

Gunda's Coffee Pot

The roots of American society run deep into European soil. Even in the days of Benjamin Franklin, he explained to Europeans that thousands of English, Irish, Scotch, and Scandinavian people were coming to America, where no one asked about their birth or breeding, but rather, "What can you do"? In America they could soon become land owners, which would better their condition at once, for the over-crowded European countries had no land left for the poor man. The large land owners kept the huge estates in their own families from generation to generation. The natural desire to own a home, coupled with the trend toward an improved economic position for all the people under a democracy, was the main spring behind the exodus to America.

Far back in the days when the nobility of Norway had many retainers, whose families and descendants were attached to the soil, there lived near Christiana a peasant woman named Gunda Johnson. The estate upon which Gunda and her industrious husband, Olaf, lived belonged to the Queen's aunt, an elderly countess, whose kindness and interest in her people were unusual.

Now Gunda, though presumably most favorably situated, had dreams reaching far across the Atlantic — even unto the heart of the fabled land of America. Her lot in Norway was not unpleasant. Did she not always have employment under the countess, whose special ward she had been?

Ah yes, Gunda's mother had been one of the most tried and trusted servants of this same countess. Upon the death of the mother, her three small daughters had been well trained and well cared for by the countess. Now each of these three daughters had a comfortable cottage on the estate, the husband of each was given employment upon the land. And yet, here was Gunda — not satisfied!

This dynamic woman had ambitions that would not lie dormant. Letters came from relatives who had migrated to America, and who lived at Princeton, Illinois. These letters always told of the freedom in America, where all men had the right "to have and to hold" their own land, where no man was responsible to king or overlord. "Heigh ho for America", sighed Gunda. Many a family council was held, and the steady-going husband, Olaf, thought Gunda must be losing her wits, so much did she harp upon the impossible movement. "How will you get there?" was his question, and Gunda, it must be admitted, found

no answer. But one day, when they had talked and talked and there seemed no way to earn the necessary funds, Gunda's eyes rested upon her coffee pot. "I have it," she cried. "I am going to make coffee and sell it and earn the money!"

The energetic Gunda was as good as her word. At every sale or auction the fragrant aroma of her delicious coffee so tantalized the buyers that they patronized her generously. Ere long she showed Olaf a purse, growing fatter each week. "And it will take us to America", she chuckled.

By this time Olaf caught some of her enthusiasm, declaring that he would work in America and pay it all back, while twelve-year-old Carrie, the oldest daughter, had visions of remarkable achievements when she got to America. She told the five younger children that they were soon to cross the monstrous ocean. There was much hustle and hurry around the cottage. The neighbors heard of the plans, and soon the tale reached the ears of the countess who promptly sent for Gunda to find out what these wild rumors meant.

Gunda's determination had grown stronger each week, and her boundless enthusiasm quite swept away the objections of the countess. After listening awhile, she decided that opposition was futile, so she said, "Go, if you must, and here is a purse of gold. May you do well with it!"

Ah — the good countess! What a fairy she had been with her purse of gold! Gunda and Olaf left Christiana with their six children as quickly as possible. Carrie took great care of the younger children, especially the baby whose first birthday anniversary found him coming to America.

But that ocean — it seemed endless! Six long weeks were required to cross it. Though powerful engines in modern ships now make it possible to cross in less than six days, in 1854, when the Johnsons came over, it took six weary weeks. Even stout-hearted Gunda became tired of the ocean and questioned her ambition. But they finally landed at Boston, and there they took the west-bound train.

This new method of travel was most exciting, but the novelty soon wore off and Gunda and Carrie had much to do to keep all the children comfortable. They had expected Chicago to be a great city, rivalling Christiana. But the Chicago of 1854, though a most welcome sight indeed to the weary travellers, was disappointingly crude and straggling, and bore little evidence of becoming a great metropolis.

The family reached Princeton, Illinois, in safety and was welcomed by relatives already in homes of their own. There was much joy at the

reunion. How every one marveled at Gunda's raising the money by selling coffee, and also at the great generosity of the countess! But the funds could not last forever. When the family arrived in Princeton they had just three cents left!

It was not long, however, until they were comfortably situated. Willing hands found work to do. Carrie learned American ways and language very rapidly and her services were much in demand. As a young woman of seventeen, she was employed at Cooley's Hotel, in Toulon, Illinois, during the presidential campaign of 1860. Cooley, the proprietor, was a Democrat and Carrie did not like his talk nor the pro-slavery sentiment of his Democratic followers. No European immigrant, ambitious to earn a living and own some land, could endure the principles of slavery. All her sympathy was for Abraham Lincoln of whom she had heard so much, whose life had been along the road of toil which she and her people knew so well. Across the road in Toulon was another hotel whose proprietor was a Republican. How Carrie longed to go there to work! How she hated to be associated with that "old democrat hotel".

