

MY MEMORIES

Omer Harold Espe

PART I

"Do you want this little box, Sonny?"

This question was asked of a little boy who was standing close to where a circus tent was being erected, with his mouth agape as he accepted the box proffered by the circus worker. The little tyke was about three years old and very much interested in what was going on at the circus grounds. So interested was he that he didn't see the very scared and irate maternal parent bearing down on him.

"Omer Harold Espe! Didn't mamma tell you not to leave the yard when she let you out to play?" And with some very fast and solid raps on the rear of his bib overalls, the little imp was transported home. What probably softened the spanking was the density of the gray flannel diaper that graced his little behind.

The year was in the late nineteen hundred teens or early 1920's. And the place was a small town called Ramona, South Dakota, a few miles north of Sioux Falls.

Peter and Thilda (Tillie) Espe had moved out there in the midsummer of that year as Peter had been hired by the Carmody family to work on their hog and dairy farm. Work was hard to find and Peter had been hauling the mail for his father Lorentz Espe from the Malung, Minnesota to River, Minnesota post offices. It was a star route and box delivery was part of the job. But the star routes were bid on every four years and the lowest bidder was usually the one that got the job for the next four year turn. Well, this had happened that year, so another hauler had been hired by the U.S. Postal Service so Peter had to find other employment.

But lets go back about thirty some years. It was the time when people from many European countries were immigrating to the United States and settling in different parts of the country. Seems as though the U.S. had been portrayed as the land flowing with "milk & honey", and it was beckoning, especially the younger people to make the adventurous trip here to see what riches it held for them. Thus it was that Lorentz and Beret Martha Espe pulled up stakes in their home land near Trondhjem, Norway and set sail for the U.S. of A. At that time they had four children. Belle, Evan, Mary and the youngest, Peter. (Peter used to say that he was "two years on the sea", as his second birthday fell at the time they were on the boat that carried them to this country.)

With very little money in their pockets, they somehow headed for the southern part of Minnesota, on a farm close to Bricelyn, where they worked and where their youngest daughter, Bessie, was born. They later moved to Minneapolis, where Lorentz found work. By this time Peter was becoming a tall and handsome young man and was also starting to look for employment. After a few minor jobs, he then managed to get employment with the Street Car Company of Minneapolis as a conductor. He had acquired the habit of chewing snuff (Copenhagen) during his boyhood days, so he still was using the stuff as he was conducting the street cars. Well, as he told it, it was a very busy day and the riders on the street car were many. As the passengers were leaving, Peter had to get rid of some of the tobacco juice that had accumulated in his mouth, so he "let fly". But alas, the wind did a reverse flip and the gooey, smeary stuff landed right atop of a gentleman's hat. Of course, the man being unaware of what had happened, kept right on walking away from the street car, much to Peter's relief.

Now let's go back again to about the same time the Espes came to this country. Seems that another young couple from Varmland, Sweden had decided to sail for the U.S. to seek their fortunes. So it was that Ole Dahlgren and his wife, Elizabeth and their children came to America. They apparently came directly to Stephen, Minnesota by train where they either bought horses or hired some one to haul their household goods to Malung, Minnesota where they settled in the late 1800's. Shortly after emigrating, they were blessed with, I believe, the last of their children, a daughter, whom they named Thilda. She grew up in Malung, going to school there, also learning to play the organ and guitar. She had a beautiful voice and used to sing and play gospel songs in a little church that was close to the Malung post office. There were six children in the Dahlgren family as they lived in the Malung area and all were educated there. Their names were John, Hannah, Axel, Charley, Oscar and Thilda, in that order. About that time there came an epidemic of scarlet fever to the Malung community and the Dahlgrens were also affected by this disease. (A very severe one in those days as there was not the medicines to combat viruses and infections that there is today.) So it was with great sadness that their sons Charley and Oscar contracted the scarlet fever, and were quarantined. Oscar was able to recover from it, but not until it left him with epilepsy. Apparently this disease would not leave unless it left the victim with some crippling effect as was the case with Oscar. However, Charley was not even this fortunate and the Lord saw fit to take him out of this world at the early age of 18 or 19.

