
NUGGETS OF HISTORY

VOLUME 33 FALL 1995 NUMBER 4

THE LUNDGREN/LA GRANDE HOME



1017 Seventh Street Circa 1892

Photo: Courtesy of Norman LaGrande

Methinks I hear the sound
of Time Long Past
Still murmuring o'er me,
And whispering in
This house – like the lingering
Voices
Of Those who Long within their
graves have slept.

Author unknown

FROM AN EDITOR'S DESK



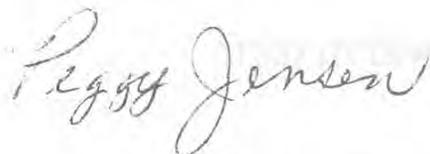
In 1987, the late Penny Christiansen, then editor of *Rockford Magazine*, asked me to write a Christmas story about the La Grande family and their historic home on Seventh Street. The article appeared in the December issue. We now reprint it in *Nuggets* to reach a new audience. In addition, we're including excerpts from a piece written for Rockford's Swedish Historical Society by retired school teacher Jane Peterson La Grande, wife of Norman.

His grandfather P. A. Lundgren had purchased the home in 1890. He and his sister Margaret grew up in the home with their widowed mother Minnie. In 1949 Jane and Norman moved into the home, reared John, Charles and Elizabeth there, and shared it with Minnie until her death. Today they still own and occupy this family treasure.

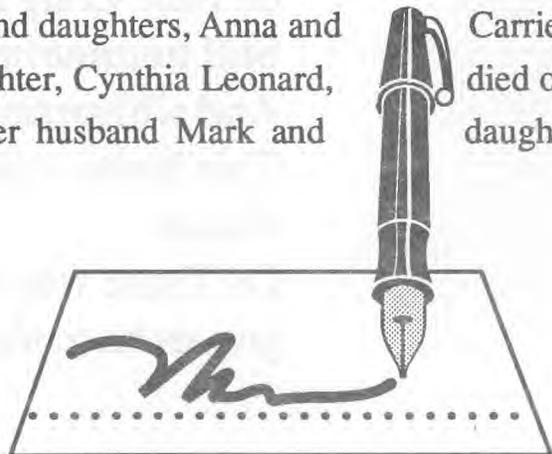
John died at age 11 on May 12, 1965. Charles now lives in Lima, Ohio with his wife Phyllis and son Peter. Charles, who has earned a Doctor of Arts degree, teaches German in Shawnee High School near Lima.

Elizabeth and her attorney husband William Hipkiss reside in Grand Haven, Michigan. Elizabeth teaches private voice lessons. They both participate in area music performances. This marriage brought three adult step-grandsons – William Green, Stephen and Andrew Hipkiss – into the La Grande family.

Norman's sister Margaret, widow of Herman Bargren, resides in Rockford. Her son Paul (an attorney), his wife Elizabeth and daughters, Anna and Carrie, live in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. Margaret's daughter, Cynthia Leonard, died on April 15, 1991, after an extended illness. Her husband Mark and daughters Amanda and Kristine survived her.



Peggy Jensen, Editor



LITTLE HOUSE ON SEVENTH STREET

by
Peggy Dahlberg Jensen

One family's Christmas story

On Christmas Eve 1974, Rockford natives Charles and Phyllis La Grande sauntered hand-in-hand through the narrow streets of a quaint Austrian town. They entered an ancient church for midnight mass. Singing “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht” struck an emotional chord, a remembrance of Christmas at home. At 12:01 a.m., as they left the church, snowflakes were covering the Tyrolean valley. Church bells chimed, echoing through the countryside for almost 15 minutes.

Celebrations in Rockford

At that very hour, his extended family was gathering on Seventh Street for a Christmas Eve celebration, a tradition since 1892. Such continuity had created strong family ties, an anchor to the past. There the family had experienced pain and pleasure, birthing and dying – and 84 Christmases (in recent years, Christmases have alternated at other family homes). So strong are the memories that Charles' parents shudder to think that one day strangers might live in their house.

