

Gunner Christiansen
by Daughter Lillie Finley
Danish Immigrant
Gripsholm
May 1, 1951



THE RETURN OF WILHEM,
GUNNER AND IVAN CHRISTIANSEN TO CANADA MAY OF 1951
AS REMEMBERED BY GUNNER



Our Dad returned to Denmark reluctantly, in 1936, with our Mom (Jenny), Gunner and Ivan. He could never settle down or feel at home in Denmark. Dad always wanted to return to Canada. He never shared his dreams personally with me, in this regard, but it was obvious from his many attempts that he wanted to return.

Before 1940 I don't recall hearing or seeing anything that suggested that he was thinking of returning.

During the War years (1939-45) the dream of returning to Canada could not be realized.

After the War Dad and Mom made concrete steps to get back. While they had the money, this time, they could not get a Visa to enter Canada. No reason was given. Dad didn't give up however, he corresponded with friends and acquaintances in Canada and got Harry Shepherd, Dad's friend and Robin Hood Flour Mill in Calgary, Alberta to Sponsor us.

The time leading up to 1951, when every thing finally fell into place and we could return, was a very tense time for us all, but especially for Mom and Dad. I remember them anxiously waiting for the Mailman, every day, and a letter from Canada. With great trembling Dad would open those letters and read, aloud in English, the content for some good news.

Finally that important letter did come that guaranteed us, Dad, Ivan and Gunner work at Robin Hood Flour Mill, in Calgary, Alberta.

Everything being cleared for our return to Canada, Dad and Mom had to sell their belongings. Dad and a friend had started a Fish Smoking Business and Dad had a Fish Peddling Business which he also had to sell. He was able to sell his assets, but he had only enough money for himself, Ivan and Gunner to get back to Canada. The strategy was, that we were to go ahead and together we would, as quickly as possible, make enough money then bring the rest of the family over. That is, Vera, Bent, Tommy and Lillie.

Our parents decision to move to Canada, disrupted our whole family. We left Jylland, Bjeregaard where we had only lived three years. My Mom and the four youngest children would live in Copenhagen until we were able to save enough money in Canada to bring them over.

Dad, Ivan (16) and Gunner (18) left for Canada in May 1951, on a Train destined for Gothenburg, Sweden where we were to board the Swedish Ocean Liner, Gripsholm. After the three of us had boarded the Train and my Mom standing on the Platform, I witnessed something I had never witnessed my Dad do before or since, he broke down and cried as we pulled out of the Station.

Our train headed for Gothenburg, on a trip that I don't remember much of. We arrived at the Amerika Terminal. The train took us right down to the pier where we were to board a luxury Liner. I only became aware of that as we boarded the ship. The trip across the Atlantic is kind of a blur to me still. The things I remember are some of the people we met on board and with whom I struck up a life long friendship. There was John Andreassen and his wife, Grete and their two children. I later worked with John in Calgary, as a Tile setter. I have tried to stay in touch with John and Grete over the years . The last time I spoke to him is about two years ago. He is retired and to my surprise is in his eighties.

The passengers on the Gripsholm were predominantly emigrants going to various parts of Canada. Some were like us returning to Canada. One guy in particular told some wild stories. This fellow was about Dad's age. He told us that he had worked on Construction in Canada somewhere. One day he had fallen off the scaffolding and landed on his head in a barrel of nails. The doctors were picking nails out of his head for weeks after that. I don't know how true the story was. But that was one story that impressed my eighteen year old mind.

We enjoyed the luxury on board, especially the meals, for they were included in our fare. But we also had access to a Swimming Pool,

Theatre, Worship Services and Tuck Shop. Our big problem was that we didn't have much money to spend on anything extra. Dad tried to be generous to our Waiter and tipped him, the response he got from him in Swedish was "that is not much". Well it was much for us who still had thousands of miles to go yet. The trip across the Atlantic was pleasant and comfortable. But it was exciting to see land again, Ivan's and my homeland.

We landed in Halifax and we had to go through Immigration. The three of us had Danish Passports, but when the immigration officer looked at Ivan's and my Passports they simply stamped Returning Canadian. Here we had jumped through so many hoops in Copenhagen that we didn't need to go through.

I don't remember a lot from the long and tedious Train ride across Canada. On the Train we were on our own. There were no meals included. We had just a few dollars to get us to Calgary. The consequence of that was that we ended up eating Sardines, dry bread and Watermelon. To this day I still hate Sardines but I have overcome my dislike for Watermelon. We spent several nights on the Train, a Coal Fired Steam Engine. By the time we got to Calgary we were very dirty with Coal dust. At night the table and seat was made into a pretty good bed. I remember people having nightmares and being awakened by the screams of people. I also remember the Train Conductor flirting with the Indian women in northern Ontario. That was also the first time that I saw a Native person.

At long last we arrived in Calgary, CPR station. Axel Smith was there to meet us in his new 1951 Ford. Axel Smith and his wife Carey were good friends of Mom and Dad. Axel was my Godfather.

Axel put us up in a Hotel on 7th avenue for one night. It has since been torn down. Dad was excited to know he was back in Calgary again. But being back was marred by the fact that the rest of the family was still in Denmark.

We went to work right away at Robin Hood Flour Mill. I didn't like that job. I had to work the midnight shift, where I had a terrible time staying awake. At times I was filling those bags with Brand and sewing them shut in my sleep. Ivan and Dad worked on a different floor, on the day shift, they were filling smaller bags with white flour. Both Ivan and I were smokers at the time, Ivan was 16 and on the small side. One day while going home from work, Ivan was smoking his long stemmed pipe. A Calgary Transit Bus suddenly came to a stop where we were. The Bus Driver jumped out, quit amused, by this boy who was smoking a pipe,

this kind of thing just wasn't done in Canada. The Bus Driver was one of Mom's and Dad's acquaintances from the first time.

I remember getting to know several of Mom's and Dad's friends from their first stay in Canada, but they were not in their class any more, many of their friends had moved on and had become successful as business people or farmers. Here we were, poor immigrants, who had struggled, financially in Denmark for 15 years, unable to care for many of our basic needs. I remember one lady commenting about Dad's teeth, several were missing and rotted out. Nevertheless, these old friends were good to us they made us feel welcome in Canada. I especially remember Chris Jensen and Mine and their family, and the Damkar's and their family. They would often invite us to their farm on Sunday mornings after church, at Sharon Lutheran Church. We enjoyed the many meals and afternoons spent at their farms. These same people also lent us money that helped us get Mom and the rest of the family to Canada sooner.

Shortly after arriving in Calgary, Alberta we rented a house in Sarcee and we bought a Car. The house was outside city limits. We had a spectacular view of the Rocky Mountains from our house. At night, coming back from the city, we had to be very careful we didn't run over Indians who were sleeping on the dirt road.

Another highlight was watching the Calgary Stamped Parade from the windows of Robin Hood and later going to the Stampede Grounds with Smith's. What impressed me the most was the Indians, their Tepees and their costumes.

When Fall came in 1951 and after many letters between Mom and Dad and money saved and borrowed, Mom and the rest of the family (Vera, Bent, Tommy, and Lillie) arrived on a hot fall day in September. I was still working the night shift and was sleeping when they arrived. I remember waking up and seeing Mom looking in my bedroom window. We were told of their harrowing trip on what they called an Italian Cattle Boat.

Our family was united again, only to encounter many more challenges in the years ahead. For me, our decision to return to Canada was a good decision. I understand why Dad and Mom wanted to return to Canada. It is a great place to be. I am glad to be here. Thanks Mom and Dad for getting us here despite all the hardships involved.

