

Nels Peter

An Immigrant's Untold Story

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It was a pleasant Saturday afternoon in late August of 2016 as I pulled into the Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis. En route to a family reunion with some second cousins, I thought it fitting to visit the gravesite of our shared great-grandfather, Nels Peter Liljengren. This visit was also part of a promise made to his great-grandchildren living in Sweden (whom I had recently met) to learn more about this man whose life was a mystery to anyone alive today.

Making my way to the back end of the cemetery I passed many impressive markers and monuments. Many politicians (including governors and a U.S. senator) and prominent businessmen are buried at Lakewood. My great-grandfather was a businessman. I was anxious to see what type of marker I would find on his grave. To my unpleasant surprise, I came upon his grave in a public plot with NO marker. Maybe the grass grew over it, I thought, as I scraped away the sod where the marker would have been. But no luck.

How could a man who crossed the ocean from Sweden, started a successful business in Minneapolis, and fathered nine children be buried in an unmarked grave? Who was this man whose remains were six feet below me? I stood there thinking of the precious few things I even knew about his life. All anyone really told me was that he was a cabinet maker (and a good one at that, as several of his descendants have beautiful articles of furniture he made himself), that he once owned a city block in downtown Minneapolis, and that he died from drinking wood alcohol.

We also knew that he had been born Nils Petter Bengtsson in Sweden in 1848. He changed his last name to Liljengren just prior to his emigration from Sweden in 1873 (in English this name means "branch of the lily flower"). His youngest child was my grandfather, Leslie "Ted" Lillgren. (Five of Nels Peter's children changed the spelling of their last name to more closely match the pronunciation they grew up hearing in a home where both parents spoke Swedish as their first language.)

But the fact that so little was known of Nels Peter's life among anyone living should come as no surprise. My grandfather was only 3 years of age when Nels died alone in a hotel room on Washington Avenue in Minneapolis in 1903. According to the story in the newspaper (which you can read at findagrave.com) Nels Peter had left his family five months before his death. The article mentions that he had not gone into work during the week before he died. He was clearly despondent. Being a cabinet maker, he knew what wood alcohol would do to him if ingested. While it was never officially determined, many believe that Nels Peter took his own life. But how did such a talented and intelligent man, who had a beautiful wife and family, come to such a tragic end? What happened to the "block in downtown Minneapolis" he once owned? Why did he leave his family? What personal demons haunted him to drive him to do such a thing?

Fast forward two years and I have found the answers to many of my questions. Nels Peter's life was interesting enough that he appears many times in the St. Paul and Minneapolis newspapers in the late 19th century (because "Liljengren" is not a common name in the U.S., it was easy to track down these

articles). One could say that there was a time when he was considered a pillar in his community, particularly among his fellow Swedish immigrants to Minneapolis. And yet based on the writings of his descendants who themselves have now passed on, he apparently was not well-liked by his family. In fact, I later discovered that Nels Peter ended up living (and dying) in a hotel room because his family had kicked him out of his own house.

According to one account I read by one of his granddaughters, Nels Peter had the habit of coming home intoxicated and impregnating his wife. Money was tight and this meant that more mouths would need to be fed. On a personal note, had Nels not had this habit of fathering children in his middle age then my grandfather would most likely never have been born (Nels Peter was 52 when my grandfather was born in 1900).

As far as I know, Nels Peter's story has never been told. I made a promise to my cousins in Sweden that I would find out about the life of the man who had left their beloved grandmother behind in his native country when she was a very small child. Writing this story is my way of keeping that promise.

The Early Years – 1848-1872

Nils Petter Bengtsson was born to Bengt Nilsson and Pernila Nilsson on June 25th, 1848 in the parish of Tönnersjö in the southern Swedish province of Halland (just inland from Halmstad on the southwestern coast of Sweden). Like many Swedish infants, Nils Petter was baptized a week later (on July 2nd). He was the youngest of six children. He spent the first two years of his life in a small farm named Ljungen. He then lived the rest of his life in Sweden on a larger farm they called Dahlabygget. This farm remained in the Bengtsson family until the death of Nils Petter's oldest brother, Bengt.

