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Turn back, turn back!

Effie Johnson

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Turn back, turn back, Oh time in thy might! Make me a child again, just for tonight.

An old lady wrote her memories of her childhood in the early 1900s

BY EFFIE JOHNSON

I remember my childhood very pleasant. Although we had not much of the so-called worldly goods, we had lots of fun!

As I think back now, this was very much due to the love and devotion my sister Alma gave us; she devoted her life to raise my brother and sisters. Alma Regina Benson, as she was baptized, was born July 26, 1883, in Manistee, Michigan, the firstborn of John & Louisa Benson. She moved with her parents to a farm in Free Soil, Mason County, Michigan, where she was to spend the rest of her life. Because of the arrival of four brothers and four sisters in the ensuing years, Alma was forced to leave school at an early age (5th grade school was not compulsory then as it is now.) However, this did not stop Alma from reading and improving her mind. At an early age she was sewing for the whole family, not only plain sewing but dresses with fine tucks, lace insertions, pleats, ruffles, etc. – nothing was too complicated for Alma to tackle, and without a sewing lesson.

Life on a farm in those days was far from easy: up early in the morning milking, cooking, churning, bread making, weeding, canning were some of the chores to be done. Water was carried from a spring below a steep hill – a well was later dug and a pump installed for water – where also milk & butter were kept due to lack of refrigeration in the summertime. Later, a house was built and ice cut from the lakes in the wintertime and stored in sawdust and this was used in ice boxes where

a pan of water had to be kept under the box to catch the drip as the ice melted.

When I was 8 years old in 1908 our father died and Alma was named administrator of the estate. Before he died he had asked Alma to stay on the farm with my mother. The family now consisted of Alma, Betty, Ann, Fred, Ellen, and Effie – the other two boys having died in infancy and one born dead. The two boys died of black diphtheria a month apart – this was a disease much feared as it was almost always fatal.

All of us except Alma were born in a log house built on the original homestead. This house needed replacing as it had seen its best days and my father had been hauling lumber and cement blocks, storing them with this in mind. So in a few months Alma drew up the plans for a new home to be built nearer the main road and across from Will Weaver's house. Mother and Alma hired an old Scandinavian carpenter who stayed on the farm getting his room, board, and washing done as part of the fee. He was there about a year when the house was completed enough so we moved in. Boy, were we ever excited! In those days we children had mattresses stuffed with corn husks and they could be so high before they got pressed down we could hardly get into them.

In the log house we had handloomed carpeting on the floor with straw under it for padding – was this ever dusty in the spring when we did spring house cleaning – each runner

had to be taken apart and washed and new straw put under after pieces were sewed together again. – No vacuums those days, just a carpet beater or broom. We had a summer kitchen in the log house – not used in winter except to store wood, etc. It just had the rafters and the hornets used to build their clay houses in the ceiling and buzz around.

Alma, in addition to all her activities, tatted, crocheted, and made rugs. My mother's speciality was braided rugs which we had all over the floors and so heavy to shake we hated that job!

Alma also tried her hand in making maple syrup – tapping the maple trees which grew around our place. She also made some hair pieces (not wigs) which she made from combing – we all had long hair then.

When I was about 13 my grandfather (Louisa's father, John Adolphson) came to live with us and my Uncle Renholt, (Louisa's brother) came with him from Minnesota.

Uncle Renholt was a bachelor who had run a threshing outfit in Minnesota and we all loved him, he was so easygoing and told such grand stories about his life. He drank too much and occasionally went on sprees when he would literally throw his money away and come home broke. He bought a farm about 10 miles from us and had such a spirited team of horses who never walked even when plowing or doing other heavy work.

Alma and my mother baked bread and cookies for him and he came once a week to get them and probably

spend most of the day with us. Later he was to sell his farm and move in with us, and my sister Alma nursed both my uncle and grandfather when they died at our house. They are buried in Maple Grove cemetery, Mason County, Michigan.

Alma also took care of my mother until she died, and she was in poor health about 3 years before she died, having hardening of the arteries which causes one to forget and mentally deteriorate.

