

Johannes Andreas Britanus Larsen/ John Britton Larsen, 1885-1968

by his grandson, Jerry Larsen <jerryjan@comcast.net>

Toward the end of World War II in 1944 I remember sitting on my Grandfather John's lap in the evenings while he sat in his favorite chair in the large living room. This was in their beautiful big house located in Portland, Oregon, that had three stories plus a basement, which he built himself in the '20s. This was a fascinating place for a boy of 4—including the attic with its numerous trunks and boxes full of Norwegian costumes and other memorabilia.



Grandpa John & Jerry Larsen

Grandfather was born in June of 1885 to Lars Pederson and Rasmine Eliasdatter on the Røyra farm on the south end of the small island of Leinøy and named Johannes Andreas Britanus Larsen. This island is part of the Herø parish, which includes several islands to the southwest of Ålesund in Sunnmøre, which is part of the Møre og Romsdal fylke. He was the seventh child and fifth son of Lars and Rasmine. All eight of their children lived to adulthood, which was a rarity back then. When he came to America he changed his name to John Britton Larsen. By then they were using the adopted farm names in Norway (1903), but people could neither spell nor pronounce "Røren" in this country.

My father, who was born in Portland in 1912 to John and his new wife Brynhild, described the nature of the Norway farm and homestead to me based on his visit in 1924. This was the only time the family traveled back to the old country after emigrating. It had small trees, but was hilly and the ground contained more rocks than soil. Farm and pastureland was so limited that very few animals could be supported and growing anything was difficult. They lived a bare subsistence life, with fishing included in the mix. There were none of the bridges in 1885 that now exist, so if one wanted to leave the island, one rowed.

The oldest son was destined to take over the farm, which he did in 1910. There was not enough property to do any of the splitting-up into separate parcels as was done in prior years. Since John was the fifth son he had only a few choices. He could move to Oslo, Ålesund, Bergen or some other large city and try to get work, go to school and learn a trade, or emigrate to America. He chose the second option, and then the third. He went to carpentry school in Ålesund and later in Bergen. In June of 1903, just a couple of weeks shy of his 18th birthday, he stepped off the vessel *S.S. Ivernia* onto the dock in Boston, Massachusetts with a few clothes, a few dollars, and his carpentry tools. He spoke no English but made his way to the Bayshore District in Brooklyn, New

York, where his brother Rasofiel was living. It's almost impossible to imagine the transition from this immigrant boy of 18 who couldn't speak the language to the prosperous individual who is shown in the picture.

While living with his brother, Rasofiel's wife, Anna, and daughter, Clara, in Brooklyn, John worked where he could during the day, probably as a carpenter's helper, and went to English school at night. Somehow an opportunity opened up the next year, and John traveled across the country to Portland, Oregon. He was still barely 19. He undoubtedly worked as a carpenter during those early growth years. Portland mounted the Lewis and Clark Exposition in 1905 to promote the region's commercial potential. New highways were being constructed and many federal projects were launched. This was a perfect time to be a skilled tradesman and John made the most of it. This opportunity, which would have been widely publicized, is the most likely reason why John trekked the 3,000 miles to Oregon and the fact that his English was probably passable by this time. His pronunciation and accent remained very Norwegian, however. My name is Jerry but it was always "Yerry" in my memory. He never could master the "j" sound!

After arriving in Portland in 1904, he joined the Norsk-Danske Methodistkirke and the I.O.G.T. (International Order of Good Templars, an organization working in the field of temperance). It was probably at one of these that he met his future wife. Brynhild Embretsdatter Haugseth arrived in this country in May of 1906, emigrating from Oslo with her sister Dagny and arriving at Ellis Island on the ship *Hellig Olav*. She went to St. Paul, Minnesota, and worked as a lady's



Houses built by John in Portland, Oregon

maid while learning the language, and like John, moved to Portland. She was born and grew up in Øvre Rendal, Hedmark, on a relatively prosperous farm in that valley. Her upbringing and dialect were quite different from John's but they fell in love and were married in June of 1911. Throughout her life she preferred to play the role of the "grande dame" and John was successful enough to support that inclination. My earliest memories of her include my fear of the fox stole

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

that she often wore, which had the feet and head attached to the pelt with little glass eyes that looked alive. Every morning, when I stayed with them, she made me drink a glass of some kind of ghastly health substance stirred up in water. But her fatigman (my favorite), krumkake, rosetter and kardemom brød were out of this world -- I can still smell them baking or frying!

John declared officially his intention to be naturalized in March 1907. He stated that he is "21 years old, color white, complexion sandy, height 5 feet 9-1/2 inches tall, color of hair sandy, color of eyes blue, no other visible distinctive marks." He became a naturalized American citizen in 1913. The same year that he was married, he formed his own construction business in Portland.

My father, Loyd (with one "L") Edwin Larsen, was born in 1912, followed by a daughter, Prudence Ragnhild Larsen, in 1914. During these years, and for some time following, John sponsored many brothers, cousins and sisters of his wife to come to America. He in part staffed his construction firm with these new immigrants. Several lived with them when they came, and this speaks well to his generosity and big-heartedness to his family.

