

# JUSTIN TITUS WRITES AN AMUNDSON FAMILY HISTORY

June 1987

To those who are interested in our family history, I aim to write down from my past 86 year old memory to the best that I can recall. It will all be facts. I guess I just happen to be able to recall a great deal of the early days - history and names. I take after my Father in being a poor scribe. We were both, as was my Mother, more or less artistically inclined.

My Father, John Amundson, was an excellent cabinetmaker and watch repairman. The wooden tools, wood working with steel blades, are in the Spirit Lake, Iowa museum. On our maternal side was Grandfather Gunder Matheson. He, with two brothers, came to live near Milford, Iowa from Winnesheik Company in 1862. Prior to that, Gunder had lived in Michigan. Since the Civil War had begun, Gunder (Gundy) and John, brother of Gunder, enlisted in the U.S. Army for the North. John served on the Eastern front and Gunder did two "hitches" in the West (Dakotas and Minnesota), holding mostly Sioux in check - total of six years on the Indian Wars. Gunder, in travels with the U.S. Cavalry, spotted the country along the Little Sioux River, southwest of Milford and eight miles south of West Okoboji lakes. At the end of his first three-year enlistment, he located the "Morningside Farm". He took over the farm of a homesteader - 200 acres from a man that gave up - Indian scare or the like. The 200 acres were laid out in an ell shape. East end included pasture along the Little Sioux River, with hills, grass, hardwood forest along hills and valleys, up to where the farm building sat just above a ravine facing the east: hence Morningside Farm.

The building on the place at the time were a log cabin (oak logs) and east on the brink of a hill was the barn. The foundation was of native rocks from the Wisconsin glacial drift about 10,000 years ago. Gunder gathers limestone from outer openings here and there. I could still see some when I was a kid.

Gunder used the limestone, after burning, to make mortar to build the rock walls for the barn's foundation. Most of it is still standing solid today. The barn frame was constructed of oak logs hewn square, ends fitted into rectangle chiseled holes, with wooden pegs to hold them - called mortise and tenon. Those oak beams are so hard today; one cannot drive a nail into them.

Mother Amundson and her older sister and brother Daniel (Dan) were born in the log cabin. Later, about 1885, Gunder built a large house with bay windows on the south side, off what we called the parlor (only for guests). There was a large living room, a dining room next to it, and a kitchen off the dining room, with a pantry. The master bedroom was also on this lower floor. There was a stairway leading up from the living room. Upstairs was a hallway, three bedrooms and an attic room on one side at the head of the stairway (storage space).

On the east and south side was what was called a porch, and above it was a floored roof with a railing around it. This we used on summer evenings, as it was above the mosquito level. Later, our Father John removed all floors and railings, put in a concrete floor and a panel around both sides, a rain-proof ceiling above and screened all sides. We had a table in the Southeast corner where, in summer, all meals were served.

When I was a kid, there was a well and an old wooden pump next or near the east kitchen wall. Later Dad built the kitchen out over the well, so we had cold water from a pitcher pump in the kitchen on the right hand side and another pump and sink on the other end (north) that pumped soft rainwater from a cistern. Later, he dug another cistern. Rainwater was collected from eve troughs. The cisterns provided enough soft rainwater for laundry, face and baths. Baths were in tubs until later on, when dad closed off the pantry and made it into a bathroom – with toilet, too, but had to put in a sewer line.

We had three wells. One also by the barn to water the work horses, another down south of both the large basement barn and what we called the sheep barn. It has been long gone. This lower well was shallow and spring-fed – always had plenty of water in it. The other two wells, thirty feet deep sometimes, got rather low on dry years.

In Grandfather Gunder's day, they just dug wells. They were lined, curbed with rock called nigger head (no offense). I will bet they are still in position today. Now I know, and have for a long time, that if these two wells had been dug a few feet further north they would have hit strong underground water veins.

The water-witch sticks worked for brother Geno, sister Inga and I. Vaughn (younger brother) had a well drilled in the garden – not much there. I showed him where a strong vein ran past the dining room door. He found that the witch stick worked for him also.