A One-Family Home

Lean and muscular, Norman La Grande, a retired city engineer, says, “We

couldn't bear to see it neglected or chopped up into apartments.” In her school teacher's voice, Jane, his wife now of 52 years, adds, “Rather than have anyone else live here, we'd tear it down ... unless it could serve some historical purpose.”

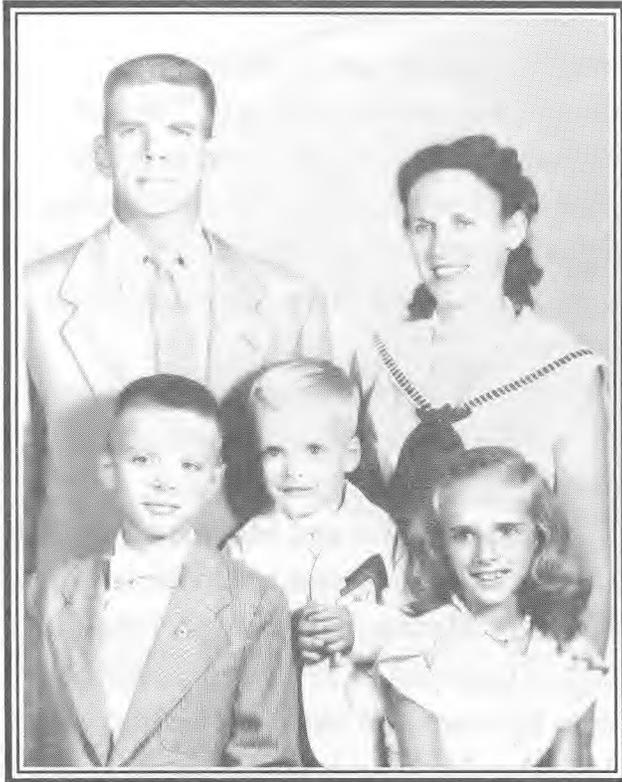
Norman's grandparents, Per August and Wilhelmina Lundgren, reared six children – Emmy, Rose, Minnie, Lawrence, Robert and Maynard – in that steep-roofed Victorian tract house. Next, daughter Minnie, her husband John La Grand (married in 1916), and their children Norman and Margaret, called the 15-room dwelling home. (The children added the “e” to La Grand.)

Widowed in 1927 after 11 years of marriage, Minnie managed to retain the home even through Depression years. Later, she shared it with her son Norman, his wife Jane, and their children Charles, Elizabeth and John. Until Minnie died in 1973, she remained a constant, especially at Christmastime, in the memory-laden home.

Now only Norman and Jane occupy the historic house they moved into in 1949. Norman describes his grandfather's house as “a working man's home.” Originally, it had outdoor plumbing – an outhouse and a combination

washhouse and woodshed at the back of the lot – and no fireplaces, only wood stoves, one of which is still used.

Norman and Jane's children now live out-of-state.



*Norman and Jane La Grande with children
Left to right: Charles, John and Elizabeth
Photo: Courtesy Norman La Grande*

❧ Traditional Christmas Preparations ❧

Christmas traditions at the Seventh Street home hark back to earlier days. Then Minnie, like other Swedish women, spent weeks preparing for Christmas. She stuffed ground pork and potatoes in casings for korv (traditional Swedish cooking sausages). On a given evening, using an oversized bowl, she'd set a yeast dough for limpa, a sweet rye bread flavored with orange rind. By morning,

the dough would have risen like a hot air balloon. With long-fingered, thin hands, Minnie – even during her more frail later years – kneaded the dough on a floured board, rotating it a quarter-turn each time she folded it toward the center. After five or 10 minutes, when the dough squeaked, she formed it into loaves to rise again. A few hours later, the delicate aroma of fresh-baked limpa perfumed the house.

