

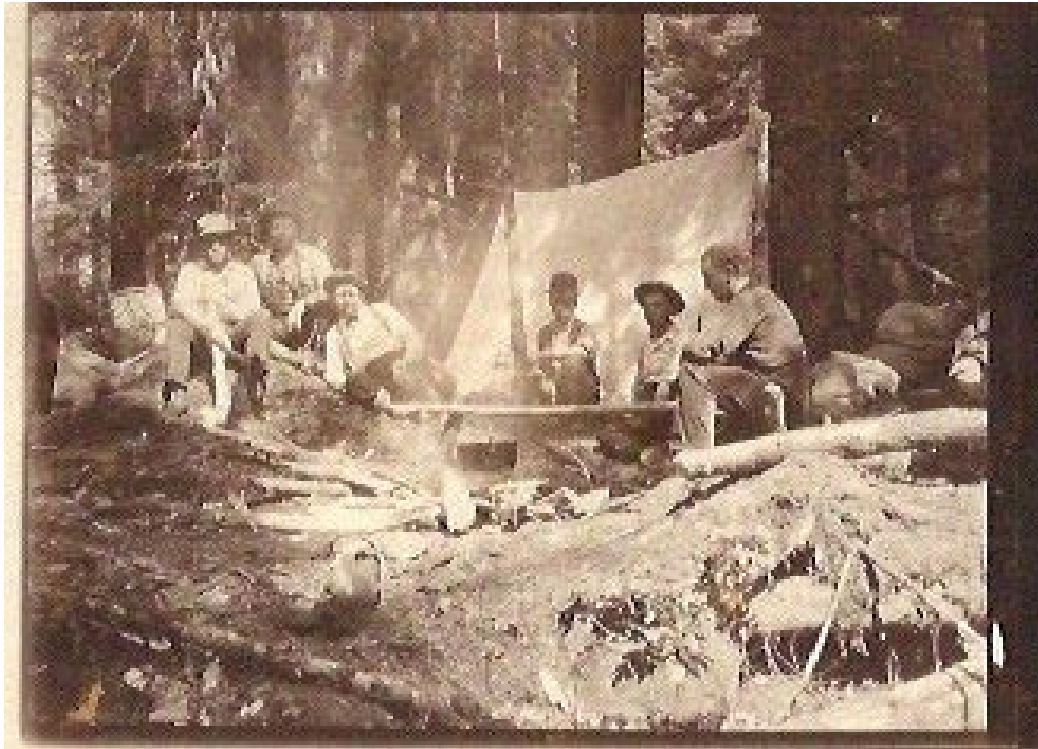
Theo & Bess Engstrand
by Gary Engstrand, April 2020

When I was young my family would occasionally visit my dad's parents in their apartment on Lake Street and Bryant Avenue (816 W. Lake). The building, with storefront below and apartments above, is still there. My dad described it to me years later as a "crummy one-bedroom apartment." I remember it well; his characterization was accurate. You entered the building on Lake Street, a few doors east of Bryant, went up a long flight of stairs, and diagonally across the hallway to the right was the door to their apartment. When you entered, you were at the (south) end of a large rectangle, maybe 15' by 25-30' (I can remember the apartment vividly but am not sure of dimensions this many years later). The dining area portion of the room was right there inside the door, looking through to a kitchen on the right and a Murphy bed in the wall to the left. Beyond the dining area was the living area. To the left rear was a closet and the bathroom; to the right rear was their bedroom. The windows (one in the bathroom, two in the living room, one in their bedroom) faced north, on to the building's parking lot and a rather run-down house on the far side. As a result, it was never bright and cheery in the apartment and the view was urban unappealing.

My grandfather, Theodore (Theo) Engstrand, was born June 4, 1877, somewhere in Sweden. The family emigrated to the U.S. in 1879. They left Sweden as Olaf and Mary Olson and arrived at Ellis Island, New York, as Olaf and Mary Engstrand, and eventually made their way to Ogema, Wisconsin. (Their names are among those on an extremely large circular plaque at Ellis Island.) The family story is that they changed their name to Engstrand while on the boat in order to move up in the food line, which provided meals on an alphabetical basis. "Engstrand" in Swedish means, roughly, "meadow by a stream," and my assumption is that it's a place name they took from where they had lived in Sweden.