When I was eighteen, I decided to go to Ferris Institute to take up a business course. As money was scarce, Ellen, who was on her first teaching job, would loan me my tuition and rent money. Alma & Fred would send me a box of groceries every week which they did until I completed my course and went to Detroit to work.

Written by Effie Johnson (b. 1900) – daughter of Johan Bengtsson (John Benson), who immigrated to the U.S.A. in 1872, from Friel parish in Skaraborg county.



Map from Handy Book for Genealogists.

Addendum

Johan Bengtsson was born 14 July 1848 on the farm Torpet in Friel parish in Skaraborg county. Friel is situated on the coast of Lake Vänern, halfway between the cities of Lidköping (to the north) and Vänersborg (to the south). At least 135 individuals left Friel for America according to the database *Emibas*.

Johan Bengtsson was one of the eleven children of Bengt Hansson and his wife Annika Andersdotter. Of these children two died as little children, but the rest of them grew to adulthood. Brother Anders Bengtsson (b. 15 Dec. 1846 in Friel, immigrated 1871 and then used the name Andrew Ekwall. He first lived in Lockport, Will Co., Illinois, but later moved to Manistee, Michigan, where he ran a tavern with his brothers, John and Gus. They sold this and all of them moved to Free Soil, where they all became farmers. Andrew Ekwall died in 1921 in Manistee, Michigan.

The third immigrant from this family was Gustaf Bengtsson, b. 1 Nov. 1850 in Friel. He immigrated in 1879, and joined his brothers in Manistee, and later moved with them to Free Soil to farm. He used the name Gus Benson in the U.S. Gus died in 1926.

Johan became John Benson in the U.S., and also farmed in Free Soil, as told before in his daughter Effie's story. John married in 1882 to Louisa (in Sweden Lovisa) Adolphson, born 26 Aug. 1860 at Hov Busegård in Hov parish (Östg.). Her parents were the blacksmith Johan Fredrik Adolfsson, b. 27 Dec. 1826 in Tidarsrum (Östg.) and his wife Brita Margareta Gustafsdotter, b. 15 Oct. 1824 in Fivelstad (Östg.). The family consisted of the parents and eleven children, all born in Hov: twins Amanda and Fredrika (b. 17 Mar. 1850, Amanda died 9 Mar. 1851; and Fredrika 17 Jan. 1851) Gustaf (b. 29 Nov. 1851); Carl Johan (b. 8 Dec. 1853); Adolf Werner (b. 20 Jul. 1855); Axel (b. 16 Jan. 1859); Lovisa (see above); Albert (b. 27 Apr 1862); Reinhold (b. 5 Aug. 1864); Hedvig (b. 18 Oct. 1866, died 24 July



Sisters Effie Johnson and Ellen Smith. (Photo in Los Angeles 1997 by Åke Somnell).

1867); and Anna Matilda (b. 19 Jan. 1868, died 25 Aug. 1868). There are no causes of death mentioned for the two youngest daughters, but one can wonder if their deaths had anything to do with the very bad years 1867-1869, when the crops failed and it either rained too much or too little. The hardships of those years made the decision to emigrate easier, to escape poverty and deaths.

On 9 Aug. 1869 the father Johan Fredrik left for America in the company of his son Gustaf, with tickets for Chicago. Son Carl Johan left in 1870, son Adolf Werner left in 1872, and wife Brita Margareta with the rest of the children in 1873.

John Benson and Louisa had eight children: Alma (b. 1883); Frederick (died at age 3); Albert (died at age 6); Betty (b. 1891); Anna (b. 1894); Frederick (b. 1895); Ellen (b. 1898); and Effie (b. 1900).

Louisa died 1945 in Free Soil.

Anna married Ira Granger (1880–1962), and she died in 1983.

Ellen married David Smith (1901–1987), and died in 1997.

Effie married Fred Johnson (died 1970), and died in 1998 in Los Angeles, CA.

The other siblings never married. Alma died in 1957, Fred died in 1961, and Betty in 1982.

Source: The article and addendum are based on material provided by Kjerstin Olofsson of Viskafors, Sweden. E-mail: kno.olofsson@telia.com