law.

When Oscar was in his early twenties, he worked many different jobs including laying steamshovel track in the Hibbing mines, working in the North Dakota harvests and doing carpentry work with his brother Martin. These jobs may have been the source of the \$190.00 Oscar used to buy his first car, a Model 'T' Ford Coupe. He describes the car as being "About Eight Feet tall, an awful outfit"! Even so, he drove it often and hard. Tires were made of poor materials and only lasted about 500 miles.

When Oscar was about 25 years old, he decided to return to full-time farming. He bought a 1530 International tractor and a 32 Case thrashing machine. He was farming on his parents farm in East Valley and the nearest town to get to was Holt. Although now only a specter of a town, Holt was once an important place to people in the area. It had 2 hotels, an elevator, grocery stores, cafes, creamery and many different shops. Oscar - who is a great talker - made a lot of trips to Holt and although he tells of many reasons to go into town, those who know him get the idea that he probably sometimes just went to town to find someone to gab with. The creation of the Agassiz Refuge, however, drove away many people from their farms and soon it was obvious that this was the beginning of the end for Holt.

In 1934, while the rest of America was suffering from the great depression, Oscar bought his first new car. The Plymouth Deluxe that put him back \$825.00 but it was worth it, as the car served him faithfully for years. The depression, says Oscar, had less effect here than in many parts of the country. His worst experience during the depression was getting only \$7.00 for a good cow. It still aggravates him!

In 1944, when he was 40 years old, Oscar married Berget Hanson of Oklee, Minnesota. They made their home on the East Valley farm with Oscar's ailing parents, brother, sister-in-law & niece. On July 14, 1947, Oscar's father, Gullick, passed away after a battle with cancer. As so often happens, his mother Christina died soon after, on April 18, 1948.

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Olivia married Bob Newland in 1965 and now has a daughter, Nancy and a son, Dan--that's me. Grandpa Oscar has always been a devout family man and cares very deeply for his family and others. Grandpa and Grandma Swenson were always together when you saw them and her death in 1972 affected him deeply. He seemed to some to seclude himself from the world and tried his best to go on alone. This eventually began to pass, though, and Grandpa's grief was put aside by his great love of life.

Now, at 81, he has moved from the farm and is living in Newfolden, which is 15 miles from the old home. Grandpa has friends everywhere, and is often surprised when people he has never met call him by his first name.

He says his mind is going, but this seems to be highly ^{doubt} doubtful, as he has a keen mind, a sharp wit, and always seems to know what has happened, what is happening and what the forecast is for tomorrow. Some of the reasons for his mind working so well may be because he is interested and has worked on many community and church organizations. He was clerk of the Ringbo School and helped keep it going when students and funds were both running dangerously low. Grandpa was hurt badly when the little school closed in 1958.

Grandpa was also supervisor of the East Valley Townboard and is very proud of his part in road construction efforts in the township. He retired from the townboard in 1985 after 34 years of service. He received a farewell party and a plaque of thanks from the community. He also got his mug in the paper which he enjoys, although he'd never admit it.

Grandpa has held many jobs at the local church. He is still a member even now after his move and continues to hold the job of Cemetary Sexton which he has has held for over 25 years.

Grandpa is still very active, and enjoys to be outdoors. He also enjoys reading, watching TV, and most of all - just finding someone to play cards with (he's an expert at smear) and he likes to have someone to have coffee with or just to talk to.

His name won't appear in a history textbook, or on the cover of Time, but Oscar William Swenson has contributed much to many, and enriched the life of everyone who knows him.