

Why I Write

by Ernst F. Tonsing

He was tall; he was trim; and he was very intelligent, I heard. He was my grandfather. I never knew him, however, since he died before I was born. I have seen two pictures of him. One has him standing by his wife, my grandmother, gazing calmly at the camera. Another one has him sitting on a very old motorcycle that is piled high with mail bags. I heard that he established the first postal route in Saline County in the center of Kansas, daily delivering letters to Post Offices in the scattered little communities on the prairie.

I know only a few disjointed things about him. My mother said that he was born in Kristdala, Kalmar Län (county), Småland, Sweden, and came to the United States as a boy. He was indentured for seven years to an old bachelor farmer. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner during those years consisted only of fried eggs and bacon—nothing more. He worked seven days a week those years, with just one day off at Christmas and another at Easter to visit his family.

My mother also told me that he enlisted in the Army so that he could get his citizenship, and that he rode with Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" in Cuba. I later found that this was wrong. He had, instead, fought in the Philippine-American War. I heard that he had died an agonizing death of tuberculosis during the Dust Bowl days in which massive winds sucked up the soil into the air from the farms on the prairies.

Some late evenings when the responsibilities of the day are over and the light is fading outside, I wonder what would it have been like to have known my grandfather. Would we have played ball? Would we have gone on long walks? What would we have talked about? What could he have told me about his childhood, of the journey across the sea, of his tedious toil as a youth, and of his travels as a soldier?

Alas, he never put any of his thoughts down on paper. I will never know him, nor be able to be admitted to his inner self. He will remain just a few, scattered facts—remote, inaccessible, and unconnected with the realities of my life.

That is why I write now. Not only have I penned academic articles, I have also reimagined what it was like for my grandfather's parents to embark on a sailing ship to ply through Atlantic storms to America, their journey to Kansas, and what it was like to live in a dugout house where they had to combat prairie fires, hoards of grasshoppers devouring their crops, and droughts. I want to leave something of their stories as well as mine behind to connect with those who I shall never know, to be a part of their lives, too. A life is too precious to let it evaporate into a few, fragile, fragmentary facts. A life is too important not to record.