In the meantime, the Espes had decided to leave Minneapolis and try to get some land up in the Roseau County area. Peter also quit his job as streetcar conductor and arrived with the rest of the family. A large part of Roseau, especially the southeastern part of the county was open for squatters. That meant that one could "prove up" on a plot of real estate (40, 60, 80 or 160 acres) and live there for a certain length of time and you would own the property without any outlay of money. So this is what the Espes did. Lorentz, the father settled on 40 acres in Beaver Township. Also Evan and Peter each proved up on 40 acres. The land was mostly jackpine ridges with very little open land that was tillable, so they had to clear with axes and grubhoes any land that they wanted for hay and gardens, etc. Lumber saw mills were erected all over in that area, and the timber made very excellent lumber with which to build their homes and barns and other

buildings. As I am writing this I am aware of the hardships that besieged the settlers coming into a new environment. We don't really appreciate what they went through to open new frontiers which are now developed and are so much a part of our lives today. Even eking out a living at that time was in itself a hardship; trying to plant crops in small areas, hunting for meat to supply their larders with food to keep them going, milking a few cows to provide the money it took to clothe and feed their families. Even though there were hardships, there was always time for enjoyment and fun plus an earnest desire to serve the Lord in each their own ways.

One of the food items they used to prepare in those days was a delightful delicacy called "gammel ost" or "old cheese". There were very few people that really liked this tidbit, as it was a food that reeked with a strong odor, and many times made certain people vomit. The story is told of two bachelors who lived near each other in the area where the Espes settled. Seems that one loved to eat this "gammel ost" while the other one had very strong reservations about it. One day as the latter was visiting the other, he was treated to the cheese and after lunch his host asked him if he had ever eaten it before. His reply was "No, I have never eaten it, but I have often stepped in it."

About this time the mail route that ran between Malung and River, Minnesota (the name River was the post office that was in Beaver township where the Espes lived) came up for bids and Lorentz Espe bid on the four year term and got the job. Of course, they each took their turns hauling the mail and Peter also was involved in this task. In the summer time there was mud to contend with and, of course, snow in the winter. Horses were a great part of their lives, as it was probably the main mode of travel both winter and summer. There were a few people that owned automobiles. A few Fords, Studebakers, and Overland, but mostly horse drawn four wheel buggies, (mainly for two horses) were used. The distance between Malung and River was approximately 20 miles so with horses it took a long day to travel both ways. They would drive from River to Malung with one team of horses and leave that team and drive another team back and so on every day but Sunday. In the winter they would use what they called a "caboose", which was a light sleigh with a cab on it, made of either heavy card board or canvas stretched over a strong frame with and "airtight" wood heater to keep them warm (a real comfy' rig).

So it was at this time that Peter Espe and Tillie Dahlgren met somehow and old Dan Cupid had some sharp arrows in his quiver and apparently used some of them to shoot at this young couple, resulting in their romance which culminated in marriage.

PART II

World War I broke out about this time, so Peter was eligible for the draft. The war had been raging over in France in Europe for quite a while and many young men were called into the service. While some were shipped over on troop ships, others were deferred for various reasons.

The morning of April 7, 1917 broke rather wet and muddy, but the stork was descending on the home of Pete and Tillie and there was a scramble to get the doctor who would have to come from Roseau, the county seat, and the midwife, Mrs. Hetteen who lived a mile from the Espe home. So early that morning a little red faced screaming baby boy was born to the Peter Espes. Apparently Peter was deferred for a while but would leave for the service later when everything had settled down.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this writing, the term of Lorentz as mail hauler came to an end so Peter and Tillie moved to South Dakota to the Carmody farm where Peter hired out as a farm hand. We had to live in a garage that was on the farm. It had been remodeled for living quarters. I say we, as I was a member of the family now and made an extra mouth to feed.

