EARLY DAYS WITH
JOHN S. & MARIE K. SIGDESTAD

By
Daniel J. Sigdestad

PREFACE

I would be remiss if I did not admit to misgivings for not obtaining from my parent's authentic and interesting genealogical information. Of what intrinsic worth would not such priceless material be--pertaining to modes, standards, methods and customs from early years down through their life span, measuring from 1865 to 1950?

I have tried to cover part of that span in my own limited way, recalling those incidents and experiences that might be of interest and benefit to my children and their offspring in years to come.

Special recognition is due my dear wife for her assistance in preparing this record of events. It is my hope and prayer that those herein listed, and progeny, will enjoy and profit from the information in the history of the lives of parents and grand their given parents.

In loving memory of my parents who lived loved and labored that we might more ably reflect on and benefit by their industry, thrift and sacrifice.

BLESSED BE THEIR MEMORY

Written by their son
Daniel J. Sigdestad
September 1982

John S. Sigdestad

The golden morning sun rose radiantly over the hills and valleys on the South Dakota prairie that beautiful autumn day when mother's anxious moment culminated in my arrival into this world. Mother had previously lost a pair of twins which left her grief-stricken and sad. With implicit faith in her Lord and an abiding trust in His promises, she prayed in her distress that Cod would entrust her with another pair of twins. I am here as a result of her ardent and impassioned prayers.

Selmer and I were born at home on Sunday September 17, 1899. These births healed the fallen, yet indomitable spirit of mother whose trusting faith and fidelity could not be shaken or dimmed. How fortunate we were to be born into a family whose lives were centered around and motivated by their loving Savior.

My earliest recollection of home was my inability to enter the shanty adjacent to the house under construction because I could not operate the latch-string on the door. I well remember how mother took pains in dressing us, partly so as to confound the relatives in identifying us. For her own way of telling us apart she tied a red handkerchief around the neck of one of us. Could it be that the one so designated would

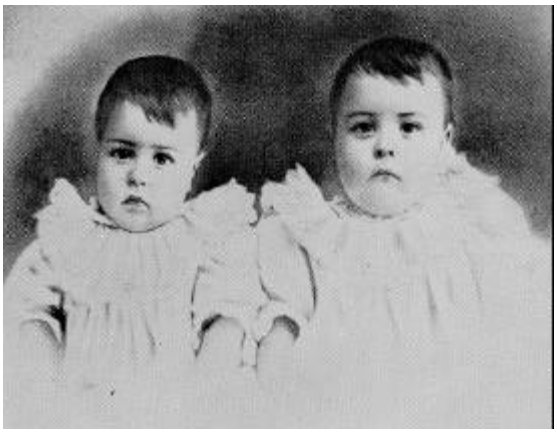
unfasten the tie, thereby confusing mother? Not likely! We were too young for such pranks, possibly only two or three years old.

Marie K. Sigdestad

Carefree summers soon came to an abrupt end when we were old enough to go to school. My first day in school will always linger in my mind. Dad brought us to school in a buggy drawn by King and Prince. As Dad left the school grounds I cried uncontrollably. Not even the loving, assuring voice of a concerned teacher could control my lonesome, homesick feeling. Peering through the west window of the schoolroom I watched Dad returning to our clearly visible home until I lost sight of him as he turned off the road towards the barn.

The first day of school seemed endless, but it came and went. The distance home that first day was joyfully shortened by the thrill of going home where I felt more secure. Our shortcut route to the schoolhouse was a clearly defined path across Anton Morby's and Uncle Sakris's fields rather than walking the main road. Selmer would invariably take the lead. Over the stubble fields he would aim the course so straight that we marveled at his ability to do so at such an early age. This same course was repeated each year throughout our eight years of rural school training. This path was visible for a long distance until it was plowed under in late fall, when a new and more difficult path had to be made over the plowed ground.

For boys growing up on the farm the most difficult part of starting school again after having gone bare-foot during summer may have been the wearing of shoes which the callused and unfettered feet protested. Clothing was drab for the most part for school children. Girls wore their hair in braids tied with large bows or worn with a band. The boys' hair was usually trimmed with shears. To get the edges somewhat even a large bowl was placed on the head so the shears followed the contour of the bowl.



