

Genealogy Tale

by Susan Stow

Hearing family stories as a child, I didn't mind their retelling, for somehow the tale became embroidered, embellished and a bit more dramatic with each repetition. One such story was of my paternal grandmother's coming to Stillwater, Minnesota at the age of two.

It wasn't until I moved to Stillwater to teach school that I found out there was far more to the tale than I ever knew before. My Grandma Jennie rode along to help set up my tiny apartment. Along the way, she commented, "You know I was born in South Stillwater?" (now known as Bayport). I imagined that she was confused and told her, "Grandma, that makes no sense at all. You came from Hellesylt, Norway when you were two years old." "Well, I did, but I was born in South Stillwater."

What was revealed that day was a very poignant story about her mother, Anna Helset Saeter, a woman known to me only by name, one photo, a recipe for "Cry Baby Cookies" and snippets of family lore. It was the lure of knowing more about Anna that peaked my curiosity about genealogy.

Birth certificates of (Grandma) Jennie Caroline Saeter, 1894 and her brother, John Peder Saeter, 1892 were registered in the Washington County Courthouse in Stillwater. So the first fact was proven.

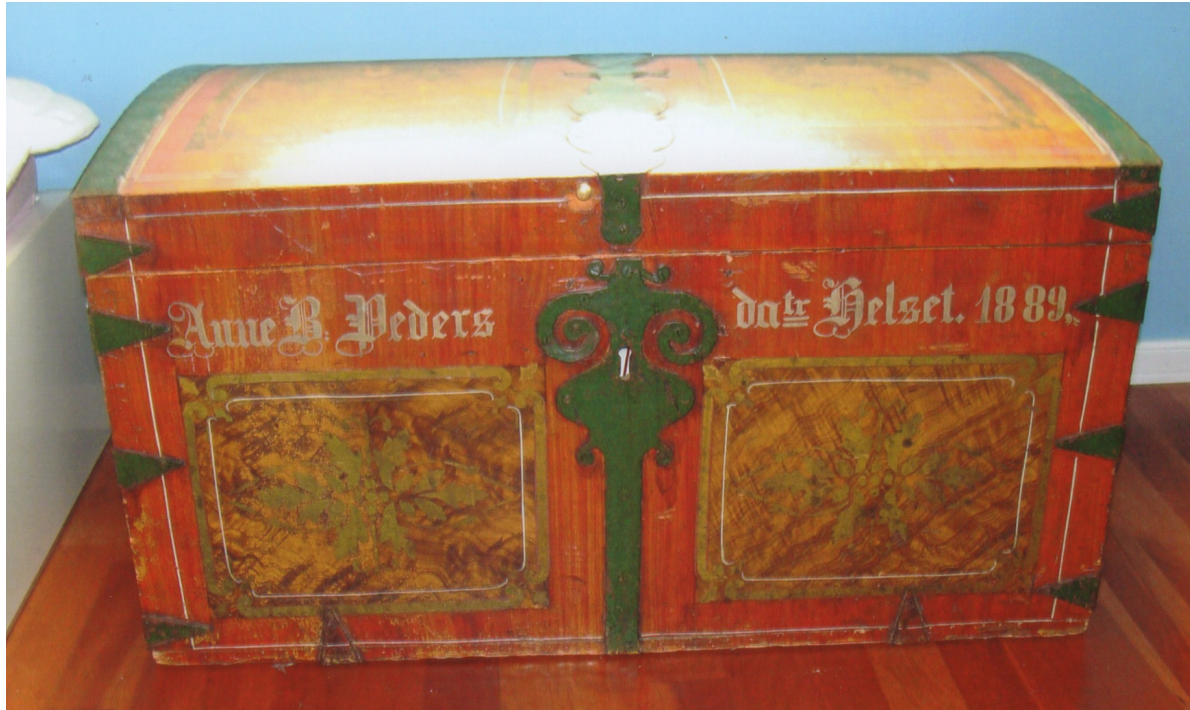
I knew from Norwegian Helset relatives where the home farm was located at the end of the Geiranger fjord near Hellesylt in Sunnelven, Møre og Romsdal, but I didn't have the background about her birth family. Through digitalarkivet.no, I was able to piece together her family. Anna Pedersdatter Helset grew up on the Helset farm as the oldest of ten children. Two of the ten died within weeks of their birth and two died of diphtheria at ages 3 and 6.

In the warm summer months, Anna was the "seter jente" at the Liadalen mountain meadow, tending goats and cows. Winter time meant helping at home and learning to weave. Later, at a talk at a NAGA event, I learned that the oldest daughter's role in a farming family was just that, seter jente, often not marrying but remaining in the service of her brother inheriting the farm and his family.

Jørgen, Anna's oldest brother who should have inherited the farm, wanted the adventure of emigrating to America. He was the first to leave Helset. Perhaps the letters from Jørgen postmarked Minnesota made Anna to seek her future in America as well.

Her journey was through the fjord to the coast, from Norway to Hull, England by boat, and then by train across England to Liverpool on the Western Coast. More research, online revealed that Anna traveled on the *Bothnia*, a Cunard Line ship, to New York. There were 300 cabin passengers and 548 people in 3rd class. I am quite sure Anna's

ticket was 3rd class. Anna Helset arrived in New York on 9 May 1891 and is recorded on the passenger list as a dressmaker from Norway.



How she traveled to Minnesota would be conjecture on my part, but probably train and then paddle wheeler up the St. Croix River to Stillwater from the Mississippi. Records for this type of travel have eluded me thus far.

