

Alien Life in Laclu

Written by Barb Schroder-Manson

My childhood definition of an alien was “someone from outer space”. Now I have a secret. My grandparents were aliens. I have proof and I am about to tell you quite an amazing story.

When I was a small child, I overheard my parents and their friends talking and one of the guests said my grandparents were aliens. For the rest of my childhood, I looked at my grandparents very strangely and I assumed they really were aliens and now I have gathered all the evidence I need to prove it to you.

First of all, they came to Canada on a ship. Well, I presumed a spaceship. They came from a faraway land called Sweden. I assumed that Sweden was part of the galaxy. They did not speak our language but instead spoke some alien tongue called Swedish. They dressed differently than we do. They actually wore horns on their heads. They ate the weirdest food – head cheese, pork hocks, fish heads and lutefisk to name a few. So, you see they were aliens! Not until I was a teenager did I realize there was another definition of alien – “a foreign born immigrant”. By this definition, most of our earliest pioneers were aliens.

My grandfather, Otto Schroder and his wife, Matilda Toren, came to America in 1908 from Sweden. Otto was born in a small farming community in Halsingland, which is situated in the middle of Sweden on the east coast. Matilda was born in Varmland, along the southwest border of Sweden and Norway. They married on August 22, 1901 in Sweden. The original Schroder farmstead in Bjuraker, Sweden has been owned and farmed by the Schrodgers since 1890. And 129 years later, it is still a working farm and owned by my cousin Hans Schroder.

Otto and Matilda, along with almost one-fifth of the population of Sweden, decided to come to America due to famine and no work available. Grandpa Otto and his brother Charlie and Grandma Matilda and her brother Karl with his wife Ruby all journeyed together across the ocean. They first came to Canada in 1908, went to Duluth, Minnesota in 1909 and then settled in Ostersund (Laclu) in 1912. By the way, they took a ship, not a spaceship from Malmo, Sweden to New York City. Then from New York, they took the train to Duluth. To get to Canada they travelled by cart and oxen.

Otto & Matilda stayed in Duluth for three years – my dad, Algot Schroder, was born in Duluth, Minnesota, USA – yes, you guessed it, another alien on the list.

Now, why Ostersund you ask? First of all, they were offered 120-acre farmsteads for free if they homesteaded there. This area looks exactly like Sweden – bush, trees, lakes and wildlife. All these reasons contributed to settling in what is now called Laclu.

Otto and Matilda’s first order of business upon arriving was to build a shelter. For the first year of their life in Laclu they lived in a tent while they built their home on Lake Rosina. They lived there for 42 of the 56 years of their marriage. I had always envisioned a beautiful log home like the ones you see today, but apparently not – it was an unassuming wood frame house. It had a stoop, which are steps leading up to the front door to a small landing, and then you walked into what was called the Great Room. There was a kitchen table and a wood stove near the front door. Always on the stove was deer meat stewing and Swedish coffee (I called it syrup) brewing to greet you.

There were three single beds for their three sons (Algot, Herbert & Lars) pushed along the sides of walls and used as couches during the day. And Grandma Matilda had her rocking chair.

There was one small bedroom with a curtain for a door, for Matilda & Otto to sleep in. Have you been counting the rooms – two – the great room and the bed room. They were fortunate enough to also have a summer kitchen – a lean-to against the house where meals were prepared in the summer heat and where the pickling and canning was done in the fall. The home had no plumbing, no heat source other than the wood stove and no electricity – just the coal oil lamps.

To go to the bathroom, you had to walk 300 yards up the hill and into the bush to the outhouse - in the spring, summer, fall and winter. Matilda insisted it be that far away. They also built a root cellar on the side of the hill by the creek. This underground room kept the potatoes, carrots and turnips cold and fresh. There was a small wooden door to get into it, similar to a hobbit door. They also built an ice house, more like a wooden shed of sorts. In the winter they would cut huge blocks of ice and cover them with sawdust and then they would have ice all summer long.

Laundry was brought down to the creek and cleaned on the rocks. The clothes were hung outside to dry, but the sheets were laid out on the field to dry. It was quite the site to see all the sheets laying in the field, rustling in the wind, like sleeping ghosts.

MAKING A LIVING

Otto and Matilda did many things to make a living and to survive. They had to clear the land with their team of horses. They worked the farm, selling the eggs from their chickens and the milk from their cows. They would row through Belle Creek and then portage to Rice Bay and then row the boat on Lake Lulu and sell their goods to Winnipeg cottagers. Even back then Manitobans were an important part of our economy.

In the fall, Otto would go west to harvest and Matilda would look after the farm. They even took on a boarder for almost two years – Mr. Vin Clancy. They picked and sold hundreds of pounds of blueberries from Blueberry Hill. Otto built cedar rowboats and sold them around the lake. Of the boats he did not sell, he would rent out for \$1.00 a day. Otto also build houses. I guess that's where my dad, Algot got his love of carpentry from.

Using a dog sled in the winter, they would trap beaver and mink to raise cash. When you went to Grandma's house you would see beaver pelts strung on wood frames and put around the Great Room, just like artwork. Matilda was so proud that they had enough cash to buy a large canoe – one I'm not sure Grandpa liked so much, he seemed to fall out of it a lot. I think he preferred his own rowboats.

FOOD

They hunted, trapped and fished with a net for food. At first Grandma and Grandpa fished for jackfish and would throw away the pickerel – too small they said. They loved their canned jackfish – it tasted almost like salmon. Vin Clancy taught them about pickerel and the great taste of this rather small fish.

They lived off their large gardens, the size of football fields. They had huge potato fields. In later years, there was Otto & Matilda's field, Heino's field and then Algot & Elsa's field (Otto's oldest son). All the children would pick potatoes just like they did down south with the cotton.