Daniel and Selmer

My first grade teacher, Carrie Vale, was one who went beyond her call of duty. Individual help was never denied any pupil in spite of a full daily schedule in an overcrowded one-room school.

When we grew older we helped our parents with their daily chores. Even as preschoolers, Selmer and I would offer to milk a certain tame cow although mother frowned on that offer because of the danger involved. We were confident we could trust our pet cow, so with pail in one hand and stool in the other we sat down to prove our offer, Selmer on one side and I on the other. We did it, but mother thought we worked too fast, so she tested our feeble attempt to see if we had gotten that last drop of milk. We were taught at an early age that whatever was worth doing was worth doing well, so the next time we offered to help, we tried to perform to mother's liking. A few years later, however, we could never figure out why we were so anxious to learn the art of milking. When we didn't have to do it, it was fun; but when that

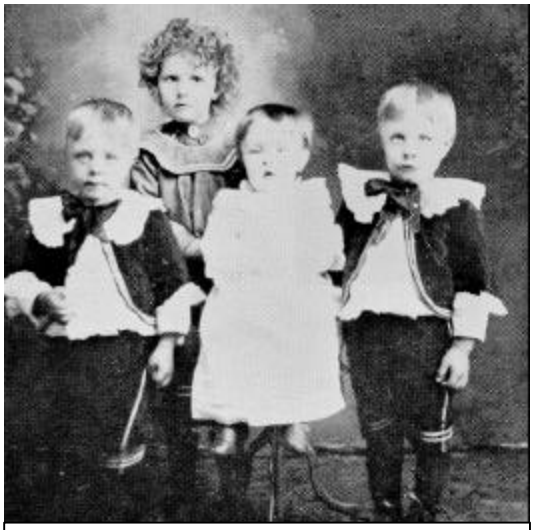
became our daily chore it was far less appealing.

Another chore after school was helping mother by going to the pasture to pick cow chips. We would take partially dried chips, stack them in pairs in an upright position for further drying. In a day or two, depending upon the need, we would take gunnysacks, gather the dried chips and carry the sacks home on our shoulders.

Water was heated in a pan or kettle atop a coal-burning stove. The large oven turned out golden loaves of relished bread. The inviting aroma in the kitchen on such days was impelling enough to make us want to help mother feed the stove, knowing we could sample the bread, hot from the oven.

We always had enough to eat, though I am sure it taxed Mother's ingenuity to plan meals on a small budget. Bread we had always, potatoes and other vegetables from the garden were abundant. Beef and pork raised on the farm rounded out the meals with an occasional duck or jackrabbit. We learned at an early age not to waste food. We were often chided if an uneaten portion of food was left on or behind the plate. Often crusts of bread were left hidden behind the plate, unseen by the offender but clearly visible to the scrutinizing eyes of Mother and Dad. They made sure that it was eaten before we could have our dessert. The cookie jar was always a temptation. We were never denied any food, but between meals we were taught to ask for it.

A wash stand and a cistern pump occupied a corner of the large kitchen. There was also a pail for water and a dipper. Jackets, caps and coats were hung on a row of hooks behind the kitchen door. Under the watchful eye of mother these hooks were used as expected. Clothes draped over a convenient chair or dropped on the floor or carelessly tossed in a corner were quickly identified with its proper owner. Overshoes were lined up neatly near the door on a piece of paper to protect the floor. Mud or snow was often tracked in nonetheless, and Mother did a lot of mopping up on her linoleum-covered floor.



Daniel, Minnie, Joel and Selmer

On wash days a goodly part of the kitchen became a laundry room. A wash tub placed on a bench and a copper boiler were brought in from their storage place. Water was heated in the boiler on the kitchen range. All clothes were rubbed and scrubbed by hand on a washboard. Clothes were hung outside to dry. In winter the clothes would freeze stiff on the line. The long-handled underwear ranging downward in size from Dad's 40 to Joel's diminutive proportion assumed grotesque shapes. Improper handling in this frozen condition could damage the fabric, so they were carried in carefully like headless ghosts. A few minutes in the warm kitchen would collapse them enough so they could be draped over chairs to complete drying. It was little wonder that Mother's hands remained red, swollen and sore.

