

Immigration Saga

The following Saga is a story of Brita Invick. The author mistakenly called her Bertha in the original document. Some of the old documentation spelled her last name as Indvik. Her husband Thor Invick was also known as Tore Indvik in older Norwegian documents. The Saga begins:

Brita Invick lived nearly 104 years and came to America 90 years ago (written in 1959).

“There goes a silent train” and a new chapter of the immigrants unwritten Saga has ended. For the most part this saga “has been written in sand”, a silent witness that hides faith, hope, love, will, watchfulness, labor, loss, blood, tears and sweat, a battle with nature and the elements that requires the utmost effort of people and their souls.

While leaves of gold, brown and red fell slowly from the large trees in the Midwest Brita Invick closed her eyes forever. It was Monday October 19, 1959. For a hundred and three years she had seen the leaves fall and wither, and the same number of years she had seen the trees set buds and the flowers unfold, a Saga that can not be written, and man in his thoughts can barely imagine.

I visited her a few weeks ago, and it is possible that her dead husband was a distant relative of mine. She could still sit up a while each day, and her thoughts were clear, but it was difficult for her to speak.

Brita Nasset was born in Lerdahl, Sogn January 8, 1856. There in the wild and beautiful Lerdahl where glaciers were mirrored in the Sognfjord, Brita grew up in circumstances that did not give the family sufficient income for a good living. Brita was barely thirteen years old when her father, Hans Nasset, received a letter from his nephew, also named Hans Nasset, and another relative Hans Hendrickson. Both had taken up land and had started to till the ground in Glenwood Township near Decorah in Iowa’s NE corner. They wrote home and told of the wide expanse of land with deep valleys with woods, rivers and abundant wild life. Here was land and opportunity enough and barely any people. They had only to come and take up the land they wanted, fertile land in a good climate.

Hans and Ragnhild Nasset with their children, John and Brita, the mother’s sister, Christie Hattleberg, and her children, Marie and Anders, decided to go to America in the spring. Everything was ready, but Hans Nasset got pneumonia so he and his wife had to delay their journey, but the others departed. Brita had not had time to read for the minister so she was confirmed before leaving Norway without going through the usual preparation period.

Late in a spring evening in 1870 Brita and her relatives with 700 other passengers departed from Bergen on the sail ship “Valkyrie”. They had taken with them quantities of food packed in small kegs, quarts and pecks for the most part, it was kept in a room far down as near the cold as possible so it should keep fresh on their journey. Brita said the

food consisted of dried beef, coarse bread, butter, gammelost¹, goat's cheese, coffee and a big barrel of homemade malt ale.

The big ship sailed in a fresh breeze over the North Sea, but when they neared the English coast they ran into bad weather, heavy rain and thick fog. After midnight something happened that terrified the passengers. Suddenly in the dark night there was a terrible crash and a jar that threw the passengers out of their bunks, and many of them were buried under some of the ship's cargo. Their ship tilted to the side. A steamship, with great speed, had struck them amidships. Luckily The Valkyrie did not spring a leak, but the passengers and seamen who came on deck could hear heart-rendering cries for help from the steamship. It vanished like a phantom as it sank beneath the waves. "It was terrible", said Brita, "but it went so fast, and in the dark on the stormy sea it was impossible to render any help". They sailed into Dover and remained there for many days while the captain and some of the seamen helped hunt for the sunken ship. The ship was never found. No one knows what ship sank, or how many seamen and passengers went down with the ship. It is one of the sea's unsolved mysteries.

It took the Valkyrie more than two weeks to travel to the coast of America, a record at that time, as they sailed in a fresh breeze. The ship landed in Quebec, Canada, and Brita and her company sailed on a little steamship up the St. Lawrence River and over the Great Lakes to Milwaukee. They went by train to Prairie Du Chien, a new little town on the banks of the Mississippi River. On a riverboat they sailed north to Lansing on the other side of the river. From Lansing to their destination near Decorah was about forty miles over rolling prairies and some rugged terrain of valleys, woods and streams. At that time Brita's relative, Hans Hendrickson was building a house on his farm. They drove each day with teams, to Lansing to haul lumber, and each day they inquired about the newcomers. The Saturday he expected them to come Hans sent his neighbor Ole with a passenger wagon. Ole wanted Brita to ride with him while the others should sit on the lumber load. But her brother John declared that he had promised his parents that he would not let his younger sister out of his sight until they arrived at their uncle's. "There are so many strangers in this big country, and they're not all to be trusted", he said. So Brita rode with John on the lumber load with their relative, Andrew Grimso, instead of the passenger wagon belonging to their well-meaning neighbor. They stayed over night at the Hendrickson farm, and Brita said they had a very good supper.

