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# From Kila by Kila to Oxford

## - How an immigrant descendant became a mathematics professor at a venerable university

BY CARL-JOHAN IVARSSON

In May 1887 Johan August Eriksson and his family emigrated from the borough (*köping*) of Säffle in Värmland. The year before he had sold his farm Östbacken in Östra Skrufserud in Kila parish to the bailiff O.W. Lindh from Säffle. Johan August, his wife Clara, and their four children joined the “family colony” at Moody County, South Dakota. In many respects the Eriksson family was typical of the immigrants of that period. Later on more children were born to the family, the next to youngest was named Eric Elmer. He was to leave the farming life and become a long-time professor of mathematics at one of the most prestigious universities in the Midwest.

The father, Johan August Eriksson, was born 1855 Jan. 11 at Ölserud in Kila, and had very deep roots in the parish. His maternal grandmother's father was named Olof Andersson (1780-1856), and built the house at Bockerud at Djupviken in Kila. The house was much later moved to Säffle and was turned into the local heritage museum (*hembygds gård*). Olof's oldest granddaughter, Britta Maria (1825-1891), in 1848 married Erik Börjesson from Boda in Kila in his second marriage.

Britta Maja and Erik first lived at Eriksberg in the Karlstad rural parish (*landsförsamling*), but in 1851 they bought the farm Ölserud in Kila and moved there with their family. Erik had six children from his first marriage, and his second wife Britta Maja gave birth to an additional

seven children. When Erik died in 1866 there were many heirs to share in the inheritance. The following year Ölserud was sold, and the family moved to Östbacken.

The very limited possibilities to make a living from the land in Kila was certainly the most important incentive for all the seven children from Erik Börjesson's second marriage to leave the Kila area for America. Six of them settled in the same area, south of the city of Flandreau in Moody County in South Dakota.

### To America

Johan August (now mostly called just August) as the eldest son took over Östbacken for a couple of years, but sold the farm in 1886. He and his wife Clara Jansdotter (1856-1935) from



*Bockerud, now in Säffle. (Photo by Gunnar Jonsson).*

Spässlanda in By parish, left Kila parish and first lived for a year in Säffle before they started their travels to America, with the destination of Moody County. By then they had four children: Johan August (called John), Axel Edvin, Ingeborg, and Oskar Oliver. Several of August's maternal aunts and cousins also came to Moody County as did more people from Kila, so you can really talk about a family colony there. The place was even for a while called Kila, South Dakota! Many of them applied for land under the 1862 Homestead Act.

The area in Moody County had the most fertile soil in South Dakota. The Erickson family now grew with five more children: Valborg, Amelia, Ruth Anna, Eric Elmer, and Violet. After just a few years in America the children were given American names.

It is Eric Elmer Erickson, born 1899 Aug. 6, who is the focus of this article. In his memorial notes he tells about his life. I had access to them through Robert Schmidt, archivist at Miami University.

### The sod house school

Eric Elmer was born near the Chilberg farm, six miles northeast of the little town of Trent in Moody County. For some year Father August tried his luck as a settler in Perkins County in northwest South Dakota. The western part of the state, west of the Mississippi, has decidedly less precipitation than the eastern part, which makes it very difficult to farm

there. The family lived in a sod house, and Eric Elmer's first school was also built of sod and any leaks were stopped by newspapers. There was very little rainfall during their two years in Perkins County, and finally they were able to sell their land and return to Trent, where August had bought a butcher's shop, which he ran for many years.

During the spring of 1916 Eric Elmer finished the 11th grade of high school in Trent and a solemn graduation ceremony was held in a nearby Baptist church. At this ceremony the shy Eric Elmer held his first public speech. For the first time he could also dress himself in long pants; until then he had always worn short trousers. He now moved in with his older brother Axel Erickson and his wife Lizzie in the neighboring town of Egan, and due to this he could complete his 12th year of high school in Egan.

It was now 1917, and in April of that year the U.S. entered World War I. In that year graduation took place earlier than usual, so the students could do farm work. There was a lack of farm workers by then, as many had been called up. The summer of 1918 the draft age was lowered to 18 years of age. Eric Elmer joined the Student Army Training Corps (SATC), an organization connected to colleges, universities, and business schools all over the U.S. SATC aimed at training students for the war effort and Eric Elmer went through his training at South Dakota State College in Brookings. The SATC students lived the life of soldiers with reveille, uniforms, and training in military tactics and drill exercise, as well as taking part in the ordinary college programs.

## Upheavals

SATC was demobilized in December 1918, without Eric Elmer making any close contact with the war, and he decided to keep on studying as an ordinary student. The family had no resources for college fees, but Eric Elmer worked hard at house painting and digging jobs during the summers, and graduated during the

spring term of 1922 with a B.A. in electrical technology. He was given awards for his good academics.

Many know that World War II resulted in great upheavals in American society, where people that would not otherwise have had the possibility to study could go to college under the G.I. bill. But World War I also gave new possibilities for talented youth. Eric Elmer was a clever young man who might not have enjoyed this opportunity unless he had joined the SATC.