The rite of the Saturday night bath was likewise performed in the kitchen. Again the water was heated in the kitchen. One at a time we stepped into the wash tub. All wastewater was carried outside to be dumped. This was usually done by the one next in line unless Dad was close by. After supper the table was cleared so we could use it as a desk on which to do our homework. Many were the arithmetic problems with which I struggled!

A large hard-coal heater took up considerable space in the living room. We never tired of admiring the distorted images of our faces reflected in the highly polished nickel-plated trimmings. The smoothly rounded surfaces were wonderful against which to warm our cold hands and feet. In wintertime we

both dressed and undressed within the circle of that pleasant warmth. The cheerful glow of fire within shone through the isinglass doors that, when viewed from the outdoors, caused us to rush through our chores so we could get back into the house to enjoy the comfort of that inviting glow.

A stairway off the kitchen led to the bedrooms upstairs. These rooms were suffocatingly hot in summer and frigid in winter. A heavy patchwork quilt over woolen blankets covered each bed. In extreme wintry weather layers of newspaper were placed between the blankets for added warmth. Bedbugs, often found in egg crates exchanged when eggs were hauled to town, abounded in spite of mother's unending war against them. Men who often worked in logging camps in winter would bring with them these infectious creatures, thereby multiplying and augmenting the already heavy load of our distraught mother. She would spray kerosene behind the moldings, into the cracks, over the frame and springs and even into the corners of the mattresses.

Clara and Minnie

Mother's life with Dad was generally tranquil. Dad worked hard to provide for us in so many ways. Childhood diseases in the early 1900's added to the parent's worries. Most children caught and survived chicken pox, measles, mumps, whooping cough and scarlet fever. We always strove for perfect attendance in school, but when I was in fifth grade I contracted mumps which forced me to stay home for a week--there went my attendance record! Clara was the only one of us that had a perfect record throughout her eight years of school for which she was recognized at graduation time.

Father's only day of rest was on Sunday. His all-occasion blue serge suit served him so long that the seat of his pants shone like a mirror. He was "klokker" (sexton) for many years in Bergen church until the English language replaced the old Norwegian about the year 1917. The folks saw to it that we were faithful in our church attendance. Only unfeigned illness or inclement weather kept us at home.

Dad was a typical immigrant from Norway. His life was a difficult way of life. The mountainous terrain where he had lived afforded no space for grain pursuits. Many were discouraged at the dim prospects of owning a farm, due to the traditional custom of inheritance. He became restless. Anxious for a life in America and a strong desire for a better life caused him, together with countless others, to leave their fatherland, braving the unknown seas for a venture in an unknown land. Dad braced for the expected and unexpected evils of the unforgiving ocean on its unescorted and lonely trip into chartered waters and uncharted dangers. Tradition had it that the oldest son in the family should have a right to the farm; others had to search for work elsewhere. News from America may have been exaggerated at times, but the encouragement to emigrate was all that was needed to convince them that a journey to the new land was worthwhile. So with a stubborn determination and a positive attitude they forged ahead.

Dad was a symbol of this type. He landed with other members of his family in Montevideo, Minnesota, in July, 1881. He worked on farms for 25 cents a day and in winter months got his room and board for his work. After four years in that area, the family traveled via covered wagon to Day County, South Dakota, landing in Lynn Township in 1885. Here he filed on 80 acres of land and later purchased a quarter section from Ben Bakken on which he built his home. In 1891 he bought the rights to a tree claim where he planted a grove of trees that has since decorated that land which is mine today. The pioneers rose with the sun and labored as it crossed the heavens, and when it sank behind the western horizon they cheerfully headed home--tired but happy in the consciousness of a day's work done.

Marie Kvile, at the age of 21 years, had come from Norway the preceding year with her brother Iver Danielson who had established a home in Union township about four miles from Dad's place. Marie kept house for her brother until such a time that Dad was able to woo her away from her brother's place to help him establish their own home. Little is known about their courtship, but on July 2, 1891 they were married. Here they labored faithfully against many odds in the early days of farming. Drought, grasshopper, hail and prairie fires raised havoc with their heroic efforts in trying to raise a crop, but their persistent courage was not intimidated by reverses.