His parents were farmers during a time when life in Sweden was difficult for most citizens. For a country of less than five million people to lose over 1 million to emigration in the 19th century speaks volumes of the conditions people faced in those days. Today we think of Scandinavian countries as some of the most progressive in Europe. However, that was not the case in 19th century Sweden.

The Swedish population between the early to mid-nineteenth century nearly doubled. But the country had not yet industrialized so there were fewer and fewer economic opportunities for the new generation. Many who farmed did so on land they did not own with much of the fruit of their hard work going to rich landlords. The church was of little help, as they spun their sermons and teachings to help keep people oppressed by their land owners and government. A Swedish author/journalist named Vilhelm Moberg wrote a series of four novels entitled *The Emigrants*, which is about a family emigrating from southern Sweden to Minnesota in the mid-19th century. Vilhelm had spent about a year in Minnesota visiting Swedish communities as part of his research for his novels. There is a statue of him as you enter Chisago City, Minnesota, on Highway 8.



Nils Petter's birthplace in Ljungen (Photo courtesy of Henrik Carlsson)

Moberg goes to great lengths to describe just how horrible living conditions were in his country in those days. For those interested in Swedish life back then, you can either read his novels or watch the two films released in the early 1970s (with Max Von Sydow and Liv Ullman) entitled *The Emigrants* (viewable at Amazon Prime).

Farms in the days of Nils Petter that could be passed along would only go to the oldest child. While we do not know if Bengt Nilsson owned the farm he and his family worked, he did have the legal right to pass his tenancy on to his oldest son, Bengt Bengtsson (records indicate that this did happen when Bengt Nilsson passed away in 1875). Being the youngest child, Nils Petter knew he had no future in Sweden as a farmer unless he learned a trade and got out of town.

Nils also lived through the great Swedish Famine of 1867-69. To survive, many Swedes baked bread made from tree bark. While the famine was worse in the northern provinces, this dire situation must have started Nils thinking about leaving Sweden for “Nord-Amerika.” And while he would be the first in his family to emigrate, he would not be the only son of Bengt Nilsson to leave Tönnersjö for Minneapolis, Minnesota (two of his brothers, Jöns and Lars, would eventually come to the U.S. and work for their youngest brother).



Dahlabygget Farmhouse. Nils Petter walked out that doorway for the last time in 1873 when he emigrated to the U.S. There is an old apple orchard behind the house that either Bengt Nilsson or Bengt Bengtsson planted (Photo courtesy of Henrik Carlsson)

The Child No One Knew

When I first began researching my family tree online in early 2016, I stumbled upon one tree that was being maintained in Sweden. In it, I saw the name Nils Petter Bengtsson-Liljengren, who was from Tönnersjö. But I saw another name next to my great-grandmother’s name (Augusta), and it was Beata Hakanson. I then discovered that in addition to the great-aunts and great-uncles I knew about in Minnesota, there was another great-aunt born in Sweden named Hanna Maria Nilsson (who was born in late 1872). My father was still living at the time of my discovery, and he said he had never heard about an aunt in Sweden. My guess is that this was a family secret not shared with many.

I was able to contact the owner (Arne Bohman) of the family tree in Sweden that mentioned my great-grandfather. He is the father-in-law of a great-great-grandson of Nils Petter, named Magnus Carlsson. Arne then put me in contact with a grandson of Hanna Maria, named Henrik Carlsson (Magnus’s father).

Because we were going to visit Denmark later that summer to attend a wedding, we arranged with Henrik to drive into southern Sweden from Copenhagen and visit my long-lost second cousin and his family. It was quite a reunion, as we broke bread together in the home that Hanna Maria and her husband Emanuel Carlsson once owned (and which now serves as a “summer house” for Henrik and his family). Hanna grew up to be a school teacher in a rural area of southern Sweden and her home had at one time been her school house (before the government eventually closed it down).

