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### Mortenson, Peter (1840 - )

Evelyn Mortenson

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**MORTENSON, PETER**

My Grandparents in Minnesota

In the year 1869 my grandfather, Mr. Peter Mortenson, then a young man of twenty-nine years, came to the United States from Sweden. The ship on which he crossed the Atlantic, while steam propelled, was one of the old type, lacking almost every convenience of the present-day ships; and it required nearly four weeks to make the voyage. The joy and emotions of seeing the sky-line of New York by my grandfather and his fellow passengers can only be known to those who have had the experience. There before their very eyes lay the New World, the Land of hope and promise; the Land that has never failed to reward faith, thrift, and frugality.

Grandfather was one of six young men from the same community in the Old Country that cast their lot in the same basket. After landing in New York City they all continued on West by rail. They had read much about Minnesota--about its wonderful fertile soil and its lakes; but undoubtedly what attracted them most was that they had learned that there were several colonies of their own nationality in different parts of that State. The fact that they could not speak a word of English naturally drove them to seek some place where they could make themselves understood; and then, as now, there were many of their own Countrymen in the village of Minneapolis. Hence to Minneapolis they could go. "Birds of a feather flock together."

They all had bought tickets to "Minnesota," which in this case meant St. Paul--the "end of the line." As their pocket books were empty there was only one way,--walk, and walk they did. But as their purse decreased their appetites increased; and while grandfather went into a little store to inquire of the road to Minneapolis, he happened to see what he thought were the most wonderful apples he had ever seen.

Taking out a paper quarter the last piece of money from his pocket book, he first looked at it, then at the "apples." Finally, thinking of the pleasant surprise he could have on his friends, he decided to give them a real treat; and so he invested his last cent in a big bag of the luscious fruit. With the aid of a lexicon, he inquired the way to "Minneapolis and departed. When he overtook his companions he proudly exhibited his purchase; but it was decided that they walk on till they got good and tired and then they would sit down and rest and at the same time enjoy the "apples." They did; that is, they sat down. Never having seen or heard of tomatoes before, they all bit in with a powerful jaw; and that unmannerly fruit, as it sometimes will do, squirted out at both sides of their mouths and in numerous other directions. There is only one one hundred percent rule, and that is, that there never was a Swede born with a taste for tomatoes. The expressions on the faces of those six "new-comers" plainly indicated that they were no exceptions; for after just one bite each, it was a case of who could throw his tomatoe the furthest. Grandfather has never been known to eat them to this day.

They found their way to Minneapolis all right, walking the entire distance of ten miles and arriving toward evening. The town was in those days better known as St. Anthony Falls because it surrounded a large water falls by that name. The travelers had their first sight of a large and beautiful waterfall that evening; and my grandfather, having an eye for the beauty in nature, enjoyed the sight immensely and can still relate how he later used to sit for many hours admiring its grandure. It was not then commercialized and much of the banks of the beautiful Missis-



issippi river was then wooded.

The "tourists" soon hunted up the "tourist park" which in those days was called "Immigrant Home" where food and shelter could be had by practically every "new-comer" from the North half of Europe and anyone else, temporarily of course, with or without money. Practically every "new-comer" from the North half of Europe was trusted at all these "Immigrant Homes" in any of the principal cities of the central states; and it is to their credit that seldom was this trust betrayed. Sooner or later the immigrant would return and pay his debt. Would that every citizen of this country today was as zealous of his honor in such matters.

After a good night's "rest" on a bare floor, with their knapsacks as pillows and a plain, though sufficient breakfast, the sextett scurried forth in pairs to find work--work of any kind and at whatever pay they could get. Because they were unable to speak or understand the language, they soon found it was not such an easy matter; yet one or more always managed to pick up something, and since they pooled their income and their outgo, they all ate or they all starved. In the meantime grandfather had studied his lexicon very industriously and soon became the spokesman for the rest. After much discouragement and trudging around among the farmers between St. Paul and Farmington, he managed to get all his companions placed on farms, while he himself secured work on the Northern Pacific R. R. which was then being constructed between St. Paul and Duluth.

When winter came and the ground froze, this kind of work had to be discontinued, and he drifted with the rest to the logging camps of Northern Minnesota where he soon became quite expert at it and before Spring was made foreman of the felling gang, which also helped his in-

come somewhat. This kind of work was however very dangerous, and many were the times that a large tree or large limb missed him only by a few inches. Once a very large tree missed him by less than "the skin on the nose," for the trunk of the tree literally scraped the skin off his nose when it fell to the ground. Two inches closer and this story would not have been written. When Spring came and the snow melted and the big spring-drive was on, my Grandfather at first had intended to try that also; but after learning the nature of the work he decided to ride the train instead of the logs that they had cut. Loosening them here and there when they had run into a "jam" and otherwise regulating their orderly flow down the river, did not appeal to him. Every once in a while someone would slip off a log into the ice-cold water, often never to come up; and if they did climb out, they would still have to dry their clothes on their bodies. According to my grandfather's ideas that was too much risk even if the pay was extra good. Some men earned almost as much on a week's driving as during the whole winter in camp, but it meant a whole week almost entirely without food or sleep. Grandfather took the safer means and walked several days to the nearest stage coach and then to the nearest railroad. He always went on the idea that his health was worth more than the job.

After getting back to Minneapolis after his first winter's logging, he finally secured work on a farmstead that was located on what is now the corner of tenth street and Hennepin Ave. or where the present City Library stands. This was then just in the outskirts of the City, so this gives some idea of how it has grown in the last fifty years. This farm was, however, sold that summer and platted for streets and lot purposes. The farmer retiring, wanted grandfather to move with them "to town" and be their coachman, and many



is what I am told. The location was most favorable, because 23 acres were inside the village limits, and only 50 miles from Minneapolis, which meant marketing advantages.

The owner seemed to realize that also for the price was \$2300., which generally was considered about \$1000. too much, but which later proved to be a very good investment, especially when marketing grain and live stock. On the little farm things moved rather slowly the first year, as the big trees--some were 24 to 30 inches in diameter--had to be grubbed out by hand. This was by no means an easy job as grubbing trees or stumps in those days was done very differently from now. They had no horse-power winch or Fordson tractor to pull them out; neither did they have dynamite or other explosives with which to "shoot them." Two men today with modern equipment can clear about as much land as 50 could then.

Little by little the clearings grew, the crops increased, and so did the profits. Aside from straw sheds for the cattle, the first building to be erected was a granary, large enough to hold all grain crops. Then came a corn crib; after which followed a substantial barn; and lastly after living in the little log house with the lean-to for ten years, grandfather with his wife and two children moved into a new brick-veneered house. Each year showed a larger profit, and soon it was all paid for. His former years of hardships were things of the past, and as the years went on they became moderately well-to-do.

While it is now in other hands, it still stands there--the old home-stead, the old log house and all. It is my father's childhood home. To me it is history-----to my father, and to my grandfather now 85, it is a dear spot-----never to be forgotten.

--Evelyn Mortenson

FROM THE RECORDS IN THE STEARNS COUNTY COURT HOUSE

FOR THE PETER MORTENSON BIOGRAPHY

NO LEGAL RECORDS IN THE STEARNS COUNTY COURT HOUSE