The living houses on this farm were east of the other farm buildings, such as barn, machine sheds, etc. Between the houses and other farm buildings was a ravine with some water running in it. There probably was a bridge crossing it, although I don't remember it. There was one definite thing about living in that garage that displeased Mom and Dad. The place was overrun with rats. Try to imagine rats running around in your home. Ugh!! Well, Dad got sick and tired of this, so he decided to do something about it. He caught one of the rats in a trap and singed the thing and dropped it back in one of the rat holes in the floor. Mother said it sounded like someone was trying to move the garage. All the rats panicked, left the garage, and fled across the ravine to make their residence with the hogs. You could see them eating corn right along with the hogs. But it left our home peaceful and liveable again.

I don't recall how long we lived in South Dakota but eventually we moved back to Roseau County. In about 1921 or 1922 Dad bid on the same mail route Grandpa Lorentz had hauled and he got the job. So for four years there were the duties of carrying the U.S. mail between the Malung and River post offices as well as box delivery along the way.

In 1923 I started school in the Malung school. It was a single room school with one teacher for all eight grades. My first teacher was Mrs. Lydia Larson, a very wonderful Christian woman. She had three children of her own going to the same school; two girls and one boy. I know that some of you, my children, know her and also her children, Sylvia Lisell, Lillian (Mrs. Oscar) Eklund (he was a barber in Roseau) and Ruben Larson of Malung.

When Peter Espe was hauling mail there were post offices at Malung, Pencer and River. The Malung post office was directly north of the old Malung school house which, I believe is still standing. The old post master of the Malung post office was a grouchy sort of man. But now that I think of it, perhaps some of us youngsters made him grouchy, as some of the boys used to pester him a lot. (He was also the school janitor.) I recall one time at Halloween the younger men around there crawled up on the school house roof and plugged the chimney with rags, so when he made a fire in the morning, all the smoke came back into the school room, much to his dismay and chagrin.

I'm trying to recall some of the incidents that took place during my early years. One thing I will always remember is the special tent meetings that were held at Malung when I was about six or seven years old. There was only a small building in Malung that was used for church services then. The Evangelical Covenant Church as it is called now was then the Mission Friends and they used to find evangelists to come and speak.

What made an impression on me and I know helped change my life completely as the years passed, was when I was watching the people putting up the tent for evangelistic meetings there at Malung. The evangelist was helping and he saw me watching them, so he came over to me and handed me a little booklet. It was the Gospel of John with many sacred songs that I later learned to know and sing. I treasured that little booklet and remember Mom teaching me the songs, and also reading the Word to me.

One spring day when the water was running real good and the streams were filled to overflowing, Mother and I went over to my Uncle and Aunt (Frank and Hannah) Thompson's place to visit. Their son Elmer and daughter Millicent were there too. Elmer was a year older than me and Milli was five years younger. Well, as Elmer and I were playing, we were down by a creek that ran close to their house. He was fortunate enough to own a little wind-up boat. So he went across the bridge and I stayed on the side by the house, and we started sending the little boat back and forth between us across the stream. It came my turn to send the boat back to him so I wound up the spring and reached down to put it in the water, leaning heavily on a broken tree stump that was lying there. All of a sudden the stump came loose from the ground, and before I had a chance to let go, I took a plunge head first into the creek. By the way, I couldn't swim a stroke before that, but apparently I learned real fast. I was headed down stream and going fast. As fate would have it, Elmer saw a tree that reached across the stream a little way down, so he ran out on it and when I reached that point with my arms flailing away, he managed to grab me before I went under the tree and hauled me to dry land. This proves to me once again, that the Lord has His guardian angels watching over us when we get into scrapes like this.

Uncle Frank Thompson had a threshing machine with a steam engine for power and it was real thrilling for me when I could be around when threshing time came around to watch the activity. There were bundle racks pulled by horses and grain wagons used for hauling the crop to the granaries. I remember especially the good meals that were prepared for the threshing crew and of course we kids had our share of the goodies.

MMmmm!! Needless to say, there wasn't much money around those days, but we always had plenty to eat and wear.

About this time, Charles Lindberg made history by flying his single engine airplane named "The Spirit of St. Louis" across the Atlantic Ocean. I well remember the day I heard about it. It was a beautiful summer day and I was in the garden with Mom and also eating a fresh turnip or so, and the news was out that Lucky Lindy had made this long flight all alone in his little plane. I really admired him. He was a man of courage.