After we had supped, we were sitting with my cousins (two of Henrik’s sisters joined us as well), as Henrik proceeded to read and translate letters that were written to his grandmother by the two brothers of Nils Petter’s brothers who also emigrated to Minnesota. Both had at one time been employees of their youngest brother and were cabinetmakers as well. Imagine my surprise, listening to a letter that was written in 1906 that mentions the names of my great aunts and uncles, all the while sitting in Sweden! As far as we know, Nils Petter never wrote his daughter in Sweden (at least we see no record of it). But his two older brothers felt obliged to do so, even sending money to their niece on occasion.



Hanna Maria and her mother Beata, circa 1880.

Henrik also showed me some birthday letters Hanna received from classmates when she was in grade school. In these letters we see that for a time Hanna adopted the last name Liljengren. Her uncles Jöns and Lars also changed their last name to Liljengren when they emigrated to Minnesota. Perhaps this was when Hanna started using her father’s last name, given the apparent closeness she had with her uncles.

Henrik did not know how the relationship between Beata and Nils Petter came to be. But we did find out later that Beata worked as a maid on Bengt Nilsson’s farm. Evidently Nils gave a little too much attention to the “help.” Maids in those days did not have many options so she was unable to resist his advances. Perhaps she thought that he might someday marry her? We can only speculate. We do know that Nils Petter abandoned his

responsibility to his child and her mother when he left the country, never to return or to send for them. We also know that for a time Beata and her daughter were sent away from Dahlabygget, only to return after the passing of Bengt Nilsson.

Hanna grew up to be a very productive member of Swedish society. Because of her lifelong service to her country as a public school teacher, she was awarded a medal by the Swedish government. Her wonderful grandchildren and great-grandchildren are a testament to her life well lived. I am very honored to have become acquainted with some of them.



Hanna as a young school teacher

Emigration – 1873-1874

Nils Petter left Sweden in May of 1873, departing from the seaport of Gothenburg. His occupation is listed in his emigration documents as “snickare.” This is Swedish for “carpenter” or “wood-worker.” His two brothers who followed him to Minneapolis would also list the same occupation on their emigration documents when they crossed the ocean. Like most Swedish immigrants, the first leg of their sea journey took them to Hull, England, on that country’s east coast. From there they rode a train to Liverpool on England’s west coast. They then boarded a larger ocean-going liners destined for New York harbor.

After arriving at Ellis Island in New York, Nels Peter (his U.S. name) traveled by rail to the small Illinois town of Galva. This was a predominantly Swedish settlement, but one that did not provide much hope for young Nels Peter, who wanted to make his mark in the world. It was said of Galva in those days that many of the Swedes worked on farms during the summer and in coal mines in the winter. This was not the life for Nels Peter, and his stay was brief as a result.

The Early Minneapolis Years – 1874-1876

We don’t know why he chose Minneapolis as his new home in 1874. Perhaps he met fellow Swedes in Galva who had the same idea. But we do know that there were more economic opportunities in this young city in a state replete with so many natural resources, and it would provide the perfect place for Nels Peter to start a career in this boomtown.

To look at Minneapolis today it is difficult to imagine just how small (and wild) of a city it was when Nels stepped foot off the train from Galva. Just two years earlier, Minneapolis had merged with St. Anthony (on the other side of the Mississippi River). Even combined, St. Paul was still the “big brother.” Estimates are that Minneapolis had less than 20,000 residents in 1874. Some of the major streets still were not paved - indeed some parts looked like the Old West.



This photo of Washington Avenue was taken the same year that Nels Peter first arrived in the “Mill City.” Notice that the street is not even paved.

The Mississippi River was dotted with flour mills. Minneapolis became a major producer of flour for the rest of the country, earning it the nickname “Mill City.” Mines and timber from northern Minnesota provided the materials necessary to grow this young town into a major urban center. This was the opportunistic world in which Nels Peter found himself. Like Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz, he was “not in Kansas anymore.” He was a long way from Tönnersjö – in more ways than one. The first reference we find in print about Nels Peter in Minneapolis was an ad he had published in 1876 in the City Directory (image to the right).

We see that he was advertising himself as a “Polisher.”