By September of that same year, Anna was married to a Norwegian lumberjack, Johan Andreas Jenssen Saeter, who grew up on an island off the coast near Ålesund named Godøy. After his confirmation, Johan moved to another island, Valderøy, to work on the Gjøysundsaeter farm. Locals on that island shortened the name to Saeter, a name that followed Johan to America. Of course, this information led me to search Johan's interesting family too. Believe me, the hunt became infectious! A mystery, a puzzle!

Two children were born to Anna and Johan, a son John in 1892 and daughter in 1894. Three months before Jenny Caroline was born, Johan was killed in a lumbering accident in what the Stillwater Gazette newspaper called, "The Pineries".

The Tozer Lumber Company gave Anna the choice of return passage to Norway with the two children, or a house built for her in South Stillwater. Anna chose another journey. In May of 1894 after Jenny's baptism, the three return to Helset farm, finding refuge there for nearly a year. Hard times for supporting a large family encouraged Anna's parents to recommend that she would find a better life in America.

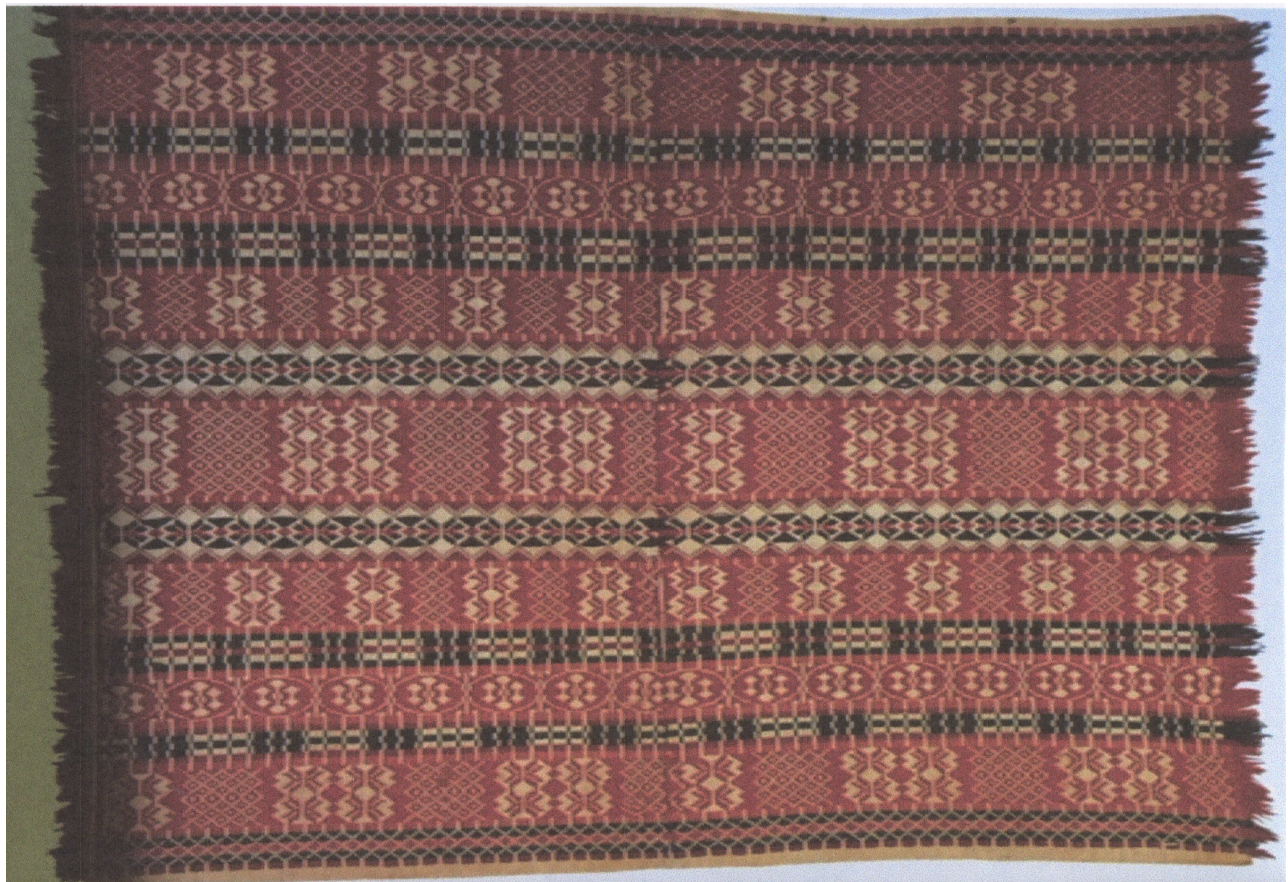
Crossing the Atlantic Ocean for the third time, Annie Saeter is recorded on a U.K. passenger list, again out of Liverpool, England to New York, as a 26 year old mother

with an infant daughter. They arrived in the United States 23 March 1895, once again documented on a passenger list. The most heartbreaking part of Anna's second journey is that she has left her 3 year old son with his grandparents on the farm. She doesn't see him until he makes his own journey after his confirmation at age 16 in 1909.

Since delving into my Grandma Jennie's journey, I have traveled to the Helset farm in Western Norway four times. Fortunately, relatives have been able to share more family stories of those who remained in Norway. The ultimate thrill was being on that same farm, seeing the same mountains and lake, hiking to the seter and then imagining Anna as a girl who decides to seek a new future.

Three thousand, eight hundred and sixteen miles separate Stillwater, MN and Hellesylt, Norway. Three generations separate Anna Helset Saeter and me, however confirming some facts about her have made her life real to me.

In our Synnøve-Nordkap Genealogy Group, we refer to finding the proof behind our search for family information. Many in the group are experts at guiding "newbies" to sources of information. Our lodge website genealogy page has a wealth of links that will help you search for the Anna's in your family.



Weaving done by Anna Pedersdatter Helset