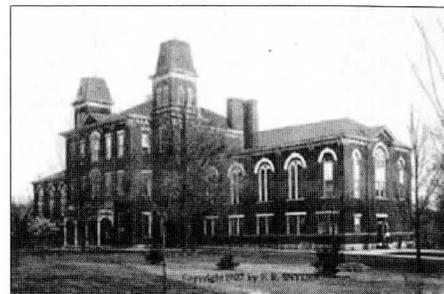
After his college exam Eric Elmer was employed to teach trigonometry to army veterans and geometry to college students. The career of teaching was appealing to Eric Elmer, and in the spring term of 1923 he received a scholarship to the University of Iowa, where he graduated with a master's of mathematics and physics. He continued to teach at this university until, through a friend, he heard about a position for a mathematics teacher at Miami University in Ohio. He sent in his application and was accepted in the fall of 1925. Here he spent the the rest of his professional life.

## Miami University

Miami University had been named after the Miami River, and is located in the city of Oxford in the southeast corner of Ohio. It has no connections to Miami, Florida. The university was founded in 1809, and is the second oldest in Ohio. The city of Oxford was named for the British city of Oxford.

Among the more well-known alumni of Miami University we find Benjamin Harrison (president of the U.S. 1889-1893), vice presidential candidate in 2012 Paul Ryan, and Maria Cantwell, senator from Washington state.

In the fall of 1925 Eric Elmer started his career as an assistant professor of mathematics at Miami University. After two years he also started as a student advisor, which also meant the he lived with the students in the dorms. In 1943 he was promoted to a full professor, even though he lacked education as a

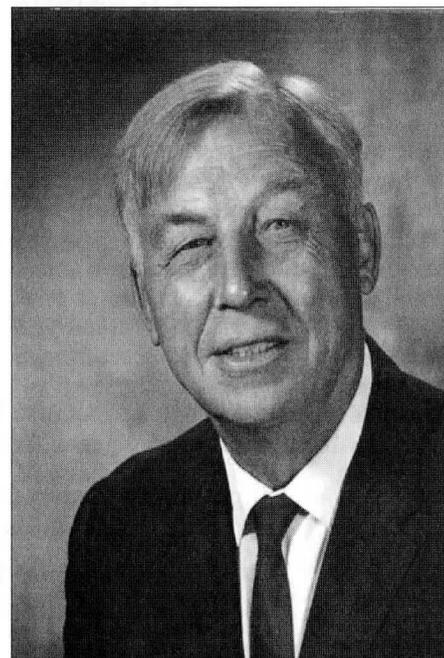


*Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.*

researcher. In a memorial text from the university, Eric Elmer is described as a stimulating teacher, well-liked, but demanding and energetic. It could be dangerous to sit in the front row or close to an aisle, since then he could mark the students with chalk on their foreheads, or "saw" on their ears with a ruler to make them pay attention. Lazy and unprepared students were not allowed, but he also could show great patience with needy and diligent students.

About this time Eric Elmer started to care for his nephews and nieces in a special way. He invited no less than seven of them to study at Miami University, and five of them graduated from there. This was a great drain on a teacher's salary, but "we made out all-right," as he writes in his memoirs.

In 1944 Eric Elmer married Louise Glasgow, a woman he had met in 1931 when she came to Miami as a



*Eric Elmer Erickson.*



Louise Glasgow Erickson (1905–1986) and a student.

music student. After her studies and work at Syracuse and in New York City and other places, she came back to Miami to teach piano. Eric Elmer himself was an avid singer and music was one of his great interests during his life. Already as a boy he

had been singing as a boy soprano in church. During his time in Iowa he had been singing one of the leading parts in Gilbert & Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* and he had been the bass soloist in *Messiah* by Handel. At Miami he continued to take singing lessons, was the solist on several occasions, and sang in the church choir for 39 years.

### A man of many interests

Eric Elmer was interested in many things. He was the timekeeper and judge at athletic competitions at the university. He restored several old buildings and collected antiques. His pride was his collection of no less than 50 old kerosene lamps, and also he worked as a surveyor. He had the post of city engineer for Oxford, and worked with WPA projects during the Depression. For 20 years he belonged to the Oxford "Board of Public Affairs," and improved the water and sewage systems of the city. During World War II he worked for a year at the university airport, where 20 pilots from the navy and 60 from the army were training to fly airplanes.

For 8 weeks he supervised their training before the army and navy sent in eight officers to do the work he had done on his own.

Eric Elmer retired from Miami University in 1964, but still lived in Oxford with his wife Louise.

Eric Elmer died in 1977, and his wife in 1986. In their memory there are scholarships at Miami University both for mathematics and music. They also donated considerable sums to the hospital in Oxford.

Eric Elmer Erickson's *Memories* are ended by this modest summary: "a person who is lucky enough to be born in this country should use his talents and energy to improve his city, his state, and country in every way possible."

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## Some Events in the Delaware Valley

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DATE	EVENT	SPONSORING MEMBER
June 4	<b>Dedication of Crane Hook Monument</b> Old Swedes Church, Wilmington.	Old Swedes Foundation
June 8	<b>Finnish Monument Ceremony, Dinner &amp; Old Fashion Dance</b> Chester & Philadelphia.	Delaware Valley Finnish Americans
June 15	<b>PECO Multicultural Event and Concert</b> Penn's landing, Philadelphia.	New Sweden Alliance
June 22	<b>Midsommarfest</b> Philadelphia.	American Swedish Historical Museum