“French Polish” was a popular process in those days (particularly in Europe) in which a high gloss finish is produced through several steps. Notice the description of his work that Nels writes for this ad. He seemed to take great pride in his work. Even though he had not yet started furniture manufacturing, it appears that Nels Peter engaged in professional services as a means to build capital for the manufacturing business that was spinning around in his brain. We also see that Nels Peter starts to use his initials instead of his name (as was common in those days). Most ads and stories published henceforth refer to him as “N.P. Liljengren.”



N. P. LILJENGREN,
POLISHER.
—
FRENCH POLISH,
Oil, Wax and Ebony Finish.
—
Prompt attention paid to the Polishing of
Hard Wood in plain or Fancy Finish; also
Pianos and Genuine Gold Gilding on old
Picture Frames.
—
1st Ave. S., cor. 4th Street,
MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.



Bengt Nilsson, my great-great-grandfather

On Christmas Eve of 1875, father Bengt Nilsson passed away back in Dahlabygget. He was 73 years old at the time of his death, and had spent his life farming. His oldest son Bengt Bengtsson assumed responsibility for managing the farm and for taking care of his aging mother, Pernilla.

In late 1876, N.P. was a founding member of what was to become the strongest Swedish society in Minneapolis, called “The Swedish Brothers.” The purpose of this society was to help Swedish immigrant families and individuals who had come to Minneapolis and were in need. It appears that this was a very beneficial society, and it shows a kind-hearted side to my great-grandfather.

Starting a Family and a Business – 1877-1879

1877 was a very eventful and happy year for N.P. In March he wed Augusta Josephine Anderson. Like Nels Peter, Augusta was born in Sweden. She was ten years Nels’s junior. She left Sweden in 1870 at the age of 12, arriving with her family. She had a sister (Emma) and a brother (Alfred). Her father’s name was Lars Anderson, so her brother chose Larsson as his last name. Her brother apparently became an ordained minister when he grew up.

Augusta was remembered as being a tall and beautiful woman. All the males in my family are over six feet high, and several other descendants of Nels and Augusta’s are of above-average height. Looking at my entire family tree, I believe being tall is something we inherited from our great-grandmother and the Andersons.

Two months after the wedding their eldest son Richard Berger Liljengren was born. When you research the history of Swedish marriages, what we would call “shotgun weddings” in the U.S. were actually a common occurrence “in the old country.” In 19th century Sweden a family not being able to have children carried social stigma. To avoid this, engaged couples would “test the waters” to ensure their fertility and ability to procreate. A pregnant bride meant that the couple would not end up being childless. While the church in Sweden frowned upon this practice, it was a well-accepted social custom.

When Richard grew up, he spent his entire working life with the railroad. He never married. Because Nels died 25 years before my father was born, my dad never met his grandfather. But my father once told me that his “Uncle Dick” was more of a grandfather to him than an uncle. From all accounts, it appears that Dick eventually became the “man of the house” when Nels Peter’s life would fall apart years later.

As if starting a family wasn’t enough, N.P. and Augusta (sometimes referred in documents as “A.J. Liljengren”) started a manufacturing business. He was fairly progressive in his thinking in those days to include his wife as a proprietor of his business. This man (whom I found buried without a grave marker) was popular enough at one time to have been listed in the “History of Hennepin County and the City of Minneapolis” (published in 1881). In his brief bio we see that 1877 was the year he entered into furniture manufacturing.

N.P.’s first partner was a fellow Swede by the name of Ernest Dean and by 1880 they employed 20 men and had a factory at 111 Third Street South (I believe this site eventually became the City Post Office). The business was doing so well that N.P. was able to buy out Dean’s interest in 1880, and Dean went on to start his own successful company. Things were looking up for Nels Peter.

In 1879, the Liljengrens welcomed their second son into the world – Bernard Rudolph. The name he was called most frequently was Rude (probably pronounced “Rudy”). When he grew up, he became a salesman for Kodak, where he spent an entire career. Uncle Rudolph’s first wife died (childless) and he had a daughter (Cherry) by his second wife.

