

I spent a lot of time this evening looking at a very old picture. It was taken in Big Rapids, Michigan in 1872 or 3. In the spring of 1873, after spending their first winter in America in that town, Lars and Benedickta Augustineson and their daughters, Larsina Bettina and Alexandra Cornelia, moved north and homesteaded on eighty acres in Burdell Township of Osceola County. Lars and Benedickta were my great-grandparents, and their younger daughter, Alexandra Cornelia, was my paternal grandmother.

There is a lot to see and much more upon which to speculate while one is perusing this old photo. It is obvious that it was a studio picture, and probably, it was taken to send back to relatives in Sweden and Denmark. Before embarking on a second uncertain journey—that of homesteaders—that was nearly as formidable as the notion of setting forth for America on a sailing ship, a family picture was probably felt to be important.

I sat for a long time after “zooming in” on the image of my great-grandmother. In family lore, which can sometimes be enlightening and at other times less than accurate, Benedickta was the dominant person in that marriage. It was said that Lars Augustineson was easy-going and good-natured, and that his wife was determined, hard-working, and stern.

I have always been curious about my great-grandmother’s hair style. In an era when—if I am not mistaken—women usually wore their hair up in some kind of bun or braid, Benedickta’s long, dark, rather curly tresses were hanging loose, parted in the middle, tucked behind her ears. It looked as though she had probably drawn up the front part on each side and secured it in a ribbon at the back. Her expression is solemn.

Benedickta is wearing a dress of vertical stripes, light and dark. The full sleeves are nipped in at the wrists, and the long skirt is voluminous. A strip on the bottom has been sewn on with slanting stripes, and another section at the very bottom is vertical like the rest of the dress. I don’t know what color this dress was, but I would guess that it was dark blue, gray, or black with white stripes. A belt cinched in her small waist, and in her lap—she was seated—lay a hat. It was covered with ruffles and one large white flower, and long ribbon streamers fell along her dress. One of Benedickta’s hands was twined in that ribbon, and the other hung loosely at her side. At her collar she had another ribbon, probably the same color as that on her hat. This ribbon was tied in a flat bow, and the ends hung down midway across her bosom.

On the other side of the picture, my great-grandfather, Lars Augustineson sat. His broad hands lay on his knees, fingers slightly spread. He was wearing a double-breasted suit and a vest. On his feet are sharp-toed boots without laces. Lars has a beard and mustache, both rather full, and hair that appears to be much lighter than Benedickta’s. I would guess that it is dark blond or light brown. He is not a large man. It is hard to get a feeling about his personality by looking at this photo. He looks calm and quiet, and that is in keeping with the family legends surrounding these pioneers. My father barely remembered his grandfather, but he said that he had always heard that Lars Augustineson liked children.

Between the parents stand eight year old Larsina and four year old

Cornelia. They are wearing matching dresses. They appear to be flowered prints, probably blue or green with a white pattern. Some sort of white lace or eyelet finish is evident around the necklines and at the bottoms of the short puffed sleeves. Their belts look much like some I remember from several decades ago—belts that were called “waist cinchers”, stretchy with a metal contraption for fastening in the front. Larsina’s right hand lies on her little sister’s shoulder, her left on the arm of her mother’s chair. One of Cornelia’s hands hangs loosely, the other is touching her pappa’s.

I have looked at this picture many times over the years. It has endlessly fascinated me. This woman, with such a stern expression, but with dark, curly hair loose over her shoulders and a flowery hat on her lap—who was she, really?

I know that she held down the homestead while Lars worked away on the railroad the first year or two. I have heard how they broke land—a requirement under the Homestead Act—by hitching their milk cow and their one horse together, and how she walked to town barefooted, putting on her shoes only as she approached the village, to save the soles on her shoes.

And, I know that she died on the eve of 1900 and was buried in the local cemetery where a giant white pine now grows, planted by Lars that next spring. I know, too, that most of her years in America were spent here in a log house on the same site where our cabin now stands. Walking the fields and meadows on the farm, her presence, and that of Lars and of the generations that followed, are always with me. I count it good fortune that I can walk the same paths, see the same swamps and fields, notice the same woods that my great-grandmother experienced. Still, I continue to wonder who this woman really was.