In 1927 another party bid lower on hauling the mail, so Dad was out of a job. He and Mom decided to have an auction sale and move to Moorhead where they had been promised a job at Concordia College working in the kitchen. Of course when we moved there things changed drastically for me as I had to go to a new school and in a big city at that. I was in the sixth grade and there they taught ancient history. Yuk! And I mean ancient - Greece, Turkey Italy and all those countries were mostly what it was all about. I was glad when the year was over.

I remember so well the new Ford car was out. A complete change from the Model T. This one was called the Model A, with clutch and gear shift that many cars still have today. It had three forward speeds and a reverse. They were the rage! But of course we could not afford one of these new cars so Dad still drove the 1926 Model T touring car. I'm trying to think of a few things that sort of stick by me as I grow older. Perhaps some of you will get a smile or even a loud guffaw once in a while as you read about these things that took place so long ago. As I look back, I remember some things were not as amusing then as they are now. I remember we had a beautiful gray team of horses.

I guess I'll remember my teenage years as very outstanding, as I learned to know many new people and the kindnesses which were shown to our family in so many different ways. It was a time when visiting between neighbors and friends was the "in thing". There was much visiting and eating especially during the Christmas Holidays. During the summers, there was swimming in the river and keeping the gardens and potato fields clean and growing. My closest friend during those days was Edwin Skoien and we were together a lot, going to Luther League and to town on Saturday evenings.

In 1929 or 1930 Dad bought a big team of horses and hired out to work for Roseau County building roads. In those days the road equipment was pretty primitive. So they had what they called fresnos that you could hook up four horses in front of and plow with breaking plows a few furrows where the ditch was going to be. Two men would drive and handle these four horse outfits and load up these fresnos and pull the loose dirt up into the middle of the road, and keep on this way until they had a road that measured so many feet across the top and tapered into the ditches. Meanwhile the horses and equipment packed down the dirt and it would be leveled off so the road became hard and "smooth". On many weekends when Dad had off, I would stay at the road camp and take care of the horses. It was kind of boring at times, but there was always something to do, like hunting gophers and things. We used to get so many cents for gopher legs and crow legs, etc.

And always there was good food in the "cook car". My Uncle William "Bill" Geroy was the cook at that road building project and he was a very good cook. I especially liked his roast beef dinners and for dessert, raisin pie. MMmmm!

Of course, during the week, Mom and I had the cattle to take care of. I, with the help of my Uncle Oscar Dahlgren, did the haying to put up the supply for the winter. So the summers were very busy.

During this time we were attending Salem Lutheran Church. Reverend T. Dahle started a string band in our church and that was especially enjoyable to be a part of. I think at times we would have ten or twelve members in our band and we would sing and play at our young peoples meetings and also traveled to other churches to perform. I think that probably many people were stirred and convicted of their sins through the ministry of that string band and the preaching of the Word by Reverend Dahle. There was also a church choir and we would sing cantatas and various selections at church services and young peoples meetings. This kept our young people very busy so there was less time to get into trouble in our home communities or in town.

I believe one of the reasons we had less trouble and crime in those days was the very limited amount of money that young people had access to and I thank God for having lived at this time. True, we would have liked to have had more money to spend but I am sure, and have seen in following years, that when there has been plenty of money and other things that the attitudes of young people have changed considerably from what they were in those days.

I would like to mention here the names of some of the families that belonged and attended Salem Lutheran Church:

The Martin Skoien family - Martin, Beulla, Marie, Mable and Edwin

The Alex Olson family - Alex, Mary, twins Myrtle & Alice, Amy, Elmer, Gladys, twins Melvin & Mildred and Leslie

The Sam Anderson family - Sam, Anna, Pearl, Olga, Arnold, Clarence, Lucille, Gerhard, Irene and Vivian

The Sidney Lovejoy family - Sidney, ??????, Clair, Clyde and Ruby

The Sam Erickson family - Sam, Inga, Alice, Maynerd and Louise

The Anton Skoien family - Anton, Anna, Alvin, George, Carroll and Elmer

The Sam Evans family - Sam, Esther, Elmer, Clyde, Myrtle, Ethel, Rose, Gertrude and Mable

The Axel Dahlgren family - Axel, Edith, Dora, Anna and Ralph

The William Austin family - William, Olga and Bill Jr.