In 1915 he became a charter member of the newly-formed Grieg Lodge of the Sons of Norway. In 1926 Brynhild was a member of the Daughters of Norway chapter in Portland.

One episode in their lives (which is totally out of character) happened in the early '20s. For some unknown reason, they decided to move to eastern Oregon, near the community of Burns, and begin farming on some acreage. They negotiated a deal with a landowner from there, whereby they traded their house for some property with a house and outbuildings. Perhaps Brynhild wished to get back to her farming roots but that doesn't really seem likely. They were totally sold a bill of goods about this property having to do with farm production figures, ability to support livestock, and even the proximity of a school for the children. Once they moved, they found out they had been bilked. A long and ugly litigation began, and ultimately they got their house returned to them, never to move again.

In 1927, a book was published, *Norske Utvandrerne og Forretningsdrivende i Amerika (Norwegian*

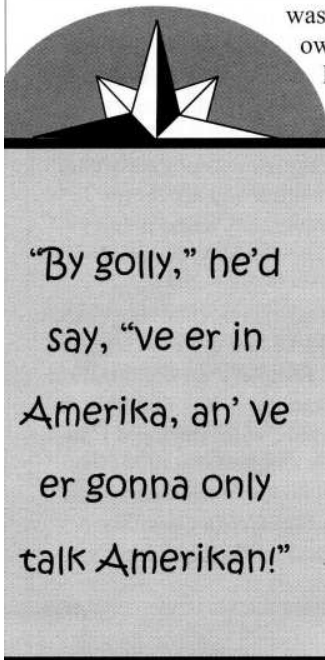
Immigrants and Business Leaders in America). It marked the memory of Norwegian immigrants on the event of the one hundredth anniversary of the first immigrants, the Sloopers. John was one of nine men memorialized in this book from Portland. He was a very successful building contractor by then. The picture shows several of the large and stately architect-designed homes that he built in the Alameda District of Portland. He also built the first apartment complex that consisted of several separate buildings with several apartments in each one that didn't look like a hotel. They were called Sandy Crest Terraces. This continued until 1944 when he purchased a defunct poultry incubator company, including a large fabrication shop. My mother, father and I were living in New York at the time. We moved back to Portland and lived with John and Brynhild for several months while my father began running the business, which was converted into a general poultry industry supply house. (The picture of Grandpa John and me was taken at this time.)

My first memories stem from this time, since I was four when we moved to Portland. I regularly stayed overnight with my grandparents. I had a small room on the third floor, all by myself, which I loved! As I grew older, I worked summers at "the shop" helping grandpa with the fabrication work. It was here, after spending eight hours drilling the same hole in the same pieces of pipe, that I decided for sure that I wanted a college education so I didn't have to do assembly line work for the rest of my life. He was an absolute working fool! He never stopped, always doing some necessary job with a big cigar stuck in his face. He still did some construction work for friends. I helped him a couple of times with this and learned some carpentry skills along the way. I remember him eyeballing a particularly complex miter framing joint, drawing some lines on the 2x4s or 2x6s, oiling up his carpenter's saw with his ubiquitous oilcan, and hand-sawing a perfectly fitting joint. Amazing skill!

When I was about five or six, John and Brynhild taught me the words to several Norwegian folk songs and trundled me down to Norse Hall in my little folk costume to sing "Per Spelman" to the assembled Norwegians. This was grandma showing off, of course! My father and his sister never learned a word of Norwegian. This was the era when immigrants wanted to be completely assimilated into the American culture. "By golly," he'd say, "ve er in Amerika, an' ve er gonna only talk Amerikan!" The only time they spoke Norwegian was when they didn't want anyone to understand what they were talking about.

During John's last years, Brynhild was afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. When the time came that John couldn't care for her anymore, she entered a nursing facility that was only a few blocks from "the shop." A small trailer home was installed on the grounds of the shop and John moved there to be near her. Meanwhile, my family and I were in the Navy until 1967, when we returned to Portland. I saw John in the field by his trailer with a two-handed scythe (well sharpened and oiled!) knocking down the grass. He was 81 but still working. He was able to regularly come to dinner at our

(Continued on page 5)



(Continued from page 4)

place. He delighted in playing with my young children, his great-grandchildren. Following a stroke, he died in March 1968, a couple of months shy of his 83rd birthday. Brynhild followed him seven months later.

I know that John's story is not unique. Many, many immigrants, Norwegian and otherwise, came to this country in those years, assimilated beautifully, and found success. They learned the language and became "Americans" in the fullest sense of the word. Just imagine - he left his homeland at 17 and became successful in an entirely alien culture. There is probably a message here for today for new immigrants, as well as the authorities.

One other big message—if you have immigrant relatives still living, capture their stories while you still can. I had all the opportunity in the world to do this with all four of my grandparents since they all lived into their 80s but I learned only a fraction of what I could have if I had just taken the time to talk more with them! Most of us just don't see the value in this until we have children and grandchildren of our own. I'm in the process of writing some memoirs on my own life so that my descendants will have something to ponder once they begin to contemplate what historic family elements came together to create them and contribute to what they are today.