Travel during the early years was at best very crude and slow. Roads were only trails and money for road building was scarce. I can recall the time when a team of horses pulling a hand-controlled scraper was used to fill in low places, thus making a grade over watered areas. Culverts were made of wood to be placed in low areas, then covered with dirt for drainage purposes. Of course oxen supplied the earliest power used for transportation. They were often hitched with horses for added power. Later horses replaced the oxen, speeding up the work. The buggy replaced the wagon, thus reducing the time it took to go places.

Exchange work with the neighbors was common. During winter months sleighs were used; also a light rig known as a cutter. Before the automobile came into being we had a shiny new buggy with a collapsible top, equipped with side curtains for use in bad weather or as protection from the sun. A new buggy and a frisky horse was the desire of those who could afford it and the envy of those less fortunate. Our first automobile was a 1917 Reo with a collapsible top and side curtains. It was a sturdy, rugged four-cylinder model that, when forced, could attain to a speed of 35 miles an hour. When it came to muddy roads it could plow its way through with little difficulty. During the winter months the car was jacked up to save the tires, and the battery placed in the cellar to keep it from freezing.

Life before the turn of the century was very simple. There was no electricity, no telephones and no running water. A clearly defined path led to the outhouses where the Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck catalogues served their final purpose. Whatever we had was a result of what we ourselves created. We made our sleds, and made skis from old discarded door tracks or staves from large barrels. Harnesses made from twine were used when we hitched trained calves to pull us around in our little wagon.

To get water for the livestock a well had to be dug by hand. That required an enormous amount of work. Usually the well was dug with a tiling spade. The dirt was hoisted up in buckets which, when moist, would be difficult to empty. Imagine digging a well by hand four feet in diameter and fifteen to twenty feet deep!

The early pioneers did not have much money with which to buy coal, so wood had to be cut for that purpose. That was always a good winter's job. Field work was far different from the present, modern methods. Tractors were unheard of. The machinery was crude. The walking plow, the walking cultivator, the miniature reaper that left the grain untied were the common machines in use. Years later the riding machinery became better known. Shocking grain was a detestable job, especially barley, as the beards would lodge in your shirt and socks causing unending itching.

Since threshing machines were few we had to take our turn in getting our grain into the bins. This would be late in the fall. It was not unusual to be threshing after the first snowfall. In order to get the fall plowing done the grain had to be stacked in huge cone-shaped stacks, usually four to six stacks to a setting, then the plowing could be done with ease. Threshing every fall was fascinating to us. To see that enormous steam engine puffing black clouds of smoke was terrifying. That smooth flowing power operated the separator with such ease that the straw came bellowing out of the blower in massive heaps to form a huge strawpile in which we loved to frolic after the machine moved away. The shrill whistle from the engine would penetrate our ears with deafening force.

When we heard Dad mention the approximate time the threshers would come to our farm, we would gaze through the schoolroom windows in eager anticipation of its arrival. When that time came we lost

all interest in our school work. The teacher knew why we were so restless, but as long as we did not misbehave we were not scolded. Our only concern was to rush home so we could ride the grain wagon with Dad to the field where the machine was in operation. What a thrill For several years we were fortunate in having the threshers at our place on our birthday. One such fall day stands out very vividly in my mind: Selmer and I had gotten pocket knives with a chain to fasten them to our overall button for safety. I can't recall any birthday present that was more appreciated than that knife. To show our pride in that unexpected gift, we were anxious to follow Dad to the threshing crew so we could show off our treasured birthday present. Dad sensed our joy and understood our pride. A greater attraction than the threshing machine was the cook-car. The inviting aroma surrounding the area was a beckoning call for us to survey the premises, I would dare

Selmer would dare me to go close enough so that cooks would be aware that we were nears I would steal close to the steps at the entrance, listening closely to find out in which end of the cook-car the ladies might be working. When I thought they were in the opposite end, unmindful of us, I would peek in the doorway to explore what was going on. As sure as I did I was caught by an unexpected gaze that jerked my head back in a jolting manner. When the cooks sensed our sneaky intrusion they knew why we were there. It wasn't long before they satisfied our curiosity by giving us a cookie or a doughnut. Then we were happy and satisfied.

Dad was a man of sterling character. He never imbibed in alcoholic beverages and never used any form of tobacco. He practiced what he preached, setting an example worthy to follow. He was always regular in attending church as was mother, and they expected the same of the children.