Another day, she'd mix pepparkakor dough, spicing it with crushed cardamon (a member of the ginger family). At her bread board, she'd roll the dough until it was paper thin. Then, with a scalloped-edged cutter, she'd shape cookies and arrange them on a cooky sheet, ready for the oven. While baking, the cookies' aroma tantalized Norman and Margaret. "Mom, can we have a cooky, please?" they begged. "Find some with burnt edges," she'd say, "and I'll stop to have a treat with you."

Minnie's grocery shopping list always included lutfisk – dried cod preserved in lye – a traditional Swedish delicacy. Carrying her shopping basket, Minnie would choose several tall stiff pieces of fish stuck in barrels outside stores on Seventh Street. At home, she would remove the lye. On Christmas Eve afternoon, the matriarch would boil the fish until it was tender. Then she'd call, "Margaret," over the sound of piano music, "time to bone the lutfisk." Of course, Margaret preferred practicing carols. But she sauntered into the kitchen anyway, tied an apron at her waist, picked up chunks of boiled fish

from the kettle, removed the tiny bones, and placed the slippery pieces in a bowl. Margaret was always glad that the pungent cinnamon aroma of frukt soppa – a dried fruit dessert soup – simmering on the cookstove, masked the fishy odor. Meanwhile, Minnie stirred a cream sauce to be poured over the lutfisk, occasionally brushing a wisp of wavy hair off her forehead.



Guests Arrive



About 6 p.m., Minnie's sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews rang the door bell, stomped their feet on the mat, and carried in gifts wrapped in red and green tissue paper. The Lawrence Lundgren family, including Margaret's constant companion, cousin Lenore, came from next door. Occasionally, the Robert Lundgrens drove over from Grove Street in their 1925 Overland. And sometimes Minnie's brother and sister, Maynard and Emily, would come from Washington, D.C., where they both worked for the U. S. government. Another sister, Rose, who had married Pastor Gustave Bergman (whom she had met during his intern year at Zion Lutheran Church), could seldom leave the Texas parish they served at Christmas. But Rose always sent a box of gifts.



Feasting at the Dining Table



Soon the family gathered around the dining-room table. Pine boughs, scattered on a snowy-white cloth, surrounded a wrought iron candelabra holding red

and green candles. While the candles flickered, Norman read the Christmas story from Luke, Chapter Two. Then all heads bowed to pray:

I Jesu namn
Till bords vi ga
Valsigna gud
Den mat vi fa. Amen.

Only a few diehard Swedes savored the first course of lutfisk. Sometimes the children tasted it, crinkled their noses, and then when they thought no one was looking, spit the fish onto their plates. Next, Minnie served more palatable Swedish delicacies: steaming bowls of art soppa (yellow pea soup prepared with fresh ham and pork ribs), kott bulle (Swedish meatballs), cooking sausage, herring and risgryngrot (rice pudding).

"No one makes rice pudding better than yours, Minnie," her sister-in-law would say. "I'm glad I don't have to tend the stove, stirring for three hours while the rice simmers in milk." Sometimes Minnie served grot during the supper, but more often as dessert with Kram, a rich raspberry sauce. Excitement mounted during the eating of the pudding. Who would be the lucky person to find the almond in their bowl – a token of good fortune or marriage? Finally, the children could eat their fill of pepparkakor and other butter cookies while adults sipped Swedish egg coffee through a sugar lump held between their teeth.



1974 Gathering



It was a similar celebration that

Charles missed in 1974. He did not see the tinsel-garlanded tree in the living room bay window nor his two favorite ornaments – shimmering orange and silver balls from his mother’s childhood tree. Neither did he join in singing carols led by his sister Elizabeth’s rich contralto voice accompanied by Aunt Margaret at the piano. But in his imagination, he heard them singing “O Come All Ye Faithful” in English; “I Am So Glad On Christmas Eve” and “Children of the Heavenly Father” in Swedish (representing his Scandinavian heritage); and “Silent Night” in German (for that background on his father’s side). In the distance, he heard a train whistle.

