

## “Not a Nice Man”

by A A Sladky

I took Mom to see Aunt Helen in Jamestown a few years ago, and thought I would take the opportunity to ask them more about their paternal Grandpa, Ole Alm. I asked, “What can you tell me about your grandfather Ole?” The two sisters locked eyes and slowly shook their heads from side to side in unison, and said to each other as much as to me, solemnly and with authority, “Not a Nice Man...” “What was wrong with him?” I asked, trying to get more details...the head shaking continued, “Not a Nice Man...” and then things moved on to a discussion of what a wonderful woman Ole’s wife Johanna was.

Listening to my aunts & uncles over the years I already knew that Ole was an alcoholic, a whiner, lazy, helpless, and bitter. When his wife Johanne died in 1896 he and his daughter Johanne lived together and appear in the 1900 Census. In 1901 or 1902 Ole moved in with Hans and Anne. Descendants of Hans’ siblings say they have been told Anne Kanten was a saint for allowing her worthless father-in-law into her house at all. Hans & Anne visited Ole’s brother in Wisconsin and it has been suggested that the visit might have been to ask Ole’s brother to take him on. In their absence, Hans’ brothers-in-law John Moe and Erick Rekstad started the paperwork to help Ole become a naturalized American citizen. This is believed to have made it possible for him to receive government relief on the Sfartha poor farm. Ole spent the rest of his life there, dying of a stroke in 1915. He was buried in pauper’s field at the Montevideo cemetery. It does not seem that there was a funeral or that any of his children attended his burial.

How did Ole get to be such a worthless man? Moving your father to the poor farm was generally a socially unacceptable thing at the turn of the twentieth century, yet it does not seem that any of Ole’s children were stigmatized for doing it. Clearly the community in which they lived understood the necessity of ‘abandoning him.’ There cannot be much of an excuse for a man so thoroughly reviled by his children and his community, but I wanted to figure out how he became such a miserable man. Perhaps I would learn something to help me understand why his wife Johanna seems by all accounts to have actually loved her husband and remained unfailingly loyal to him in spite of all the troubles he brought to her life.

Ole’s father was Erik Eriksen. According to his grandson Erick, Erik was born in the Valdres Valley, which lies to the west of Hadeland in Oppland county. Church records show that Erik arrived in Hadeland from Hurdal. If the correct family has been found in Valdres (and with a name like Erik Eriksen, it is hard to be sure), his father, Erik Endresen, was a gaardbruger (farm operator) there, so Erik was not from the husmann (renter) class. Since he seems to have been named for his paternal grandfather, Erik likely was a second son and would not have been in line to inherit this farm. He would have had to “seek his fortune” elsewhere.

The son of a gaardmand, even one who did not inherit the farm, still had the advantage of his class when making his way in his home area. There is no indication of when he arrived in Hurdal, what he did there, or why he left, but from a skeptical perspective one can speculate that he was in search of a wife who could

put him in a better social and economic position. Obviously, he did not find one in Hurdal.

Arriving in Hadeland, Erik worked on the Blegan farm and eventually took a place as a renter (husmann) on Solberg. He cast his eyes on the oldest daughter of a farm owner, Ole Gulbransen, who lived on the North Grinager farm. Ragnhild was fifteen years his senior, and she had younger brothers who could be expected to inherit the gaard. Evenso, as the daughter who lived with her gaardmand father, it may have seemed a pretty good match. The 25 year old Erik married the 41 year old Ragnhild in May of 1827. Their oldest son, Erik, was born in November of the same year. In those times, it was not unusual for couples to have one or even two children before marrying. Fathers often delayed marriage until after the birth of a child to be sure it was healthy. We can choose to believe that Ragnhild and Erik were actually in love, that her father Ole demanded and sponsored the marriage of his spinster daughter, or that Erik encouraged Ragnhild to marry for motives of his own.

Ole Alm was born when Ragnhild was 43, and his brother Michael was born in March of 1832 when Ragnhild was 46 years old. Perhaps this last pregnancy was too much for the aging Ragnhild; she died on the Svensbakken farm in Hadeland in November of the same year. The next we know of Ragnhild's husband, he is leaving the Dynna farm in the Jevnaker kommune (district) of Hadeland for Sweden in 1848, still listed as a widower.

It appears that Erik abandoned (or was unable to care for) his young children long before leaving for Sweden. Records show that three years before his father left, Ole was confirmed while living as an orphan on the Østen farm in Hadeland. Ole's brother Erik, confirmed in 1843, was living on another Hadeland farm as an orphan. There is no record of the youngest brother Michael being confirmed in Hadeland; perhaps he was taken in by a family in Hurdal or Valdres, or perhaps he did not survive long after his birth.\*

In the early 1800's, the people of Hadeland, even farm owners, were very poor. It was a struggle to support their own families, and the addition of another mouth to feed was no small matter. In Norwegian society at this time, children became adults upon their confirmation. Prior to confirmation, children who worked were looked down upon by their peers and their elders. Orphans usually had to carry their own weight in a household, and were usually taken in specifically because of the work they could do. Even holidays did not offer a break from this grim reality. As families gathered to celebrate Christmas, someone would have to tend the cows and handle chores. That someone would most likely be the orphan/child laborer.