The witch stick is a forked heavy willow or aspen twig – each branch from the fork about 8" long. You grip it on each end, I mean grip it, in hands, thumbs out, the forked part forward. If you walk over an underground vein, the fork will twist back to your chest. You cannot stop it. Note: Don't try it after sundown. Why? It doesn't work. It seems the sun has something to do with it. As kids, brother Geno and Sister Inga traced all of the veins in the farm area, just for the fun of it. I could tell many tales of the stick I experienced in later years. I serviced water pumps for Wards and the well digging and witch (hunting) I found is used far and wide. I found veins for many and showed others their wells were drilled in the wrong place. One real intelligent man had a well drilled a long way from his house. I said, "You witched for it?" "Yeah!" He found two veins, crossing each other about 100'. He drilled into both. The water came up within 10' of the well top. He had bought a Ward's pump and said it failed to run after a few days. I examined it. I called him to the pump house and showed him a dead earwig under the switch points. When it had dried up, the current could not go through. I could tell many stories on this sort of thing. Some real funnies – like the guy who said Ward's pump was no good – it didn't put out water. I opened it up, found the filter screen plugged with angleworms. I didn't say anything, just asked him to clean it while I prepared to reassemble. He just sat and stared at it. He had to raise the intake higher above the spring-box concrete floor. Two more stories go with the guy, name of Harvey. These last two well stories are about wells high on the long ridge above Portland, Oregon, above where the Willamette and the Columbia rivers flow. Now what are two water veins doing along the top of that high long ridge? I am not getting into the nitty gritty of what I set out to do. I could write volumes and tell stories by the book for hours.

Now back to life on the farm, as I knew it. We siblings all went to the old time country school. Granddad Gunder was interested in education. He helped establish the school on the section corners about one mile north of our home. It was white, about 14' x 20'. Uncle Dan, Aunt Anna and Mother Tilda (Tilla) attended – I guess to only the eighth grade. Mother Tilda did go on to a boarding school also – perhaps high school. She had many pictures of classmates and groups, but she never talked much of them. I used to look through the old picture album and ask questions. The men shown wore "pipe stem" trousers. Never a crease. A crease in trousers those days showed they were new – no go! How I remember pressing out the knee bag from my trousers and creasing the ones we wore – 13-inch cuffs. You dampen them with spray, laid a newspaper over and pressed. The paper prevented a shine.

All the farmers, near all anyhow, had large families, as ours was. They needed the kids to do farm work, barnyard chores and fieldwork. My sisters didn't do fieldwork, but Mother ran the grain binder for years, and Dad shocked the bundles – usually six bundles to a shock. They sat up butts on bottom, grain tassels on top. When dried out at threshing time, they were hauled in bundle racks to the threshing machine or grain separator. The latter was operated by a steam engine to a long belt. An engine fired by coal and the water monkey hauled the water from the river, ditch or well. The engineer always enjoyed blowing the whistle at noon or some excuse like the water monkey being late getting water. He loved, it seemed, to see the horses frightened. How I hated him. Although our horses were of a quiet nature.

When Uncle Dan was young, he procured a steam engine to run the grain separator. Granddad used horsepower prior to this. I remember the rusty parts west of the house. They sawed the hardwood logs from the timber on the east end of the farm into stove lengths. These were splint into piece for the kitchen stove and the big heater in the basement that heated the house. The smell of that hardwood smoke was delicious.

Dad bought the old school house and used it for a shop and what all. With the farmer's large families they had to build a much larger schoolhouse and it had a belfry. In the shop Dad installed a four horsepower gas engine. Now, this was a large engine – cast iron. It was three feet in diameter, had heavy cast iron flywheels and a big water bowl on top. It was capable of driving a 30" circle saw Dad used to saw the long hardwood logs cut out of the woods on the east end of the farm above or in the hills.

Also, he installed a line shaft and big turning lathe with which he turned out pillars for our front porch. He took orders and made pillars for two neighbors houses. Later a swarm of bees got between the walls and were a lot of trouble. Our Father John was an all around handy man.

Extending the line shaft into the corn crib, he built an elevator so when he came in with loads of husked corn, the front of the wagon was elevate and corn sent up into the crib. This saved doing it with a scoop shovel that a tired man would have to do otherwise. Boy, we sure worked up good appetites husking corn. Out at daylight, unload at noon, out again until dark, unload, feed the livestock, milk the cows morning and evening, etc.

Some information about relatives, neighbors, etc.:

We, the U.S. branch of the Amundson clan started with John Amundson's arrival in this country. I don't know the date. He came to Iowa Falls and to Perry, Iowa. I am sure he came from Perry to Milford, Iowa. Milford was not a very big place. Never did get very big. John was a trained watch repairman, on any clock, plus a good carpenter and cabinetmaker trained in Norway. He worked in a drug store, which had a corner for a jeweler and watch repairman. This was later owned by Frank Merritt.

Dad's last job (work) was in Merritt's Drug repairing watches and clocks until he was too ill from cancer and passed away in February of 1921. He and Mother Tilda did get to celebrate their Silver Wedding anniversary in January of 1921. Dad was very ill at the time.