Later in 1879, Nels Peter’s brother Jöns and his family arrived in Minneapolis from Sweden. He went to work for his younger brother as a furniture maker, until at least 1890 (more on why Jöns left his brother’s business later).

The early 80’s

As N.P.’s business grew, so did his family. Their third son, Arndt (“Art”) Herman was born in June of 1881. “Uncle Art” grew up to be an entertainer, with some experience in Vaudeville. He was known as a dapper dresser and a “lady’s man.” In his later years, he and his wife would perform at the Minnesota State Fair. We see many references to a young Arthur in the Minneapolis and St. Paul newspapers as a lad who starred in a boys choir that performed Handel’s Messiah.

In April of 1883, Augusta presented Nels with their fourth son, Enroth Aloric (“Al”). Enroth grew up to become a troubled man, never able to break his addiction to alcohol. He lost his family because of the bottle and we are told that he died falling down an elevator shaft. He was even known to drink sterno if he could not get regular booze. He is buried in the same cemetery as his father, also in a public grave.

Who knows the impact the coming Liljengren family troubles would have had on this young man's psyche and the role that these problems played in his becoming addicted? Like what happened to his father, we can only speculate what personal demons he battled.

The City Block -1883-1886

Also in 1883 we see that N.P. has a new partner – Ed Keeshan, and sales appear to be strong. We further see that the company has moved to a more permanent location – the “block” that N.P. once owned. At 12th Street, First Avenue has a different name today – Marquette Ave. The former site of the furniture business is now owned by the Westminster Presbyterian Church, and is close to the Minneapolis Convention Center.



There were actually three separate street addresses belonging to N.P. on First Street (1214 is missing from the ad above). One lot was a lumber yard. The middle lot was a furniture factory. The corner lot was a furniture store. Business was definitely booming. We are not sure how long the Liljengren-Keeshan partnership lasted. The below ad from the Minneapolis Tribune from June of 1884 does not mention Keeshan's name. (Notice the workmanship in the desk in this ad.)



Nels and Jöns received news in 1884 that their beloved mother, Pernilla Nilsdotter, had passed away in Dahlabygget. According to a Swedish genealogist, Pernilla died from a “breast disease.” She was 74 years old at the time of her death. Together she and Bengt had six children. The eldest was a daughter named Bengta Bengtsdotter. She married Per Larsson, and her descendants to this day have the last name of Persson. After Bengta came Bengt (the eldest son) and then another daughter, Christina (about whom we know little). Finally, they had three more sons – Lars, Jöns, and Nils Petter.



Pernilla Nilsdotter, my great-great-grandmother

In 1885, the Liljengrens welcomed their first daughter to the family – Cerena Pamela. She ended up marrying a gentleman from Indiana named Bert Campbell. By all accounts theirs was a happy marriage, and Cerena was a good-natured soul who brought joy to the lives of many. She spent her final years in northern Minnesota, where she and Bert had spent so many happy years.



This is the only photo I have seen with Nels Peter. It was taken around 1886. The boy to the far left is Enroth, with Arthur sitting in front of his oldest brother, Richard. The boy on the far right is Rudolph, and the little girl on Augusta's lap is Cerena.

The Early Gould Years – 1886-1889

I honestly believe that my great-grandfather regretted the day he met George P. Gould for the rest of his life. This man single-handedly destroyed N.P. and A.J.'s business, as well as the Liljengren family, in 1890. But between 1886-1889, Nels Peter was at the peak of his career.

On January 27, 1886, Nels, Augusta and George P. Gould associated themselves under the title of Liljengren Furniture and Lumber Company. They started with a capital of \$50,000 (which would be worth over \$1.2 million in today's dollars). After this event, we do not find Nels Peter's name in the newspapers for the next two years.

In June of 1888 we see Nels Peter listed as a trustee for the newly incorporated First Swedish Universalist Church. Being part of this congregation provides some insight into the thinking and theology of Nels at the time. Growing up in Sweden, he saw how the state church had abused its parishioners with threats of God's punishment to motivate them to work the farms for the rich land owners and for the government. Here in Minnesota, Nels had an opportunity to join a group of believers who rejected the notion of divine punishment and focused on their God's love and favor toward his creatures.