Certainly Ole was in no way to blame for his circumstances and by today's standards it may be difficult to understand such a callous attitude toward innocent youngsters. Looking back from the relative luxury of our lives, we cannot fully understand and should not judge the norms of a society half a world and almost two centuries away. Still, we can be relatively certain that Ole grew up very much alone, from his earliest memories watching children his own age playing while he had a list of chores and responsibilities. His grandfather had been a gaardmand, he was

separated from his father and his brother(s). It must have seemed grossly unfair to a young child; it was.

Life is not fair, and these difficult beginnings certainly do not excuse Ole's many faults but they go a long way toward explaining them. Ole Alm seems to have been a man embittered by his childhood who never really grew up.

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*Sons and daughters sometimes remember their parents differently. Martia's recollections of her father, as reported by her granddaughter, Mary Margaret (Rekstad) Gibson, provide a more positive view of Ole.*

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Ole Erikson was a small man but he had a hard, tough reputation. His parents had died when he was very young so he knew only the oldest sister of his siblings. (She became the mother of Lars Stensrud and Mrs. Gilbert Hilden of Watson.) Having discovered who his brother was, he introduced himself by jerking his brother from his girlfriend's bed and throwing him out of the house. They became acquainted while his brother tried to beat him up. This brother emigrated to Wisconsin.

Ole made his living by felling trees and acting as a guide for hunters in the woods. He also snared live birds for sale in Germanv. These birds were native in Norway and officials were trying to establish them in Germany's forests. It is thought that the birds were large game birds something like the American wild turkey. During the winter Ole wove baskets under water for sale. However, his greatest love and greatest vice was gambling at cards. His daughter, Martia remembered her father coming home late night in the winter with a gambling buddy and at the door handing over his overcoat. He had lost it in the game. The records show that they were the recipients of some poor relief, however they were never without food. Barley bread was their staple.

When my grandmother, Martia, was little, someone gave her a rag doll. She was so excited because toys were unheard of and she took it with her everywhere. One of the neighbor boys grabbed the doll away from Martia and chopped off its head. Martia picked up the pieces and took them home to her father. He carefully sewed the doll back together and placed a big hunk of a homemade nail in the neck. The next time the boy stole her doll and chopped off its head, he broke a big piece out of his father's axe head. He really got the buttons whipped off his pants.

In 1888 Martia's parents, Ole Eriksen Badstuen and Johanne Hansdatter emigrated from Norway to America. They took with them three of their daughters; Martia (20), Oline (18), and Johanne (9). Their son, Hans, had come to America four years before. He worked at the Dvergsten home in Watson, Minnesota and had earned enough money to send passage for his parents and two youngest sisters. (Mr. Dvergsten was Johanne's brother.)

The passage from Christiania to New York City took only three weeks. They traveled by steamboat in which cattle had been hauled the year before. The entire family was seasick most of the way over except for Ole himself. He found a card playing buddy in Erick Anderson who was traveling alone and was also bound for Watson, Minnesota. Erick had a bottle of whiskey with him which ensured his friendship with Ole Erikson.

When the (Rekstad) family lived near Watson, all the older children went to school in the town school. One day Grandpa Ole, who lived in town, saw that Andrew and Ole had skipped school. Later in the day while the boys were eating at the table, they saw their Grandpa coming to visit. They disappeared in a hurry knowing full well that he would tell on them and they would get it.

# Ole's oldest sister Maren was born in 1812, the daughter of Ole's mother Ragnhild and Lars Nilsen of Valdres.

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\* According to Hans; daughter, Ruby (Alm) Grover, the picture below is of Ole's brother "Michael Egge" who lived in Wisconsin. Before moving to Morrison County MN, Hans' sister Oline and her husband John Olson are said to have lived in the same area. I'm not sure if Hans & Anne went to Wisconsin just for a visit; if they hoped for assistance with Hans' father Ole, or if they actually intended to move there around the turn of the century, but Anne's remark about Wisconsin was that it was 'an awful place with too many trees, and you had to look straight up to see the sky.' I have been unable to confirm that the baby Michael survived his infancy; Ole's older brother Erik was confirmed so obviously did. My mother only knew of one brother, and she believed it was Ole's older brother. Did brother Erik remain in Norway? It seems unlikely, but did Erik take the name Michael in America? I'd love to hear whatever anyone has heard about Ole & his brothers. As with all things genealogical, the story is never complete and every answer creates more questions. I hope someday to run across some descendants of Ole's brother and perhaps they will be able to fill in a little more of the puzzle!