Sometime before he met and married my grandmother, Theo went somewhere out west prospecting for gold with his brothers. Someone took a lot of pictures of their trip. Here are two of the photos.

(Theo second from right)



(Theo on left, with Charlie, Oscar, Nels)



My grandmother, Bessie (Bess) Ethel Wilson, was born June 10, 1879, in Hersey, Michigan. She attended normal school and, my notes say, was teaching school in Superior,

Wisconsin in the late 1890s. Despite having gone to normal school--unusual in that day--my father did not believe she came from a well-to-do background. She was born in Michigan but my father said that her family "lived in different places. They were down in Missouri someplace, for a while, then she ended up back in Wisconsin. I think she grew up pretty much down in Missouri." Here are photos of her when she was about 10-11 years old and when she was 18 (in the latter case, she had written on the photo that she was 18 when it was taken).





My grandparents moved into the apartment in the fall of 1934, in the middle of the Depression. What a comedown it must have been. In 1900, when he was 23 and she was 21, they were married in a double wedding with my grandfather's brother, held at Castlewood Terrace in Chicago. (An elderly Chicagoan relative who knew my grandparents told me that Castlewood Terrace was definitely in a ritzy part of town.) Small indicators of their economic status are a few of the wedding gifts they received: engraved sterling silver flatware, Rosenthal china, and a high quality brass-and-glass miniature grandfather clock. By then, my grandfather was managing a successful family business. My grandmother had recently graduated from normal school (post-high school training for teachers), and when they were married she had calling cards. Their son Allen was born in 1901; their second son, William, in 1911. They seemed to be on a path to a successful life. (Photos of the two of them about the time they got married.)



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Mrs. Theodore Engstrand

Here's a 1905 biography of my grandfather that I happened on quite by accident when I Googled my grandfather's name; he would have been 27 or 28 when this was written. Brule is midway between Superior and Ashland in northern Wisconsin, not far from the south shore of Lake Superior.

Theodore Engstrand, the popular and genial manager of the Brule Store Co., at Brule, Wis., is a native of Sweden, born June 4, 1877. His parents, O. and Mary Engstrand, were also natives of Sweden, and emigrated to America in 1879, settling in Price county, Wis., where they still reside. The father, O. Engstrand, was engaged in lumbering seven years but is now retired from active business. He was the father of six children, five sons and one daughter.

In the public schools of Price county, Theodore Engstrand received his elementary education. The schools then in vogue in that locality, were primitive in the extreme, the curriculum embracing only reading, writing and arithmetic. However, meager as were his opportunities, he succeeded by dint of effort in becoming well grounded in the preliminaries of an English education. Supplementary to this he took a year's commercial course at Bryant & Stratton's Business College, Chicago, Ill., where by diligence he became thoroughly familiar with the principles of a technical business education. In 1898 he abandoned his school duties within two months of graduation, to assume the responsibility of managing the general mercantile establishment of the Brule Store Co., at Brule, which had been established in 1892 by his brother, C.G. Engstrand, and J.A. Lofquist. Since accepting this responsible position, Mr. Engstrand has continuously devoted himself to conducting the affairs of the establishment, which, under his wise guidance, has been eminently prosperous. Socially and fraternally, Mr. Engstrand occupies a conspicuous place in the community, being an honored member of West Superior Lodge No. 236, F. & A.M., and of the Knights of the Maccabees, Brule Tent No. 34. Mr. Engstrand's political affiliation is with the Republican party. He takes an active interest in local affairs, and has been honored by his party as delegate to Douglas county and Congressional conventions, serving three years in the former. Mr. Engstrand was married in Chicago, Oct. 2, 1900, to Miss Bessie Wilson, daughter of W.R. Wilson, of Brule. They have one child, Allen Theodore.