❧ **The Lundgrens** ❧

Not only for Charles, but for everyone, Christmas that year was different. Grandma Minnie had died in October 1973. For three generations, she had stood at the heart of the family. After her mother’s death in 1909, she became her father’s housekeeper and “mothered” two younger brothers, Robert and Maynard. Then upon marrying John La Grand in 1916, and at the request of her father, the newlyweds moved into the family home. Five years later, P. A. died, after willing the home to Minnie.

As a child, P. A. Lundgren had emigrated from Sweden in the 1850s with his parents. Unlike other Swedish families such as the Fausts, the Erlanders and the Petersons, who had come directly to Rockford, the Lundgrens farmed near St.

Charles among the New Englanders. The Yankee influence helped them to master English quickly and to shed some old country customs.

❧ **The Lundgren’s Neighborhood** ❧

After P. A. married Wilhelmina, he purchased the Seventh Street home in the heart of Rockford’s Swedish settlement.



*April 8, 1875 Wedding Day of
Per August Lundgren & Wilhemina Backlund
Photo: Courtesy Norman La Grande*

In 1892 they moved into their newly-acquired home in a neighborhood that bordered Railroad Avenue. They soon became accustomed to the sound of whistles. Some summoned furniture factory workers to their shifts. Others came from Central and Northwestern trains mournfully tooting their approach to a nearby Seventh Street crossing.

At first, P. A. worked in a desk factory on North Second Street, but within a few years, he and several partners purchased the Star Grocery Store at 1101, a half

block from the Lundgren home. P. A. later bought out the partners and became sole owner.

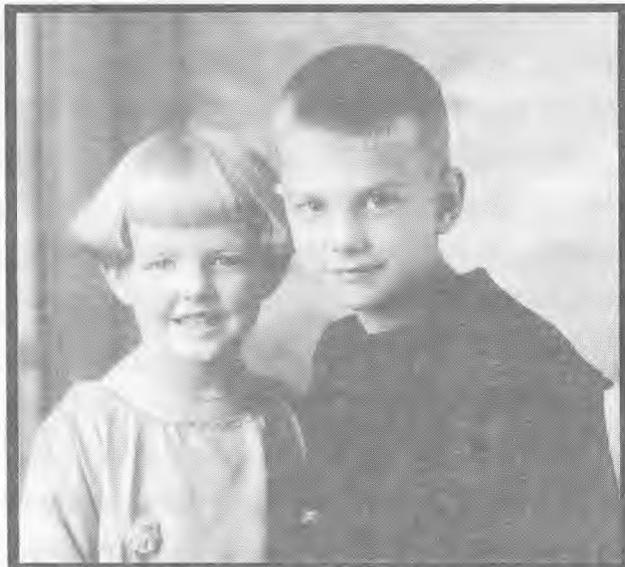
Besides the nearby store, the Lundgren world extended only a few blocks. They walked to Zion Lutheran Church at Fifth Avenue and Sixth Street for worship and socializing; they shopped either “up on Broadway” or “down on Seventh Street”; and their neighbors were best friends.



Minnie



Minnie’s husband John died in 1927, leaving her with nine-year-old Norman and eight-year-old Margaret.



*Minnie and John La Grand's children,
Norman and Margaret, circa 1924
Photo: Courtesy Norman La Grande*

To keep the family together, she rented upstairs rooms, worked as a secretary at a creamery and later for a coal company. Eventually, when grandchildren arrived, she endeared herself to them. She sewed Cub Scout patches on with invisibly

perfect stitches. At 70, she enjoyed playing catch and throwing footballs with Charles who says, “Grandma was a fine athlete.” She played endless games of Parcheesi, Rook and Caroms. She kept crayons and empty aspirin bottles in kitchen cupboards to amuse the children. In a sense, Minnie was a mother three times: first for her brothers, next for her own children; and later for the La Grande children while her daughter-in-law Jane taught in elementary schools.



