

It is not uncommon for people to ask, “Where are you from?” In this era of great mobility, many of us have lived in various places through the years. I always answer, “I’ve always lived here except for the time I was away at school and when Runo and I were newly married and lived in Sweden.” The next question is often, “But where did you live before you were here on the farm? Where were you born?”

The answer to that is even simpler. “Right over there,” I answer, pointing to the northeast corner of our cabin. “In the house that was here before we built ours. This is actually the third small house on this same location.”

The first log house was the second domicile of my great-grandparents and grandmother. When they homesteaded here, there was a small, and, as the story goes, very low-ceilinged, log cabin near what is now the north and south road on the eastern boundary of this farm. The single man who had tried homesteading for a year and then had moved on had built the crude shelter. Neighbors who had arrived a year or so before my ancestors helped the Augustinesons lift the roof and add a log to each wall for added height.

As soon as they could, though, Lars and Benedickta built the first log house on the patch of ground where we live now. In that house, they raised their girls, and when the younger daughter—my grandmother, Cornelia,—married and eventually came with her family back to the farm to live, her children—including my father, Einar—were born in that log house.

As time went on, my grandparents decided to build a frame house for their large family. That house is the house where I grew up. The log house eventually became the blacksmith shop for the farm, and sometime later, burned, probably as the result of a smithing fire that went astray.

Then, when my father and mother married, they built a log cabin on the same site as the old house where my dad was born. I am not sure that my parents had any particular preference for a log house, but this was in the deepest part of the Great Depression of the 1930s, and they had little money, but they did have woods.

They lived in the log cabin for ten years. My brother was eight years old, my sister four, and I just six weeks old when we moved to the farm house to make it possible for my paternal grandmother to remain in her own home. She was no longer able to live alone, and though my father and mother’s affections were firmly with the log cabin, they sacrificed their own wishes—and the independence of their own house—to help Cornelia.

The little house fell into disrepair. It happens quickly when a house is not occupied, and there was little money for upkeep. But, to us, it was always Our House, as opposed to the house where we lived. Time and weather ultimately meant that the cabin was no longer salvageable.

If it had been, this essay would have ended differently. We would

have saved the cabin, fixed it up, and lived in it. But, the cherry logs were in poor condition, and the roof had leaked, spoiling the floor. So, forty years after my folks had built the house, we took it down.

When we excavated the same site for the basement of this cabin where we live now, we found parts of the old log-walled cellar of the first house, the one that Lars and Benedickta Augustineson had built in the 1870s. So, as we enjoy the years in our own cabin, shaded by the silver maple that Great-grandfather Lars planted around the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, we feel both the weight and the promise of history. People can often maintain traditions if they want that connection badly enough. I wouldn't trade all the mobility in the world—the upward kind denoting prosperity or the horizontal sort that characterizes most Americans' lives these days—for the pleasures and privileges of continuing our family history here where I was born.