Also in 1888, Nels Peter's brother Lars arrived in Minneapolis from their home in Dahlabygget. His emigration documents included the comment "travels with family," so we believe he brought his wife and children with him from Sweden. It is believed he also worked for his youngest brother as well.

Lars had a son that he named Nels Peter who also was a carpenter, with his last job doing carpentry for the Swedish Hospital in Minneapolis.



Ad from 1886, which is the first we see with Gould's name included.

In 1889 the New Church of Redeemer in Minneapolis was dedicated. Their building had been badly damaged in a fire, and many companies banded together to help rebuild it. The newspaper article from the Minneapolis Tribune describing this dedication used the headline "Beauty for Ashes." The Liljengren Furniture Company is listed as providing "the interior woodwork and furniture." Unfortunately this building no longer stands so we cannot see some of Nels Peter's handiwork, but based on a description given by Betty Lilligren Mitton in a letter to my father (her first cousin), it must have been lovely. She had visited that church in the 1930s and described the "pews and altars on which he had carved lovely designs." I have a dresser handed down to me that Nels Peter had made (probably around this time) and I can attest to his artistic craftsmanship.

Surprisingly, during the second half of the 1880's, no more children were born to Augusta and Nels. The final four children were all born between 1891 and 1900.

The Business Collapses – 1890

1890 was not a good year for the Liljengren family. On April 26, 1890, Nels Peter and Augusta applied to the courts for a Receiver to take over the company. Newspapers across the U.S. reported this application for receivership. The articles claimed that Gould had been "bankrupting the concern" and "had misappropriated \$15,000 of the company" (which would mean he stole almost \$400,000 in today's dollars). Things were so bad at this time that on April 29, 1890, Nels Peter filed a peace bond in court against George Gould, citing that Gould had threatened to kill him.

On May 5, 1890, we see a lengthy article in the St. Paul Globe entitled “War in Minneapolis.” It detailed a violent encounter at the 1st Avenue complex (lumber yard, furniture factory and store) between Gould’s men and Nels Peter’s men. While my great-grandfather’s men were unarmed, Gould’s men had a handgun. No one was shot, but some of Gould’s men badly injured one of Nels Peter’s men with a baseball bat. Things clearly had got out of hand and Nels ran to get the police. By the time deputies arrived, Gould and his men were gone.

On May 8, 1890, the Hennepin County Sheriff hired James Ege to control the Liljengren Furniture Company, and as the St. Paul Globe reports it, the Sheriff stated, “hence there be no more display of shootin’ irons at First Avenue and Grant Street.”

George Gould eventually was arrested by a Deputy U.S. Marshal, and in December of 1890 appeared in Federal court. Gould was charged with tampering with U.S. Mail stemming from two incidents. The first involved a letter address to Nels Peter. The official charge was “feloniously opening mail addressed to N.P. Liljengren with the intention of abstracting his correspondence and prying into his secrets.” The second was similar, but in that case Gould opened a letter addressed to Augusta.

Jöns and His Legal Case – 1891

I thought it noteworthy to include what happened to brother Jöns as the business was collapsing. In the summer of 1891 Jöns had a case go all the way to the Minnesota Supreme Court, because he had sued the Hennepin County Sheriff.

According to the case, the Liljengren Furniture Co. had underpaid Jöns for approximately six months (Gould’s thefts had a definite impact on cash flow at the time). Because he knew he would probably never get paid, Jöns sought to make up his loss of pay by taking furniture home he had worked on at the furniture factory. On May 17th, 1890, the Hennepin County Sheriff went to Jöns’s house and confiscated the furniture he had taken in lieu of pay.

Unfortunately, Jöns lost his appeal with the state’s Supreme Court. One can only imagine the stress that was going on in his family, and the strain this must have put upon his relationship with his youngest brother.