The Alvin Moe family - Alvin, Stella, Arden, Helen and Doris

The Herman Bjorlokken family - Herman, Marie, Wavel and Harlan

Peter and Tillie Espe

The Omer Espe family - Omer, Myrtle, Glenn, Marvin, Duane, Evadell, Milo, Edgar and Sheldon

The Elmer Evans family - Elmer, Irene and James

The Almen Eidsmoe family - Almen, ?????, James and Orlen

The Herman Wallestad family - Herman, Hildur, Paul, Arvid, David, Austin, Anne, Nellie, Ida

The Albin Roseen family

The Gerhard Anderson family

In about 1932 Peter Espe bid on the mail route and got the job, making it necessary to move to River, Minnesota to near the post office as the route started there in the mornings. We still kept our membership at Salem. At times I would drive the mail for Dad and I also would get outside work on farms in the area.

1936 was a large turning point in my life. I hired out to work on the farm of Theodore M. Dahl of Borup, Minnesota. It was haying time so we were busy putting up hay for the coming winter. As it happened, Ted Dahl had a sister whose name was Myrtle and would you believe it, she was also helping her brother Anton with haying, so we were working together in the hay fields, mowing and raking hay together. You guessed it, we started dating, going to town on Saturday evenings, church doings and generally being together. Of course we both know the Lord had his hand in all this as things proceeded with us learning to love each other more and more.

In the fall of 1937 we both took the train to Minneapolis. We were both going to find employment. We had finished working on the farms of Anton and Ted Dahl after harvest and threshing on both places had been finished. (I believe that the fall of 1937 was when Marjory Dahl was born to Mable and Ted Dahl.) Myrtle was fortunate in finding a place to work in a home of an older couple nearly right away, but I hunted for quite a while before I found a job at the Lyon Fish Company. The fish company was where they pack

pickled herring in jars, like gäfelbeter, rollmops, etc. Starting wages were 60 cents per hour. Wow! I thought "I'll have my first million dollars in just a short time". I had never had that kind of wages before. Well, I guess it takes more than 60 cents an hour to make one a millionaire, as I found out later.

Some time in September after we had been in Minneapolis for a while, Myrtle and I were engaged and we said we would have a spring wedding and we set the date as April 24, 1938 at high noon at the Selmer Rage home just west of Ada, Minnesota.

While we were in Minneapolis we enjoyed being with Herb and Inga Holmsten (Myrtle's sister). I stayed with them during the time I was looking for work. They were so kind to me, letting me stay there for \$25.00 per month. We saw a lot of the Twin Cities while we were there, picnicing a lot, going to zoos, museums, etc.

I was laid off from the Fish Company just before Christmas, so took the train back to Borup and stayed with Ted and Mable a couple of days before I left for Roseau County and home again. I helped Dad haul the mail the rest of the winter. Uncle Oscar Dahlgren stayed at our place quite a bit and helped with the chores, etc. He never married.

Spring came soon and also the date of our wedding. We bought a 1928 Model A Ford and I drove it down to Borup on Easter Sunday which was April 17 that year. Uncle John Grundfor rode with me to Crookston where he was going on to Grand Forks. He went there every summer to do house painting. I drove on to Borup and stayed at Ted and Mable's before the wedding the next Sunday.

The morning of the 24th of April, 1938 came bright and clear and warm. Most of the spring's work had been completed and the fields looked beautiful. So at high noon my dear Myrtle came down the stairway at the Selmer Rage home and we met in their front room, where the Reverend Lindseth tied the knot and we were then Mr. and Mrs. Omer Espe.

As I write this it is January 24, 1988 and its been 50 years since that bright April morning. These years have gone by so fast, it just seems like a few years. We rented the place of Grandpa and Grandma Dahlgren, so we moved our few belongings there. Myrtle had sewn some very pretty kitchen curtains. I can still see them. They had little yarn balls around the edges of the curtains - red and white.