Christmas, 1985



For the family’s 1985 Christmas Eve celebration, then sixty-seven-year-old Norman prepared a nostalgic script. Once again, the family surrounded the dining table. The grey-haired patriarch began softly, “Methinks I hear the sound of Time Long Past.” Pale blue eyes glinting with a hint of tears, he spoke of the first Christmas Eve in the home, 93 years earlier.

Then instead of fifth generation Peter, Kristine, Mandy and Anna, the children answered to Emmy, Rose, Minnie, Lawrence, Robert and Maynard. Each Christmas Eve was similar; a Swedish Christmas supper, gifts around the Christmas tree, carols at the piano and services at the church. But now instead of lutfisk prepared in the kitchen, those who craved that traditional food would eat it at the Stockholm Inn on 20th Street. And rather than preparing home-made cooking sausage and rye bread, Jane would buy them. Instead of attend-

ing a 6 a.m. julotta (Swedish) service on Christmas Day, the family would worship on Christmas Eve at 11 p.m. Pinching candles out on the Christmas tree, no longer was necessary now that electric lights adorned the greenery. While Norman reminisced, the voices of earlier generations seemed to murmur, to whisper throughout the home.

Margaret recalled a vigil one Christmas Eve afternoon when she and Norman, one year older than she, decided to watch for Santa. "We knew that Santa always delivered gifts to the downstairs front bedroom. Norman said, 'I'm going to sit here all afternoon and I'm going to see Santa.' But while Norman went to the bathroom, Santa came. Norman missed him and for some unexplained reason, so did I."

Minnie's Grandchildren Recall Fond Memories

Paul Bargren, Margaret's son, then a staff member for the *Milwaukee Journal*, described that 1985 Christmas in an article for the paper that December. He had sat alone upstairs in his grandmother's monstrous leather rocker, elbows resting on the well-worn arms. In the quiet, while his wife Elizabeth soothed toddler Anna to sleep, he too heard voices of Time Long Past: Uncle Bob laughing at his own jokes; Great Aunt Emmy complaining about her permanent sofa seat of honor as the eldest family member; Grandmother Minnie's hoarse voice (due to a throat

condition); and cousins John and Charles teasing Paul's mother under the mistletoe.

To Elizabeth La Grande, the house and Grandma Minnie were inseparable. "Grandma was always there." When Grandma died, Elizabeth sensed an emptiness in the house. But since she herself had moved eight times between 1970 and 1987, she says, "I tend not to attach to places. But I remember the house as it was when I was a child. And for me, Christmas began when John and I helped Grandma trim her table Christmas tree — always a few days earlier than our own."

Margaret's daughter Cindy Leonard feels the same emptiness and nostalgia. "That house was my favorite Christmas place," she says. But she no longer likes to go upstairs to the rooms that were her grandmother's. Instead, she treasures the last time she saw her at the top of the stairs. Minnie greeted her granddaughter, home from college, with a poignant, "Oh, Cindy."

A Last "Goodbye"

Charles remembers his goodbye the day he left for a two-year teaching stint in Germany in 1973. A tearful grandmother said, "Don't forget you were my first grandson. Take care of yourself." He waved goodbye from the bottom step — and never saw her again. But each time he returns, he follows a nostalgic ritual: in the back door, up the stairs to Grandma's living quarters, through the kitchen, sitting room and bedrooms,

down the front stairs, into his parent's parlours, bedroom dining room and finally to the kitchen.

Charles, Phyllis and eight-year-old Peter missed the 1985 celebration due to Phyllis' hospital work schedule. But once again, as in 1974, their hearts remembered the warmth of family love, the lilting music, the twinkling of Christmas lights, and the wonderful smells of Christmas at that beloved home on Seventh Street.

Now, aromas may linger. Voices may murmur. But celebrations take place in other family homes as younger generations create new memories.

