

Immigrant's story an inspiration to us all

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by Bev Jackson, Executive Director FCHM

Sorting the mail, answering the phone, or greeting a visitor at the counter can bring surprising results. I never know what will happen. This column is in response to a package I recently received. It contained a program from the 1937 Saint Paul Winter Carnival, a bulletin from the 1936 New York World's Fair, and some newspaper articles from the Albert Lea Tribune. While the World's Fair and Winter Carnival make for fun reading, I was most intrigued by the Tribune articles. They were dated 1969 and 1978 - my recent past and ancient history to my grandchildren.

The articles were about a gentleman named Chris Nelson. That's the American spelling. According to him, "It really should be Nielsen." I thought his story is fitting to start a new year. His story is one of beginnings. When he was interviewed in 1969, he was 84 years old, and Lynn Closway, the Tribune staff writer described him as "a sprite man with sparkling blue eyes and serious minded on several subjects." He was going to be showing slides on Germany and Denmark at the newly formed Senior Citizens Center where he had helped with the remodeling (the Carnegie Library), and they had decided to honor him by calling it "Chris Nelson Day."

His story is a fascinating one. According to the article, "He came to the United States in 1904, but he almost didn't make it. The Danish ship in which he was sailing hit a rock and sank straight to the bottom off the coast of Scotland - by 300 miles. Several people drowned, but Nelson and several others spent six days and nights in a life raft - minus food and water. When they finally were found, one had died in the boat and two others died after reaching shore."

When he finally arrived in the United States he settled in Connecticut working on a farm for a doctor's family. He was only 19 years old. He also helped to pave streets when Connecticut became more modernized. He later located a Danish contractor in Blooming Prairie, Minnesota and in 1905 moved there to work. A year later he became a U.S. citizen and moved to Albert Lea. After working for several contractors, in 1919 he started his own business.

His wife died in 1957, and at 84 years of age, he was still living in his own home. When asked about retirement, he said, "Now I'm supposed to be retired, I guess, but I work everyday of my life. I drive my car and intend to keep on until the insurance man tells me to quit. Then I'll get out my bicycle." He had recently completed the carpentry work on the showcases at the Freeborn County Historical Museum. (Note - These are constructed from used lumber and used panes of glass, and covered with plywood paneling. They are sturdy and solid and with good care, will last for many more years.)

When asked about current events, he had some very definite opinions. The flight to the moon: "It seems like they spent a lot of money to go up

there and find out there's just a lot of dust." The Vietnam War? "It is the most senseless of all wars. War is just greed." Old age? "Just keeping busy. I hate to be idle."

In another article, dated 1978, shortly after he moved to St. Johns, he reminisced about this youth. He was born in 1885 in Mygdal County in rural Denmark. They were a poor family with ten children, and one of his jobs was tending cows for about 10 crowns (\$1.75) for six months work. Christmas traditions at home always included a little Christmas tree trimmed with hand made leather ornaments and little basket-like decorations made of colored paper to hold candy for the children. Candles were used as lighting on the tree, but someone was always assigned to watch them when they were lit. Their Lutheran Church, a Community Mission House much like our town halls, always gave a Christmas party where cookies and candy were distributed to the children, and everyone received an apple. There was no Santa Claus, but they had nisses - little elves -that lived in the barn. On Christmas Eve, Nelson and his brothers and sisters would put a bowl of pudding in the barn for them. "Sure enough," Nelson said with a twinkle in his eye, "The pudding would be completely gone on Christmas morning."

Chris Nelson was was 97 years old when he died in 1982.

What an inspiration to us all. His story is now a part of the research materials used by the Albert Lea High School Humanities students who teach the immigration portion of our Discover History Program to area fifth graders. His is truly an American success story.

How fortunate we are to have the resources to find these gems of history, and how fortunate we are to have friends who decide to share the things they find in their scrapbooks and closets and attics.