John met Mother through their trips to town. John wished to live in town near his business, but Mother Tilda wanted to stay on the old homestead. So, being in love, they compromised, and John moved to the farm. He was not a farmer, but with Tilda's father, Gunder Matheson's guidance, he picked it up. In a couple of years Gunder built a nice house in Milford and retired.

John and Tilda (Tilla) started the Amundson brood, as most of you except the youngest siblings know it today. Brother Geno was the first and eldest of John and Tilda's offspring. Geno was born February 1, 1897. I have a long list of family birth dates, but Inga's birth date is missing. Anyhow, I, Justin, was born February 23, 1901. Inga was in between Geno and I. Geno's full given name was Geno Anton. Inga's, Inga Serena. Mine, Justin Titus. I used to get into scuffles and whip several boys in grade school (never lost one either) that added a little to my middle mane. Sis Isabelle Beatrice Yule was next to me. I find I do not have her birth date either. The Yule comes from her being born the day after Christmas. Mother still supervised the big dinner. John was a big help in the kitchen, but he always had what we called a "hired girl" to help Mother at the time of our births.

Next came Alton Daniel (Doc). He was born May 25, 1906. Then Rose (Biddy), born December 14, 1908. She used to sit in the high chair, slam it up and down shouting "biddy biddy". Brother Harold Vaughn followed. When he was baptized, old Preacher Wigdahl would not pronounce the name Vaughn, so he said Vun, much to Mother's disgust. He said he knew a boy by the name of Vaughn that he disliked very much. His English was not too hot. Maybe he could not pronounce it.

Net was Roald (Rod). Sorry Rod, if you have a middle name it escapes me. Then came Tileen. Tileen, I have no birth date, passed away at about age three weeks old. Last was John. Dr. Fuller, I am sure, brought all of us into the world.

John Amundson Sr. came from a small island called Espevaer, Norway. His father's name was Amund Amundson and his Mother's Inga Serena, I think. John had three brothers and one sister. The sister's name I forget, but she married one Garvik – buyer and exporter of fish to Holland, where they were processed. Don't know of Garvik siblings.

John lost two brothers in the North Sea – fisherman. Terrible storms in that area. John's younger brother came to America with John, when John was back on a visit. Grandfather Amund had a nice home on this island and a small farm among the rocks.

There are many cousins, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, today. Unlike us here, most are tall men. Many are in the Merchant Marine, and are ship's officers. Near all of our younger cousins there speak English. So it would be no trouble to visit.

John Jr. and sister Inga have both visited our cousins there. John took a lot of pictures of the clean, neat home and some of the "spit and polish" aboard those beautiful ships.

Gunder Matheson – the Matheson names comes adding the "son" to Mathew, as Amundson comes from Amund. Both names are found in the Bible. Gunder came from near the West Coast of Norway, east of Haugesund. Now I heard this only once and cannot recall it all. Gunder located our Morningside Farm as I described. He needed a wife, so went to a Norwegian settlement he had heard of at Jackson, Minnesota – a long drive with horses across the prairie lands. This was shortly after the Sioux Indian uprising in Minnesota in which so many hundreds of settlers were massacred.

In three days time he and Grandmother agreed to marry and were wed. Grandmother Serena Larson was a pretty woman. Gunder was a handsome man. They came back to the homestead and raised three children – Anna, Dan and Tilda.

Gunder needed help on the large farm, for plowing, planting, cultivating and harvesting was a slow process. I could hardly describe the implements used in those days. Not many fences. The kids were sent out to herd the cattle, for instance. Woe be unto you if you went to sleep and the cows got into the corn or grain.

For food, gardens were a real mainstay. They butchered hogs, steers and sheep. Winter was no problem. The meat was hung in the smoke house or lean-to. When you needed any, you sawed it off. Dark places usually stayed cold up to 40 degrees, so it kept until spring. Then they butchered several critters, cut them up and packed the meat with salt in stone jars – some jars up to 50-gallon capacity.

These jars were kept in the house basement. After a few weeks all the meat was removed onto clean canvas on the cellar floor. The remaining brine in jars was boiled down in copper boilers until the water and blood was boiled out of the brine – until it was so concentrated it would float an egg. Then the meat was put back into the jars again and the brine poured back in for another two to three weeks. At this point all meat was removed and cheesecloth sewed on some. All hams, bacon and lean beef were hung in the smoke house.