*This piece originally appeared in
Rockford Magazine, December 1987.
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STANDING TALL AND PROUD

by
Jane Peterson LaGrande

In *The History of Winnebago County*, Volume II, edited by Charles A. Church and published in 1916, three paragraphs are devoted to a biography of Per August Lundgren. Included is a reference to a "handsome residence" purchased by Lundgren, March 21, 1890. His family did not occupy it, however, until early spring 1892. Built in 1885 or 1886 on land purchased in the Giddings Addition of Rockford, it first sheltered the George

Henry Wennerstrom family. Then it bore 1005 as the Seventh Street house number. Now 1017, the historic home has remained in the Lundgren family for over 100 years. P. A. Lundgren's grandson Norman La Grande (my husband) and I now own and occupy it.

Today, a high board fence surrounds a white-trimmed brown house on a narrow lot. Years ago, the lot stretched 85 feet from south to north. About 1912, Lundgren sold part of that original lot to his son Lawrence. He in turn purchased an additional few feet from Hans Peterson at then 1003 Seventh Street (later to be listed as 1009). Lawrence built a red-brick "flat" for his family: wife Anna and children Clifford, Howard and Lenore. The structure and a barn still stand at this location. Originally, the barn housed a horse, wagon, and winter cutter used to deliver groceries for the Star Grocery at 1101 Seventh Street – owned by Lawrence's father, P. A.

Per August Lundgren was born in Småland, Sweden, August 8, 1841. He emigrated to America in 1853 with his parents and siblings on a sailing vessel. The family settled in St. Charles, Illinois, and farmed there for more than 25 years. P. A. married Wilhelmina Backlund, April 1875. While the couple lived in St. Charles, five children – three daughters and two sons – were born. A third son, born in Rockford, completed the family circle. All the children received good educations and filled respectable places in their chosen fields of work.

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death in 1909, Minnie assumed not only the role of mother for her younger siblings, Robert and Maynard, but also of her father's housekeeper. In spite of her duties at home, she found time to attend Rockford Business College. Then when she married John La Grand in 1916, the newlyweds moved into the family home at P. A.'s request. Five years later he died. Having willed the home to Minnie, he assured continued occupancy of the home by Lundgren family members.

Widowed in 1927, Minnie struggled to maintain the home and to provide for her young children Norman and Margaret. Then her previous business education assisted her in obtaining positions at the Cherry Valley Creamery and the John Anderson Coal Company.

An addition to the home circa 1900 had added two rooms—a bedroom and a kitchen—each on the first and second floors. When indoor plumbing was installed in 1912, bathrooms replaced a bedroom. Tubs and toilets had tanks mounted on the walls close to the ceiling. Long pull chains flushed the toilets. The extra space upstairs provided additional income during bleak Depression Days when Minnie rented those six rooms.

“Running” water was installed in pipes in the yard before it was brought into the house prior to installation of city water and sewer systems. A photo shows a water pipe and faucet emerging from the middle of the front yard lawn. Two back yard cisterns provided “soft” water. One pump was outside on top of the

cistern; the other, in the basement. From this, soft water was pumped up to a tank in the attic from which water drained down through pipes into the furnace. Via this “gravity” system, heated water returned to the radiators. Downstairs rooms as of 1917 received the benefits of hot-water heat. (Not until 1954 did the upstairs have that luxury.)

Today, the house is essentially the same as it was in the 20s and 30s. Some renovation has been undertaken during the past 20 years. Inside blinds, stored in the attic for about 50 years, now grace the living and dining rooms. Still in use are cast iron, footed bath tubs. To preserve the character of the house, the exterior received paint rather than siding.

Norman and I moved into the home with Minnie in 1949. That decision provided an unusual atmosphere for our children John, Elizabeth and Charles. They experienced everyday living not only with parents, but also with Grandma Minnie and Great-aunt Emily. (She had returned to Rockford after her retirement from government service.)

The history of our home at 1017 Seventh Street has been interspersed with references to those who once lived here and contributed to its past. It would have been impossible to have written a story without mentioning those who played interesting roles in the unfolding of memories this house has preserved for us. There have been births and deaths in this house. These lives are interwoven with that of this dear old structure and cannot be separated from it.

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