Mother and Dad read by the light of the kerosene lamp with a reflector attached to it. The reading material included the Bible, that was used daily, Decorah Posten (news) and Minneapolis Tidende, and the Dakota Farmer. With Decorah Posten came Vedarnen, which was a tabloid that was more often read by neighbors because the exhilarating and hilarious (funnies) called "Ola and Per" became a frequent topic of conversation. That was a scream!

The kerosene lamp was replaced by the Aladdin lamp which was a tremendous improvement. Now we could see clearly from any area of the large kitchen instead of rushing to get to the limited spot illumined by the small lamp's reflector.

In 1918 Dad had electric lights installed in all the buildings. What an extravagence! Not so. We had experienced some good years and Dad thought it would be a good investment, and that is what it turned out to be. No longer was it necessary to clean lamp and lantern chimneys, a job which we disliked. All that was necessary now was to press the button. What a welcome change! A large Genco generating plant furnished the power by storing it in 16 large glass batteries. No more danger of fire in the barn that held 70 tons of hay; no more danger of a cow "jumping over the moon" because the lantern capsized.

By now we were comfortably situated so we could enjoy the comforts of the day.

Dark gloomy clouds of the first world war had hung on the horizon since 1911. The United States was not involved until later. In 1917-18 men were being drafted and ordered to military training camps. Meanwhile people at home were busy making articles of clothing needed by the soldiers. The Bergen Charity Circle, of which we were members, met regularly for this purpose, and that was the time Mother taught me to knit.

The summer of 1918 caught Selmer and me in the army draft. This was of great concern to the folks, fearing we would be called for military training. We registered as soon as we were 18 years old which was three months before Armistice Day. We were classified I-A which meant that we were physically fit for army training, and that we would be next in line to be called for camp duty. The thought of our leaving home was not very pleasant for Mother and Dad, but their anxiety was soon alleviated when, within a matter of a few weeks, the Armistice, ending the war, was signed on November 11, 1918.

Since there was no refrigeration in the early part of the century, meat had to be cured to keep it from spoiling. Dad built a smokehouse for this purpose, using a 55 gallon oil drum. The top of the drum was removed to allow the smoke to escape and penetrate the meat that was hung on the surrounding walls. Again we had fun challenging each other, this time to see who could stay the longest in the smoke-filled house. I don't know who won, but I know I came out choking and with eyes and nose running. A slow-burning fire without flame cured the meat to a delectable taste.

Before hams could be smoked they were soaked in a brine solution in a large earthen crock for several days. In this solution they would keep for weeks. Dried beef was another variety of home-prepared meat. This had to be salted for a given time, then hung to dry. When ready, Dad wrapped it in cloth, put it in a sack and buried it in the grain bin. Mutton prepared this way became "spekekjot," a favorite amongst Norwegians.

The large dried cod fish Dad bought occasionally had to be prepared in a special way before it could be cooked. Mother would put the cod in a large earthen crock filled with a salt and water mixture to which some lye had been added. Before this "Lutefisk" was cooked, it was washed and again soaked in water. Served with melted butter, mashed or boiled potatoes, it was a most delectable meal. Lefse was always a companion.

It was necessary to work if one wanted spending money. During the warm days of summer, Sam, Joe and I trapped gophers. The county paid a two-cent bounty for tails. We stuffed into our overall pockets several slices of dried beef, and with our traps in hand took off to the pasture. There we spent the entire day trapping and relishing our dried beef dinner.

To keep the gopher tails intact we placed them in a snuff box discarded by our hired man. On Saturdays we would go with Dad to town and trade our "loot" for celluloid rings which we used for trimming the harnesses.

This became our weekly event in the summer, so much so that whenever the Knott boys saw us coming into the hardware store they would jokingly say: "Here come those pesky ring buyers." That didn't bother us. We were happy with our purchases, and next week we would go back for more.

The folks believed in giving us a good education that they were denied. Parochial school was attended for a month following secular school. Here memory work was paramount. The "Catechism," the "Forklaring" (explanation) and "Bible History" were memorized verbatim. The last period in the afternoon consisted of writing from dictation several paragraphs dictated by the teacher from the "lesebok" (Reader). This required intense study because we were responsible for spelling and paragraphing, as well as diacritical markings.

