

## Memories of Clarence the Swede by Rodney Hanson

From my early years, I can remember my dad loading my brother and myself into his '25 Chevrolet and on a Sunday afternoon, driving out east of Pelican Rapids to visit the "newcomers."

My memory tells me they had come from the "old country," struggling families in little shacks, trying to take root on an acre or so in Minnesota—sponsored or attached to some fellow Swede or Norwegian in the country.

My dad felt for them. He could talk their language and understand their struggle. I'm not sure if he brought them groceries (probably did), but I'm sure he brought them hope.

They were experiencing the same thing his folks and my mothers' folks had experienced. It was that way with Clarence, just out of Vergas, as I remember 30-40 years later.

Clarence lived about one mile out of town, in a small humble home with just the bare necessities. A wife and kid. A Swede doing odd jobs just to make ends meet.

My dad would stop in regularly and visit, and they'd tell each other stories in their Norwegian- Swedish tongue.

They talked the same language in more ways than one.

In later years, when he walked to town to shop, he'd stop by my folks' house for a cup of coffee. My mother, who was born in Sweden, would have cookies and rolls and of course, sugar lumps. Dunk one in the cup with your fingers, take a suck, put the rest in your spoon and savor the flavor and warmth.

Mom and he talked about the old country and in the old language and laughed heartily at themselves.

Typical Scandinavians.

Dad tried to provide work for Clarence when possible in our plumbing business. It usually boiled down to digging in a sewer line or digging in a septic tank by hand.

He was a hard and uncomplaining worker. We'd pick him up on the way to a job and as we did the "inside work," he'd pick up a shovel and start the "outside work."

Dig, dig, dig. Bury yourself further in the ground, start laying the curbing, and end the day's work with, "We did good, Hanson."

He started to call me "Hanson" like he always called my dad. It was like I had inherited that role as well as the role of reaching out to him and his family in the simple way we knew how.

My dad was good at that. He liked to help people and expected no badges' I was a young man searching for confidence and I liked it when Clarence called me "Hanson."

Clarence was one of the local after hours characters, the guy who would show up at "John's Place" for a beer

on a Saturday night, if he had earned a little extra pocket cash, feeling compelled to celebrate the hard week's work and compelled to entertain.

He could play a small accordion-type squeeze-box and sing like you never wanted to hear. The bar flies and their weary wives clapped loudly and felt emancipated from their own trials and hardships. A familiar story being told one more time, loud laughter, a drink from the guy at the end of the bar, a slap on the back from Ole's wife, a smoke from a young stranger, a wave from a woman. Inhibitions drowned.

Life is great!

Hear Clarence sing "Greet The Folks At Home" one more time in Swedish and wait for another round.

I picked Clarence up one day on the way to a job for a "big shot." (We called him that to make each other comfortable) up on Pelican Lake.

Dad wasn't with us that day. I was starting to take~over. Clarence looked a little hung over and I was prepared to let him lay low and get over it, so I said "Clarence, you feel like working today?"

"I'm OK, Hanson, but I had a tough night."

Wanting to know the rest of the story, I tried to get down to the details of the night before.

It seems some guy at "John's" questioned why Swedes aren't really greater than ordinary people. So they paired off and exchanged swings. It was soon over and no beer spilled.

I thought I saw a glint of amusement in those bloodshot eyes as he started to explain.

"Hanson," he said. "the first time I hit him, I missed him, and the second time, I got him in the same place.

I chuckled., and as I looked over to him I caught a smile sneaking through the snuff-stained stubble. I guessed he'd told that story before and was enjoying my reaction.

We rode in silence then as the overloaded pickup rattled down the gravel highway. Words would surface later. Thinking of the job ahead, I glanced over and wondered what was on his mind.

He was in his own world, lost in thought.

There would be another night at "John's." Perhaps Pete and Haldor would show up. Probably he could try playing "Nikolina" on the mouth organ. The guy at the end of the bar might be there. That woman might wave again.

I really didn't know what he was thinking. But I guessed. Dreams were taking shape. That Copenhagen smile was still there.

Life is great!



"John's Place"  
about 1948