The next day was Sunday, and the whole company gathered at the Hendrickson farm to go to church. They went almost three miles to the little wood church that stood where the Glenwood Stone Church now stands. Pastor Wilhelm Karen, then a young man, preached in Norwegian and directed his sermon to the newcomers. He told them they would meet with many difficulties in this big land. But he also said they could overcome difficulties with faith, love and hard work, and become good useful citizens. "Here no one will ask where you have been, but everyone will notice how you conduct yourselves. Here in this

¹ Gammelost, made from sour skim milk in Norway (principally in the counties of Hardange and Sogn), is a semisoft, blue-mold, ripened table cheese, with a rather sharp, aromatic flavor.

new land honesty, faithfulness and helpfulness mean a great deal. With these characteristics you will be liked by everyone”. Karen’s message and strong talk made a great impression on young Brita, and ever after she considered him her best friend. After church they returned to the Hendrickson farm where Mrs. Hendrickson had prepared a mighty good meal.

The first summer Brita and John worked on the Hendrickson farm where they helped with all kinds of work. In the fall Brita took a job as a housemaid with the Arve Benedict family in Decorah. Both the son and daughter in the family were teachers and they helped Brita learn the English language. The next spring her parents came over from Norway, and began farming near Decorah.

Brita continued as housemaid in Decorah, and in the home of Peter Bakke she met the man she would later marry. That was Tore Indvik (Thor Invick) who came from Trondheim, Norway. He had military training in Norway and knew how to handle weapons. He was a good hunter and sportsman, a tall, handsome and strong young man. He became the leader and instructor of the soldiers in the district, looked up to by the boys and chased by the young girls. “The first time I met him I pretended not to see him because I thought he was too proud”, said Brita.

On the 4th of July, America’s Independence Day, she went with him to a dance at a large farmhouse. Many people were dancing to the music of two violins and an accordion. From that evening on they went everywhere together. Three years later they were married by Pastor Karen in Washington Prairie Church, a large stone church built by Norwegian immigrants, and which to this day dominates the landscape southeast of Decorah.

The wedding took place April 24, 1875 and was celebrated for two days at the father’s house in Glenwood. Brita was then 19 years old, and after the wedding they moved into their own little log cabin near Trout River (Trout Creek in the original manuscript), not far from where her parents lived. Here four of the couples eleven children were born.

Trout River is a stream that in the spring can become big and mighty. One year the flood was bigger than usual and water came right up to the hut. One evening in June when Tore was way downstream fishing it began to storm. There was a cloudburst, the stream overflowed its banks and soon the house was surrounded by floodwater. Brita took the children up the ladder to the loft. When she climbed down again there was already enough water in the house so that some kittens playing in a tub were floating around the room.

Tore started for home when the storm broke, and from a nearby hill a fearful sight met his eyes. His home was in the middle of a raging flood and he had no means of reaching the house. He called Brita to lock the door to try to keep the water out. At one time the water was so high that it ran through the keyhole. The water went down as fast as it had risen, and later that night Tore managed to wade out and rescue his family just before another storm broke.

After this they built a new home on higher ground, and in this home they lived until Tore died in 1929. Here seven more children were born, and a portrayal of their struggle for existence can better be imagined than described. Nature in this territory was often wild and untamable, and distances great, but life also had its lighter side. The beautiful land with its overabundance and riches gave much, and it was certainly, in many ways, a lucky family who lived in close contact with nature.

Brita was a good and gifted, but quiet, undemanding woman who gave much more than she took in this life. At her death she left four children, sixteen grandchildren, thirty-six great grandchildren and ten great great grandchildren. Brita never got to see Norway and Lerdahl again. On a sunny and warm Autumn day, October 22, 1959, nearly 104 years old, she was carried to her grave, high on the hill near the little white church in Glenwood Township, not far from the place, where for ninety years, she had striven and labored, and had seen both good and bad days.

Pastor Dahle-Melsaether preached the funeral sermon, and spoke beautiful and gripping words about this noble woman. If man takes time to reflect he will find that much has happened and changed, both in Norway and the Midwest from January 8, 1856 to October 19, 1959. This chapter in Norwegian Immigrant history of respect and quietness contains the name of Brita Invick.

Original signed by
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