Fallout and Attempts at Recovery – 1891-1900

Mr. and Mrs. Liljengren continued to advertise their business as evidenced by newspaper and directory ads during the 1890’s, and as late as 1901. In 1891, they advertise in the Minneapolis “Construction of Buildings” Laws as the “Liljengren Furniture Co.” Interestingly, A.J. Liljengren (Augusta) is listed as the Proprietor, and N.P. Liljengren is listed as General Manager. Perhaps A.J. was proprietor because N.P. no longer had credit to borrow money for the business.

A. J. LILJENGREN, PROPRIETOR.

N. P. LILJENGREN, GENERAL MANAGER.

Liljengren Furniture Co.,

MANUFACTURERS AND DEALERS IN

ART FURNITURE,

Bank, Office and Store Fixtures,

MILL WORK FINISH.

WOOD MANTELS, GRATES AND TILES.

1216-1220 First Avenue South,

MINNEAPOLIS, - MINNESOTA.

From Page 168 of the Minneapolis "Construction of Buildings" Laws, 1891

But we believe that Nels Peter and Augusta never fully recovered from the bankruptcy of their business. We see a Minnesota Supreme Court case in 1892 in which Augusta was appealing a case she lost in the Minneapolis municipal court. The Liljengrens' landlord, Mona Anderson, took them court to "recover arrears of rent." Nels Peter was a co-defendant, but it is Augusta's name that is in the title of the court case. Life was clearly difficult for my great-grandparents, seeing that rent could not even be made. Meanwhile babies continued to be born.

On April 17, 1891, Nels Peter and Augusta welcomed a newborn son, Hillard Melville. He was named after another son who was born a year earlier but died in infancy. According to Swedish custom, whenever an infant was lost, the parents would name the next born after the deceased child. Seeing the timeline of the family business troubles, one can only wonder if all the stress affected Augusta's pregnancy and birthing in 1890 of Hillard's namesake.

Hillard Melville served in the army in Europe during WW I. He and Josephine raised three children, but Hillard died in a tragic accident at the age of 41 in Minneapolis. All of his children ended up raising families on the West Coast. One of Hillard's children, Betty Lilligren Mitton, was the one who first interested me in our family heritage. It was also her writings from which I gleaned stories about my great-grandparents and aunts and uncles.

The Liljengrens welcomed another son on January 20, 1895, whom they named Emmert Lawrence. Growing up, our family had many happy visits with Emmert's grandchildren who were born to his son, Jerry. We still keep in touch with them after all these years. They are the only other great-grandchildren of Nels Peter and Augusta that we met in our youth (I have since met others).

Also, in 1895, the mother of Nel Peter's firstborn passed away in Askome, Halland, Sweden. Beata Hakansdotter was living with her daughter Hanna Maria at the time, who was now teaching school in that area. Two years later, Hanna would marry Emanuel Carlsson and they would have seven children together – all who never knew or met a single first cousin in the U.S. Two of Hanna's children were born while Nels Peter was still alive. We can only wonder if he ever heard the news that he was a grandfather back then.

On January 17, 1897, Augusta gave birth to the second (and youngest) Liljengren daughter, Celia Josephine. Aunt Celia is the only child of my great-grandparents that I remember meeting in person. She had become a widow in 1969 from her husband, Ralph Weidenbach, and was living upstairs in a two-flat in Minneapolis. I visited her with my father in the early 1970's. She was a kindly natured woman, as I recall.

Also in 1897 we see multiple newspaper articles about Arthur Herman, who was dubbed the "boy soprano." He and Enroth are reported as singing in Handel's "The Messiah" as part of the Gethsemane church choir. "Master Arthur Liljengren" also sang a solo at a "Lawn Fete" as a benefit for the St. Philips Episcopal Mission that.

Leslie Theodore, my grandfather and final child to be born to the Liljengrens, was born on May 18, 1900. He went by the nickname "Ted." Ted married a young Native American woman named Hilda from the Ojibwe White Earth Reservation, and they had two children together – Robert Richard and my father Charles Lewis. The name "Robert" came from Hilda's father and the name "Richard" came from Ted's oldest brother. Even though Richard Berger was Ted's brother, the age difference of 23 years probably meant that Ted looked at Richard as more of a father than anything else. Ted passed away at a relatively young age in 1951, while he was picking apples in the San Francisco Bay area, so I and my siblings never met him.