Then, one day, a great crowd came down the main street of Toulon. Men were laughing and shouting — noise and confusion everywhere —

what could it mean? Carrie ran to the door. The procession was coming past and, lo, it stopped at the hotel across the way! The throng centered about a wagon on which was a load of rails, and there, sitting on the rails, was the very man whom she most wished to see — Abraham Lincoln! Men shouted and waved their hats, and when he rose and began talking, "there was such yelling and screaming and patting the logs that I could not hear him, and the crowd was so thick, I could scarcely see his face. And that face — it was the kindest face I ever saw." This is her version of the occasion as she, now a woman of ninety years, remembers it.

In 1860 Carrie Johnson married George Ely at Toulon. He was a man who sympathized so intensely with the cause of the Union that in 1862 he left his home, wife, and small son, to enlist in Company F of the 112th Illinois Infantry. He was immediately sent South. Soon afterward he became ill in a camp called Nichollsville near Lexington, Kentucky. From there he was transferred to an invalid camp at Jeffersonville, Indiana. Mrs. Ely took her baby and hastened to the camp where she went to work, nursing not only her husband but all others who needed her assistance. Though her husband recovered, he was never able to make long marches again.

She remained in the camp two months. Between times of caring for her babe and the sick soldiers, she sewed straps on uniforms for sergeants and orderlies. The camp contained about three hundred tents. Upon recovery, the inmates were transferred to guard duty at arsenals or whatever service they were able to perform. Mr. Ely finished his term of enlistment at guard duty and was honorably discharged at the end of the war in 1865.

Upon his return to Stark County, Illinois, he decided that it would be wise to invest his soldier's pay in land, of which there was an abundance ready to be homesteaded out in Iowa. He told his wife he wished to visit Iowa and get some land, stating that she might go with him if she wished or wait until he located a home, when he would return and bring her to the new abode. But the courage of Gunda was not wanting in her daughter. "I'm going too", she said. "Where you go, I am willing to go."

Thus, with household goods and the children packed into ox-drawn covered wagons, George and Carrie Ely, together with her parents, Gunda and Olaf Johnson, began the long and tedious journey to Iowa. Having crossed the Mississippi River at Dubuque, they made their way westward on the road leading through Waterloo and Cedar

Falls, on toward Fort Dodge. Many reports had come to them of the fertility of Iowa land in that region, and there the ex-soldier hoped to find good land which he might preëempt for himself and his father-in-law. The modern paved highway, No. 20, over which the automobiles skim so easily nowadays, was a mere prairie trail in 1865. In some places it was a path of mud and mire, while deep sloughs made wide detours necessary.

At length the migrant family reached the eastern edge of Hamilton County and felt that they were not far from the end of their journey. They camped for the night near Hawley, a small settlement near what is now Blairsburg, and were assured that Fort Dodge might be reached by night-fall the next day, if they rose early and travelled steadily. They came west over what we now call the old Hawkeye Highway, which runs past Kendall Young Park and crosses White Fox Creek, thence into Webster City.

As they drove along, they found a man plowing in a field which is just west of the Hamilton County poor farm, but which at that time was unfenced open prairie. An oak grove lay to the south and a new house was being constructed therein. A hearty hail came from the tall, sandy-haired young farmer, who paused from his labors, and came to the road with cordial greeting to the

new comers. "Where are you planning to settle?" he inquired.

Upon learning that their objective was Fort Dodge, he said, "I think the best land around there has all been taken. It has been advertised too much. I believe that I know what you want, and it is right here in this county."

The man was so convincing in his straightforwardness, that Mr. Ely altered his purpose and concluded that at least a casual inspection of Hamilton County land could do no harm. Furthermore, their new acquaintance promised that, if they would follow the road to Webster City and stay over night there, he would meet them at the courthouse the next day and go with them to locate the land they might wish to claim. All agreed that this was a most feasible plan, and so the family of Ely jolted over the hill, forded the White Fox, and came into Webster City. In this community they have ever since been at home.

The next day they went to the land office and, being advised by their new friends as to what lands were most reliable, they drove up to the northern edge of what is now Fremont Township, and there Mr. Ely and Mr. Johnson preempted the land for their Iowa homes. Thus, by the chance meeting with a citizen who knew the lay of the land and who was willing to give the

glad hand to strangers, even at the expense of a day's work in his own field, the Ely family settled in Hamilton County instead of Webster.

They and their descendants have helped to build this community. Mrs. Carrie Johnson Ely is now past ninety years of age; her husband has passed on, but her children and grandchildren rise up to call her blessed, and to rejoice that the courageous spirit of Gunda, her mother, was transmitted to her in such generous measure.

With great enthusiasm she told me this story. And it was of especial interest to me because the man who acted as their guide and counsellor was my father, J. N. Lyon, whose friendship was theirs throughout the period of their lives.

From the castle in Christiana to the land in Fremont Township is a long, long distance. The labor of a young woman in Cooley's Tavern — the sight of the "kindest face in the world" — the nursing of sick soldiers — the stitching of straps on soldiers' suits by hand — the brave words, "Where you go I am going too" — a life of motherhood — all these are typical experiences in the lives of Iowa pioneers.

Oh, Gunda's Coffee Pot! What a libation thou hast poured upon the altar of good citizenship!

BESSIE L. LYON