Our noon recess was usually spent playing ball or crickets, but if we saw a gopher running in the school yard, we formed a water brigade, carried water from Uncle Sakris' nearby slough, poured it into the hole and waited for the gopher to come out. Then with a stick or rock in our hands we would attack, many times too early or too late. That was discouraging, so next time we used a snare made out of twine. That was more effective.

Our teacher's motto was "obedience." We were expected to follow her rules to the letter. If we got out of hand once there would not be a second time. Mother too expected wholehearted support. If I had been reprimanded for some offense, the folks would surely find out, than I would get another censure when I got home.

That brings to mind another incident when Selmer and I had been given permission to go to Jake Fosheim's place to play with Jake and Art. They were the only boys in the neighborhood that had a bicycle. That intrigued us and was the main reason we wanted to be with them. Mother told us to be home at a certain time and she meant it. That evening Selmer went at the precise time, but I was having too much fun with the bike to heed mother's order. Later I wished I had, for when I got home

mother applied something to that part of my anatomy that touches the chair when I sit down. That taught me to respect her orders.

Sunday dinners were always special but usually late, not due to Mother's negligence, but rather because of the long-winded sermons by the preacher. It was not uncommon to delay the dinner until one o'clock though the services began precisely at eleven o'clock. If baptism, communion or confirmation were a part of the service, the dinner was further delayed. To us as youngsters it often reached the point when we thought more about mother's good dinner awaiting us than of what transpired in church. There was scarcely a Sunday that we did not have company for dinner. That was the price the folks paid for living so close to the church--only 80 rods away. We always enjoyed company, then mother might have a little something extra, but it just meant that rambunctious boys, eager to go out to play, had to wait till the grown-ups had been served. That was usually a very tedious wait.

Mother's generous heart never permitted anyone to go hungry. Meat, vegetables, butter and eggs of which we had plenty, were given to the Pastor for the family's use. At Thanksgiving time mother always had a large turkey ready for the parsonage together with freshly baked bread, cookies and pies.

Preparation for Christmas always started the first week in December. School children from the various districts gathered at Bergen church on the first Saturday to be assigned their particular part in the program which consisted of poems, dialogues, songs and pantomimes, all to be memorized. When thus assigned we studied diligently for the next Saturday's practice. The night assigned for the "Juletrefest" (Christmas Tree Festival) was the highlight of all the winter activities. No one stayed home that night. Grandmas' as well as new-born babes were there. Soon there was only standing room left. When the program was over the children marched around the altar where each one was given a bag of candy and nuts; to our joy a nice red apple was added when we got back to our assigned seats.

Celebrating Christmas for at least two weeks required much time and planning. Mother went all out to make it a joyous occasion for all of us. Christmas Eve dinner was extra special. There was never a time we did not have a brand new oil cloth to deck the kitchen table although the present one would have served the purpose as well. That special meal consisted of lutefisk, mashed potatoes with delicious brown gravy, spare-ribs, lefse, flatbread, fattigman, kringla, pickles, and all kinds of cookies and cake. When supper was over the Christmas Story was read, followed with an evening prayer. At an early age we were taught the true meaning of Christmas.

For several days following, the neighbors invited the young folks for a fun time that would be spent in singing, playing parlor games, and, of course, eating a delightful lunch. This would go on far into the night. We did our chore early so we could leave home right after supper, thus making the evening s fun last longer. After two weeks of such exciting socializing, we were satisfied to get back to our regular routine.

Mother and Dad made their home on the farm until 1926 when they purchased a house and retired to Bristol. Selmer, who had worked the farm for a few years, purchased the land and continued its operation.

There were nine children in our family. Minnie was the first to survive after the death of the first four infants that included a pair of twins. Minnie was born November 11, 1897, Selmer and I on September 17, 1899, Joel on May 17, 1902, and Clara on July 29, 1905.

After a year suffering with pernicious anemia, Mother passed away on September 14, 1936 at the age of 72.5 years. After Mother's passing Dad made his home on the farm with Selmer and Elsie. He enjoyed being on the farm, staying there for several years before moving to Moorhead, Minnesota where he spent his remaining days with Joel and Clarice. He passed away on January 23, 1950 at 85 years of age.

Blessed be their memory