In 1900 we still see ads in the Minneapolis Post Office Official Guide for the Liljengren Furniture Co. So somehow Nels Peter was able to contribute to the financial care of his family. But now his oldest sons were entering the job market, and apparently son Richard was bearing financial responsibilities for the family as well. With all those mouths to feed, the family needed all the help they could get.

The Final Years – 1901-1903

We still see the furniture company in operation, based on a newspaper ad in the Minneapolis Journal in 1901 in which the company was looking for a "Good, Steady Boy, from 16 to 20, to learn the cabinet-maker's trade. The furniture factory was located inside the Power building on Nicollet Island. These were the early days of electricity and the building that housed the factory was able to provide power for the tools Nels Peter and his crew used to make furniture.

Later in 1901 we see another newspaper ad in which N.P. and his company had an immediate opening for 3 "first-class cabinet makers." The address again was the Power building on Nicollet Island. To require this number of cabinet makers meant that the business must have still been somewhat profitable at the time. We also see N.P.'s listing in the Minneapolis City Directory of 1902 under "Furniture Manufacturers," with the Power building as his address.

But the home life was not happy. As I mentioned earlier, he would eventually be kicked out of his own home. Sometime in January of 1903, Richard and the older brothers had had enough of their father's drunken antics. Because Richard shouldered some of the responsibility of taking care of his parents' large family, he wanted to put a stop to the intoxicated conjugal visits of his father that resulted in more mouths to feed. By this time, all four of the oldest sons were now in their 20's and able to stand up to their father.

Nels Peter ended up living in the Winona Hotel at 219 Washington South (the building no longer stands). Early on the morning of June 21, 1903, he was found unconscious by staff who went to his room to collect the rent. He died later in the hospital, only briefly regaining consciousness long enough to mutter something about “wood alcohol” before passing away.

One newspaper article reporting his death was titled “Wood Alcohol. Suicide or Accident”? We will never know with certainty which it was, but I believe that it was suicide. The article says that “he had been idle for most of the week.” He did not go to work because he was despondent. All of his life’s work and accomplishments had evaporated, and he was not even welcomed in his own home.

The article states that Nels Peter had been employed by the Power Furniture Manufacturing Company. I can find no reference to this company in any historical documents. I believe he was still working for his own furniture company that was housed in the Power building, and that the reporter misunderstood what he was told.

As stated earlier, Nels was buried in a public grave at the Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis. Perhaps he originally had a wooden grave marker that rotted away over the decades. Only about a third of the graves in his cemetery lot had permanent markers when I visited in August of 2016. Thankfully a grandson of Emmert’s, upon hearing this, provided a marker that he made himself:



As evidence of his family being estranged from, Nels Peter’s widow was eventually buried in another cemetery on the opposite end of town, along with several of her children and grandchildren (including now my father). “Uncle Al” is the only descendant to be buried at Lakewood – a man who also had a tragic end to his life that involved alcohol.

But at least now I can happily report that this forgotten immigrant’s story has finally been told and he is forgotten no more.

(Please look below for some family photos of N.P.’s family after his demise):



This photo of the Liljengren family was taken around 1912.



This is the last photo we have of the entire Lijengren clan, taken around 1922. In the first row, from left to right, are: Richard Berger, Celia Josephine, Cerena Pamela, Bernard Rudolph, and "Grandma Augusta." In the second row, from left to right, are Leslie "Ted" (my grandfather), Hillard Melville, Emmert Lawrence, Arthur Herman, and Enroth Aloric.

Not sure when this photo was taken (apparently sometime between the two pictures posted above), but I recently received this from descendants of my great-aunt Celia Weidenbach (my guess is that was taken around 1915):



Left Top: Al, Rude, Mel, Art & Dick

Bottom Left: Emmert, Celia, Augusta, Cerena & Ted