

Uncle Albert should, I think, have become a botanist or a forester. Instead, he was a farmer who also worked, at times, in the woods or at a sawmill. Plants and trees, though, may have been his real passion. His reading, which he did mostly while sitting on a straight wooden chair next to the south kitchen window--corncob pipe in operation--was often concerned with botanical information for our area. And he knew the local forests as well as anyone.

His given name was Erik Albert, but I never heard him called by his first name. He was the oldest boy in the family, and I suspect that Grandma Cornelia Erickson called him Albert because of her evident interest in the British royal family. Albert was, of course, the name of Queen Victoria's Prince Consort. It is, I think, no accident that the oldest of the Erickson children, a daughter, was called Nellie Victoria. Although I was a small child when Grandma died, I remember that she was very interested in Elizabeth, then in line for the British throne.

So, for whatever reason, Uncle Albert was always called by his middle name. It is only a coincidence, of course, that it was often Prince Albert tobacco that filled his pipe.

Albert and his wife, Mabel, had no children. Still, it was a welcoming place for all of us cousins in the family to drop in for a visit. We would walk up the road to their white farmhouse, stay and visit for a few minutes, sure that there would be some interesting conversation. We would accept a piece of candy from Aunt Mabel's dish and be on our way.

Albert's farming--though, more properly, he should probably been called a grazier--was always mostly concerned with sheep. While his farmer brothers kept both cattle and sheep, Albert stuck with his flock, never, as far as I remember, owning more than a single milk cow.

He was not adept at coaxing the milk from that cow, either. I suspect that Mabel milked her most of the time, and when Albert was responsible for this daily task, he milked with just one hand.

Both Albert and Mabel loved their sheep flock. They took pride in the big, sturdy Corriedale ewes and the fine lambs they raised. They had a tendency to help a lamb along with a supplementary bottle feeding

if they even suspected that a lamb was pushed aside by a stronger twin, or if for any reason it looked at all underfed.

There are always "pet" or "bum" lambs in a flock for any number of reasons. A ewe might have triplets and only have milk for two, she might have had an udder problem, or she may have rejected one of her lambs.

But, Albert and Mabel were so soft-hearted toward those beautiful lambs that they always had more bottle babies than would have been necessary. As the lambs grew from cute, fluffy babies--running and jumping with their tails in the air--to big, burly half-grown sheep, they still demanded the daily bottles. As they jumped on Mabel, sometimes ripping her calico apron with their sharp hooves, she and Albert still maintained an indulgent view of these adolescents. When the livestock hauler came to take away the lambs at fall market time, it was a sad couple that herded the pets into the truck with the rest of the lambs.

It was a common practice in past decades for farmers in our area to burn over some pasture land, getting rid of dead grass and forbs and bringing new life to spring plants. It is a controversial practice now--with both pros and cons surrounding the use of fire--but, in any case, Albert often burned over part of the property north of their home place--the acreage they called The Pasture.

One spring day we were outside when my father heard a faint voice to the northeast calling "Mabel!" Looking past the barn in that direction, he saw smoke. Dad was a volunteer national forest warden at the time, and we had a little red and white shed filled with fire-fighting equipment. He grabbed a couple of shovels and a backpack sprayer filled with water and headed north.

After he passed Albert's home place, he came upon Mabel, on foot, hurrying to respond to Albert's call. She climbed into the car with Dad and they went on to The Pasture.

Albert's grass fire had become too vigorous. He had a front that was too wide for him to control, and a breeze had come up. Dad's backpack of water quickly subdued the flames, and no harm was done.

Still, it was evidence of two characteristics that were prominent

among the brothers in the Erickson family. They liked fire, and they had voices that "carried" well over long distances. In fact, when I was young, it was not unusual to hear a shouted conversation among Albert, Rowland, Everett, and my father, Einar, each in his own field.

Uncle Albert was a widower for several years, but he still had a small sheep flock when he was in his late eighties.

He still sat by that kitchen window, reading and smoking his pipe, field glasses standing on the sill for him to take up to watch an unidentified bird, a distant deer, or even his nephews, who he suspected were shirking their haying duties on the farm to the south.

Albert wrote a many-paged memoir before he died, so we have a record of his own views of his life. We sometimes go to it to check on some event in the past, but our own recollections supply many more details concerning the life of this interesting, intelligent man.