Olaf Engstrand's obituary reported that he was 73 years old and "was an old and valued citizen of the town of Ogema having lived there since 1880." He died on August 26, 1902. A wound in his foot had turned into gangrene, he had to have his leg amputated, but "the dread disease continued to spread until the end came Tuesday last. During his sickness he suffered untold agonies." His son Theo was noted as living in Brule, Wisconsin.

(The house in Brule; Bess holding son Allen, b. 7/21/1901)



The best years of their lives were from 1900 to about 1921. The general store expanded in north central Wisconsin and my grandfather became the owner of one in Rib Lake, down the road a piece from Brule. Life was good for them for a number of years—my dad said they were not wealthy but they were well off—and they were politically and civically active in their community. They had a nice home with yard and trees in small-town America. But the stores lost business as automobiles became more widespread and the lumber business declined.

My father told me that at some point around 1920 or 1921 his mother left Wisconsin and came to Minneapolis because his father was drinking too much (perhaps because of the failing store?). She left with their sons William and Allen, before my dad was born. I have notes that “Bessie worked at Dayton’s in the 1920s and lived on Spruce Place 1920-22.” Eventually his father came to Minneapolis and rejoined his mother because my father was born in August 1922, which indicates they had gotten back together no later than November 1921 (counting backward from August 1922. . .). As my father put it, “then I came along as a mistake. My Dad being 45 and my Mother 43.”

It was no doubt devastating to them when their oldest son Allen died of smallpox in 1924, leaving behind a widow and two young children.

My grandfather sold shoes, and was on the road doing so during 1921-22. He stayed in the shoe business until about 1931, then he and his son William opened a grocery store at 44th and Beard in Minneapolis. (I have a note that Myrton Bell, an in-law relative of my grandmother’s, loaned them the money for the store.) They ran the store for a couple of years in the early 1930s, but a fire put them out of business. My father recalled that “at that grocery store

they let people charge; they probably delivered half of their groceries. People would call up their orders, on charge accounts. That was out in what was, at that time, a fairly nice neighborhood. Still is. I remember after the fire they had all these charge account books, boxes of them--people who owed them money for groceries; they never collected." That was effectively the point at which they were no longer affluent. (My grandfather Theo on the left; son William on the right/rear. "Presented by" is an interesting phrase. At least he got the apostrophe in the right place. Second photo is Bess in 1932 at 3101 Girard Avenue South, Minneapolis, one of the places they lived.)

My dad remembered the grocery store. "I used to go out there and peddle handbills. And sack up sacks of potatoes, stuff like that. This guy in the back [barely visible in the photo], he had the meat market, Otto Lilja. He was the meat market end of it, which my Dad and Bill didn't have anything to do with. But it was Engstrand's grocery, and it was Lilja's Meat Market. Look at the cereals [way up on the shelf]. How many were there back then? They had a big claw that you reached up there with to pick one out. This doesn't show it but there used to be cookies there [on the right]." Did the store make money? "Well, they were surviving."

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After the fire my grandfather came down with "rheumatism in his knee" (according to my father) and he was bedridden for almost a year. (Another note I have called it "inflammatory rheumatism.") There's an interesting family precedent during the period after my grandfather recovered from the rheumatism: He worked for the University of Minnesota (!) on some kind of (presumably New Deal) government program. When that ended, he went to work for Donaldson's selling men's suits, which he did until 1947, when he was 70 years old. (Minnesota folks will remember that Donaldson's was one of the two primary department stores in downtown Minneapolis; the other, more prominent one, was Dayton's.)

During the period of roughly a dozen years between coming to Minneapolis in ~1921 and moving into the apartment in 1934, my grandparents rented upper or lower parts of several duplexes in Minneapolis just south of Uptown; they moved repeatedly (for reasons unknown to my father, who was a youngster). An extended family (their son Allen's widow, Allen's and her two young children, the daughter-in-law's sister) lived together with them in these large duplexes; only the daughter-in-law and her sister had jobs after the grocery store burned and my grandfather was disabled, providing the household income. My father was going to elementary

school during these duplex years. Finally, in the midst of the Depression, in late summer 1934 they moved to the apartment on Lake and Bryant, where they lived until my grandfather died in 1960. They lived for 26 years in that "crummy" apartment.