At about ten years of age, my job was to keep the smoldering hickory wood fire going. Once we had no hickory wood, so Mother said to use corncobs. Well, cobs beat hickory both ways from breakfast. You poor kids, I mean all of you that will never know the flavor of the ham, bacon and dried beef treated in that manner. We today think we have it great with all we have to eat, etc. Well, we didn't have much, but we really lived "high on the hog" (an old saying).

Fun on the farm? For men, fishing, hunting, farm sales. At get-togethers, storytelling, lying – each trying to outdo the other. Swimming – those that could. Ingvold Seivertson was a jolly good-natured man. Stretch his truths? To a great extent. The boys, then young men, were spending Sunday afternoon on the pasture grass on the river bank, laying in the shade of big box elder trees. He bragged of his swimming ability. Rains had raised the river to near bank high. One of the boys took one of Ingvold's new shoes he so proudly bragged of, threw it into the river and Ingvold was afraid to go after it – someone else did.

Uncle Dan and Martin Knudson were of the same age. Martin was kin to Dan and us. They were pals later on as men and spent three years together in Alaska at the turn of the century. They were steam engineers. They tried to outdo each other in tricks on each other. Martin put pig droppings in Dan's shoes. Martin was working for Gunder at the time. Dan took the shoes to the barn. Note: Grandmother was a very meticulous housekeeper. All men had to remove their shoes before coming into the house. Well, Dan took some grass green cow manure, waited at the barn door for Martin, and poured it on Martin's hair. Oh boy! Martin was so angry! He went down through the woods to the river and cleaned up. He was lying around in the shade until his Mother Gretta spotted him and sent him back to work. Martin lived in Idaho for years. I worked for him there in 1923. He had two J.I. Case steam engines, one-grain separator and a clover huller. Martin lived until he was 99 years old. A great man – inventor, too. Invented the first hydraulic shock absorber for cars.

Granddad Gunder hired most of his help from Norway. Newcomers we called them later. One winter he had two men. Never did learn their names. One an outgoing individual – just had to go to town on Saturday night. One Saturday Granddad butchered about a 200 lb. Hog. The hogs were always scalded, cleaned of hair, skin smoothed, drained, etc. Since the weather was far below zero, the hog was frozen stiff. Someone, maybe it was the other worker, carried the hog in a sheet to the cold bedroom upstairs. We called it the spare room. It never had any heat unless the door was left open. There were three

bedrooms upstairs. The other man slept that night I another room. Here comes this guy home around midnight, crawled into bed with what he thought was his partner. He snuggled up to him, he thought, but it was the frozen pig. He felt of it and went screaming downstairs in his long handled underwear, yelling that so and so was dead. He awakened everyone. I heard this story form different sources, so am sure it is true.

All ten of the Amundson siblings were born on the Morningside Farm. Dr. Q. C. Fuller of Milford was the family doctor. He always came on time, rain or shine – often in zero winter weather – twice in blizzard conditions. The early ones were all born in the horse and buggy days. I remember, when he drove in, Dad would hurry out to put the warm horse into our warm barn. There was a blizzard one night and Dad was worried about Dr. Fuller getting through the snow banks.

The farming in those days was called diversified. We grew lots of corn. The main “cash” crop was oats, a stable horse feed. Sometimes we grew a little barley and wheat. We always had a patch of potatoes and sweet corn and once a patch of Northern White beans. We didn’t like them – they always tasted like raw beans.

In the early days, the grain was thrashed by what they called a separator. A cylinder spun at high speed, separating the grain from the straw – slow process then. Grandpa Gunder later got a return flue steam engine. That is where Uncle Dan got his start as a steam engineer. Before that the power was provided by horses. A team of horses pulled a long beam and were lead by another small pole. Around and around they went. In the center were gears leading to a belt pulley. The long belt went to the separator. Earlier the grain was hauled in loose until a grain binder was used to tie the cut grain into bundles. Dad had a McCormick grain binder – six foot cut. Mother Tilda was an expert at this. She ran it while Dad and the “hired man” shocked the bundles. Later he bought an eight-foot McCormick Deering that cut a wider cut. Brother Geno and I did the shocking then.

Potatoes were harvested by hand with four or five tined forks. Later we got a “spud” digger that dug them up onto a shaker that separated the potatoes from the dirt. It was, of course, pulled by a team of horses. Our barn had stalls built in with feed boxes and mangers for their food – enough for eight horses, all equipped with leather harness.

He had stations for about twelve cows. Cows all knew their stations when they came in (upright smooth two by fours). When they stuck their head into the V-shaped station, the V was narrowed to a slot and locked in. This is where we milked the cows.