In the 1900's, to get their staple groceries, Grandma would row across Belle Lake, portage to Rice Bay, row across Lulu to get the local train at the train stop, called Bustead. She would then take the train to Keewatin to shop. She reversed the process for the trip home, except when she got back to Laclu, Grandma would have to carry 100-pound bags of sugar and flour to the boat, across Lulu, portage to Belle Lake and then up the creek to home and unload.

Grandma would actually shoot deer right off the stoop. She'd use an old 33 and was called "One Shot Tilda". She would do this while she was waiting for her bread dough to rise which was sitting under covers in her bed. She always had a pot of deer meat on the stove. Because it was hard to store meat in the summer, they would share it with their neighbours or can it. The coffee pot was always on and the door was always open to all visitors.

FAMILY

Otto and Matilda had three sons – Algot, Herbert and Lars.

Algot Carl Otto Schroder was born in 1910, married Elsie Christianson and they had eight children. They lived on part of the original homestead until Elsie got pregnant with her seventh child and then they moved to the big town of Keewatin. His oldest son Douglas, had a camp on this parcel of land until 2008.

Herbert Olof Ingemar Schroder was born in 1913, never married and spent his entire life in Laclu.

Lars Alexander Ross Schroder was born in 1918 and married Gladys Lane and they had one son Lyle, who now resides, with his family, on the site of the original home and farm. Tradition continues in Canada as it does in Sweden.

My dad, Algot didn't want his children to learn Swedish because he was ridiculed for not speaking very good English. They were treated like aliens. Even during my Mom & Dad's time in Laclu, you had to do what you had to do to survive. At that time the Department of Lands & Forests put limits on the amount of wild meat you could have. The rangers would check the school buses to see which children had wild meat sandwiches and then go to their farms. When my Mom saw the ranger coming down the road, she grabbed my sister Val, who was a baby then, put the cold hind of wild meat in the baby carriage and my sister Val on top of it. Of course, the ranger would not go near the screaming child and did not discover the hind of wild meat. Then there was the pickled meat you had to hide. The 30 quarts of wild meat in jars were put on shelves in the culvert under the road. It was not only a good hiding place but it kept the meat cold. My Mom also put 90 quarts of blue berries, as well as pork, which was salted and put in ceramic jars, in the culvert. Those sly old Swedes!

In the 1930's, Algot, Lars & Herbert would walk the three miles to the old school house. The old school house was in operation from 1908-1951. The land and logs were donated by farmers. Lars would light the fire by 8 a.m., one hour before school, for 15 cents a day. Algot got his grade 8, which back then was equivalent to our Grade 12 of today.

PERSONAL STORIES & ENTERTAINMENT

Otto brought with him from Sweden, a sharpening stone he used on the farmstead there. On it was inscribed OPS B 1898. The first three initials were the initials of his name (Otto Patrick Schroder), the next initial "B" – Brandbo the farmstead and then the year he inscribed it. I have this stone in my kitchen and use it to sharpen knives – and yes I spit on it, just like I saw my Dad do.

Grandpa Otto was known to never take off his fedora hat, even in the house. Grandma Matilda's favourite spot in the house was her rocking chair in the great room. If she didn't like something she would say "ousha, ousha, ousha." My Mom would say Oy, yio, yio! I have inherited my mother's saying.

Laclu was known for its community events – even back then. The residents would skate on the frozen lake to Webb's store. Alex and Millie Lamb had a club for girls and taught them how to sew. Eleanor Clancy brought a touch a culture to Laclu. She graduated from the School of Fine Arts and had a kiln in her basement. She did the tiles on the face of her fireplace and was involved in many folk groups and dance clubs and she taught piano. Sleigh rides at Christmas time were always a treat. There were Strawberry Socials and dances with the Swedes showing off by doing the Swedish Hambo (apparently my parents were Hambo champions) - always with violin and accordion music, always laughter and moonshine. There was also the Regatta, the boat parade, row boats filled with bull rushes. What a site that must have been!

SWEDISH TRADITIONS BROUGHT TO CANADA

Some of the Swedish traditions still honoured in Canada by our family include Christmas – God Jul with the Swedish smorgasbord consisting of lutefisk with cream sauce, pickled herring, creamed potatoes, Swedish meatballs, pastry and chocolate snowballs with the more traditional dishes of turkey and ham. Our families continue to gather as one family to celebrate Christmas Eve. St. Nicholas (Santa Claus) comes at 8 p.m. sharp to deliver one gift to each child. St. Lucia is celebrated on December 13th, where young star boys and young girls wear candles on their heads. The candles have been replaced with glittering garland in their hair. Then they would sing the traditional St. Lucia song which loosely translated means "friendship is greeted."

CONCLUSION

Grandma and Grandpa Schroder brought with them a way of life, traditions, hopes and dreams. They were happy with their life of mainly survival. In 1955, when Grandma & Grandpa were both failing, they had to be moved to the little hamlet of Norman. When Grandma had to go into the hospital, she would get her clothes on and try to walk back to Laclu – to a life she loved. Both my grandparents were born in 1879 and both died in 1957 at the age of 78, a pretty long life for back then.

So, now as an adult, I fully understand all about my alien grandparents. I now have all the facts. My grandparents were not the aliens I thought they were. Strange ways maybe, they dressed and talked differently and they lived in a different time in history, but aliens, well let's just make sure.

BEAM ME UP, GRANDMA!



Valdemar & Ingeborg Christianson – my Mom's parents
Matilda & Otto Schroder – my Dad's parents



Sign leading to Schroder Farmstead in Laclu