At one point when they lived near Uptown in various locations, my father recalled that his maternal grandmother lived with them. His mother's "mother remarried and ended up in [Skagway, Alaska]. Then when we still lived on West 27th Street, I can just barely remember her, my mother's mother. I don't know what happened to her second husband--he must have died. She lived with us for a short time, and then she died." That was Fidelia Ann (Barton) (Wilson) Brockmiller, died in 1931 in Willmar, Minnesota, probably at the Willmar State Asylum. Her ancestry goes back to one of the original Mayflower pilgrims as well as William the Conqueror of England.

They moved into the apartment when he was 57 and she was 55. Their economic status had deteriorated substantially between the time of their marriage in 1900 and the move into the apartment. I wonder what they were thinking as they realized their diminished financial and presumably social station in life; what kind of disappointment did they feel? Their hopes and dreams must have died, particularly after the fire burned down the grocery store in 1933.

(Labor Day 1942)



I doubt it was fun for my dad. They moved into the apartment when he was 12 years old (William, then 23, was out working and married and Allen had died), and my dad started Jefferson Junior High School that year. So for junior and senior high school and up until May of 1942, he slept on that Murphy bed that came out of the wall and down into the dining area. (He spent May-October 1942 in California working for Lockheed, at which point the U. S. Army came calling for WWII.) When he returned from Europe in 1946 (invalided out with a German sniper shot in his shoulder in March 1945), he moved back into the apartment, presumably slept on the Murphy bed, and stayed there until he married my mother in October, 1949. In those post-war years he was going to the University on the G.I. Bill. (I had long recorded interviews with my dad after my mother died but I never thought to ask him about daily life in the

apartment. I only know he didn't recall it as a happy time.) (Below, my mother and father's wedding, October 1949, Bess & Theo on the right)



What was the evening routine like when my dad was in school? Did he go to bed at age 12 or 14 while his parents sat at the other end of the space, in the "living room," reading or doing embroidery or listening to the radio? (They had a radio cabinet, like many we've all seen from the 1920s and 30s, on top of which sat forever that brass-and-glass miniature grandfather clock given to them as a wedding present.) And what was daily life like after my father returned from the war, recovering from a gunshot wound in the shoulder? No doubt a very much older human in all senses of the word. (Photos below from the apartment, November 1954: My brother Tracy is the baby ~1 month old, I'm the little kid. Left photo: my dad Ben, Theo, an unhappy Gary, Bess holding Tracy. Right photo: Bess holding Tracy, me next to him. The brass-and-glass clock sits atop the radio cabinet.)



What did they do with their lives? My father told me: "They were active in the old Townsend plan¹; they even went to Washington D. C. when the Townsend Plan people were trying to get more pensions for older people. How they managed to afford that I don't know. They always got dressed up on Sunday; they'd go over to their meetings. My Dad was a wheel in the club, too; he was probably president at one time or another. But that went on for quite a few years." They played cards with friends who lived within a block of their apartment, my father recalled, but they did little else socially. "They'd always play cribbage or 500. Always playing cards." By the time they were in their 70s, my dad said, "they weren't that anxious to go out and about anyhow." They did not own a car; presumably they had no money for that. My dad also recalled that even though he was on the West High School baseball team, and team captain his senior year, his parents never came to his games.

One small story about the apartment: In the dining area there was a chandelier over the table. I can recall it just well enough to know that today it would be worth several thousand dollars; it was either Art Deco or Art Noveau, chandeliers that command a big premium today. I'm sure it's long gone now.