The milk was taken to the house and run through a cream separator. The cream was used in the kitchen, but the bulk was placed in what we called a cream can. Earlier they had a man with a team of horses pulling a wagon that went around to the farms, gathered the cans and took them to the nearest town, Milford, and then to the creamery. The cream was tested for its butterfat content and each farmer was paid accordingly. This system did not last too many years. Later, for a period of time, we churned the cream to butter, ate and sold the butter at stores in exchange for groceries.

At first a tall wooden keg was used with a cover and a hole in the top. A long wooden rod went through the hole with a plus sign wooden gadget on the bottom of the rod. This was dashed up and down until the butter separated from the buttermilk. That is where buttermilk comes from – not the cultured stuff you buy today. It consists of skimmed milk, artificially sour or clabbered, perhaps with some buttermilk mixed.

What I liked was buttermilk or clabbered sour milk with hot cake dough, doughnuts. We called them "fried cakes". I used to help Mother fry them. Brother Geno and I sure relished these. You cannot buy sour milk or buttermilk today. Today the buttermilk is pasteurized - it doesn't really clabber. We didn't know of those things then.

Today you poor grand and great-grands and those that follow you, will never know the hardships the old folks had to go through to prepare the way for the way you get to live today. Yet, don't think we didn't have our real genuine good and happy days.

We had church picnics when they had special preachers there at the Little Sioux Lutheran Church. We took turns in the summer having big family picnic get-togethers on Sunday. The families Hofstads, Andersons, Olsons and Nelsons. The Nelsons are our kin. Mrs. Nelson, a sister of my Grandmother Matheson - naturally both were Larsons. There were nine in their family. All gone now except one, Martha, in her 90's. There were others. Sivert and Lena Pederson and his father and son Sigurd. Sievert was a son of Gunder's sister. I have a picture of the Pederson family. We always called Peterson the English translation. Most of their descendants are lost in history. I did know some of them personally. Peter Overland, Sievert's father, I knew. He outlived Gunder's sister. You see, the old way was to name the son after his father's first name. Hence, it was Sievert, Peder's son. Thus, Sievert Pederson. They discontinued this about the turn of the century. Otherwise, I would be Justin, John's son. Justin and brothers and sisters Johnson.

We had woods on the east end of the ell-shaped 220-acre farm. We had mostly Burr Oak, White and Red Elm, some Ironwood and White Willow on the ravines. Granddad had planted Cottonwood groves, Black Walnut and Soft Maple. We still tapped the Maples for sweet sap, and some Box Elder trees. He also planted an orchard of several kinds of apples. The harvest apple, early - ripe in July, and the Winey, a cider apple, were my favorite. Man, you today don't know what good apples taste like. Apples today are developed for keeping and market. Too bad. Gunder also planted a few varieties of wild plums - some large yellow tinted, some medium-size red and smaller reds. Mother cooked these for the juice for pancake syrup.

Also, we had dozens of bushes of wild gooseberries. I liked them both green and when ripe (they turned black). Green gooseberry pie? Out of this world! You will never experience it - domestic are no good. Also, we had big black wild cherries. They grew in clusters. Mother made syrup of them also. There were wild blackcap and red raspberries and wild purple grapes. The grapes were crushed through the apple cider mill and pressed for their juice. The juice was canned for use in the harvest and haying field for 3:00 p.m. lunch. It was chilled with cold deep well water and we added sugar. We also had Black Haws ripen in the fall. There were wild Thorn apples and Red Haws. Since I had to bring in the milk cows from the woods pasture and river flats pasture, I knew where every fruit bush was in the woods.

The river was our summer bathtub. Earlier, when I was a "kid", we had game fish in it. Pickerel Pike, Sunfish, Bullhead, Blue Catfish, Red and White Suckers. Then some guy 50 S.W. dammed the river for power to run a flourmill. Carp had been introduced - all we had were Carp, Suckers and Bullhead left. We found that they were all fine eating. The Carp in Oregon are no good. They are a vegetarian fish - wrong food up there. The Suckers have a delicate white flaky flesh and flavor. Forked bones? Oh, boy! I finally found out from Sister Isabel how you scale and clean them - Carp, too. Take a sharp (wire edge) knife, cut crosswise each on quarter in over ribs and back of ribs in tail, cut in frying chunks, roll in flour or cornmeal mix, fry, and not a forked bone - none except large rib and backbone. Good eating in Arizona too.

We have Carp down here and Suckers in mountain streams. Now, lest I forget, any fish a cat likes is a darned good fish to eat. Al and I fed sand shark to our five darling cats in Washington State. Now it is an expensive fish in the market. Too expensive here for me.

Written by Justin Amundson  
1987 – Yuma, Arizona