They did indeed go to Washington, D.C. in 1948, according to my grandmother's notes in a daily calendar. On June 1, "Left for Wash. D.C. New York, Buffalo, Falls. Back home on 12th of June." On June 10, "Convention Wash D.C. Theo. vacation 1st to 12." On June 12, "Back home Wash trip. Grand trip." My grandmother took seven pages of notes about the speakers and

¹ "The basic idea of the Townsend Plan was that the government would provide a pension of \$200 per month to every citizen age 60 and older. The pensions would be funded by a 2% national sales tax. . . . The Townsend Plan proved enormously popular. Within two years of the publication of the Plan as a Letter to the Editor in a Long Beach, California newspaper, there were over 7,000 "Townsend Clubs" with over 2.2 million members actively working to make the Townsend Plan the nation's old-age pension system." Average monthly wages at the time were about \$100 per month. <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/social-security/the-townsend-plan/> Even though Social Security was signed into law in 1935, the Townsend Clubs continued to be active for a number of years.

what they said, from "Opening ceremonies" to "Friday - taking of pictures on White House grounds, visiting Congressmen and Senators urging them to sign Discharge Petition #7 right away." Was this the only trip out of the midwest that they ever took?

They ventured out a little. In July, 1956, "Went up to George's [her brother] cabin Lake Nebagamon Wisconsin. Theo and Bess two weeks. Grand time driving + eats + sleep." Lake Nebagamon took them back to where they began their married life; it is only a few miles from Brule. (Below, Christmas 1957 at my parents' house on Dupont Avenue in south Minneapolis.)

Other than the Townsend plan, my dad said his parents were not politically active. Nor were they churchgoers. My dad recalled that "they got me going to the Joyce Methodist Church on 31st and Fremont. They never went to church. Either my Dad or my Mother was raised Methodist, probably my Mother. I don't know if my Dad ever had anything to do with church."



My grandparents' second son William died unexpectedly on October 2, 1960 at age 49. It was the date of my grandparents' 60th wedding anniversary. My dad does not believe that his father knew that William had died. "Because he was pretty much out of it, then. He had had some strokes, but he wasn't in the hospital." He was not in good health at the end, "not for several months." Nor was he cognizant, although my dad believed it was just strokes, not Alzheimer's. "My Mother took care of him." My grandfather died nine days later, on October 11, 1960. So my grandmother lost both her second son and her husband of 60 years and 9 days within just over a week. What a blow that must have been for her.

How did my dad know that his father had died? "I think my mother called and told me that he had died. We went up there [to the apartment]; he was still there; they were waiting for the coroner because they had to have a death certificate saying that he had died of natural causes. He was just laying there on the Murphy bed." It was in the evening. "My mother didn't know he was dead, at first, I guess. Finally realized he was. There wasn't much she could do about it." The coroner came while my dad and mom were at the apartment. "Then finally the funeral parlor people came to pick him up, after the coroner was there. It was 9 or 10 o'clock at night."

After my grandfather died, my grandmother remained in the apartment for about a year and then, according to my father, his mother "finally walked over to the Alliance Residence and checked herself in" at age 82. The Alliance Residence was (and still is) a nursing home about two blocks from the apartment. After two or three years and a series of strokes, she was vegetative for about a decade before she died on July 24, 1975, at 96. My dad would faithfully visit perhaps once per month, sometimes I came along. It was a depressing place even before she lost her faculties; the visits were awful when she didn't recognize her son (or me).

Both my grandparents are buried in Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis, in plots that had been purchased years earlier by their daughter-in-law Margaret (Mooney)(Engstrand) McCutcheon. I do not recall the funerals for either of them.

I didn't know either of my dad's parents well, even as a youngster. My grandfather, when I knew him (up until age 9, when he died), played solitaire endlessly on a card table in front of his rocking chair next to the window overlooking the parking lot while he smoked his pipe. I don't think that I exchanged more than a few dozen words *ever* with him. I did talk to my grandmother some; she gave me the hint to look at her mother's ancestry, which led me to the Washburn connection. But they were both remote, elderly people for me. (He was 74, she was 72, when I was born.) They seemed to be of an "old" mindset; even my dad thought that. I don't know if that mindset was generally true for that generation or if it was just them. Maybe beaten down by life after such a promising start?