
MANFRED HISTORY AND PRESERVATION

P.O. Box 321 Harvey, North Dakota 58341

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Greetings from Manfred!

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Leslie and Olga Johnson



Husband's Full Name: Leslie Miles Johnson
Husband's Place of Birth: Manfred Township
Husband's Father's Name: John A. Johnson
Husband's Mother's Name: Malena Johnson
Husband's Siblings' Names: Alvin, Edna, Pearl, Miles,
Russell, Everett
Wife's Full Name: Olga Cecelia Opsal
Wife's Place of Birth: Rusland Township
Wife's Father's Name: Ole L. Opsal
Wife's Mother's Name: Annie Opsahl
Wife's Siblings' Names: Martha, Lewis (died as a baby)
Children's Names: Larry, Laverne, Jim, David,
Dianne, Marilyn

Leslie and Olga Johnson

THE LESLIE AND OLGA JOHNSON FAMILY

by Laverne Johnson

Leslie Johnson was born December 27, 1910, the fourth child of six (two others had died in infancy), to John and Malena (nee Johnson) Johnson. He grew up on the farm 1 ½ miles northwest of Manfred which his parents had homesteaded. He graduated from Harvey High School and attended North Dakota Agricultural College (NDSU) in Fargo. After college, Leslie farmed with his father and brother, Russell.

Olga Opsal was born on December 16, 1914 at rural Manfred to Ole and Annie (nee Opsahl) Opsal, pioneer immigrants who had come from the Eidsvoll area of Norway. She had one older sister, Martha, and a brother who had died in infancy. Olga finished the eighth grade at the age of eleven, spent a year at home, and then attended Harvey High School, graduating in 3 ½ years, at the age of 15. She attended Minot State College and taught school for several years.

One day when Leslie was delivering milk to the Manfred Elevator, Mrs. Severson, the elevator manager's wife asked him, "Why don't you go out with Olga Opsal?" Leslie and Olga had known each other all their lives as their parents were friends, and in high school they were in the same class. They had even been assigned seating together at the prom since neither of them had brought a date; however, Olga, having been advanced in school, was four years younger than Leslie, and they hadn't paid any attention to each other at that time, sitting in bashful silence through their prom supper. Now they were both in their 20s and had been dancing together at a Sons of Norway dance in Manfred recently. With Mrs. Severson's verbal nudge, Leslie started thinking about this pretty school teacher in a new light. He wrote her a letter asking if he could pick her up Saturday night. Olga thought that this tall, handsome Johnson with the deep voice might be appealing. but she was not thrilled with the prospect of being picked up for a date in his

stripped-down Model T. In the end, however, Leslie's allure won out over the potential discomfort and embarrassment of riding in that jalopy so she decided to go. When Leslie picked her up, he wasn't driving the skeleton Model T after all but instead had borrowed his father's posh new Overland Whippet. After they had dated for a while, Leslie was getting serious and Olga was getting cold feet so they broke up and both dated others. About a year later, Leslie thought he would try once more, and by now Olga knew that he was the man of her dreams. They again dated for almost a year, and on June 24, 1939, Leslie and Olga were married in Harvey by Pastor Bretheim. Their attendants were Olga's sister, Martha, and Leslie's brother, Russell.

After a honeymoon at Lake Metigoshe, Leslie brought his bride home to Riverside Farm where the busy summer schedule was already in swing. One night they went to bed early and awoke to the sound of a band playing, guns shooting, and tin pans pounding together. The Harvey City Band had been in Manfred advertising for the upcoming 4th of July, and the locals had persuaded them to join in on a charivari for the newlyweds. The neighbors were invited in for drinks, and they danced into the night. Thus began the 61-year adventure in a life shared together by Leslie and Olga.

Six children were born to this union: Larry, Laverne, and James (Orville) were delivered by Dr. P.A. Boyum, who had also delivered both Leslie and Olga. The doctor in attendance at the births of David, Dianne, and Marilyn was Dr. P.A. Boyum's son, Dr. Lowell Boyum.

All of the Johnson children attended their parents' alma mater, Harvey High School, except Dianne who opted to go to Fessenden. At one point, the six Johnson children were attending six different schools: Larry at NDAC (NDSU) in Fargo, Laverne at Minot State, Jim at Harvey, David at Drake, Dianne at Fessenden, and Marilyn at Manfred. David had the most variety in schools, attending Manfred, Drake, Harvey, and graduating from Minot High School.

Leslie frequently attended NDAC extension classes and was always eager to look at new and innovative farming practices. Besides small grain farming and dairying, he also raised capons, laying hens, and Hereford beef cattle. In 1945, he discontinued the cattle and other ventures except for crop farming and started raising a few hundred turkeys. This diversification eventually led to a turkey enterprise of up to 12,000 birds annually.

In 1946, Leslie and Olga bought a farm half a mile northwest of the original homestead, and with their two children at the time, Larry and Laverne, moved up there. Leslie's brother, Russell, and his family moved to Riverside Farm where they lived for five years until relocating back to Seattle. Leslie and Olga then moved their family, now including James and the young twins, David and Dianne, back to Riverside Farm. Marilyn came along later.

Both Leslie and Olga were the kind of people who really made a difference in the world. Leslie pursued innovative farming methods and pioneered a low-cost market feed for turkeys, which revolutionized the turkey industry. When the Federal Government attempted to institute marketing orders in an attempt to control animal agriculture, Leslie testified at a United States Congressional Hearing and was later told by North Dakota's Congressional delegation that his testimony had been instrumental in killing the marketing orders. Leslie was also active and served in leadership roles in church, community, and state organizations.

Olga worked tirelessly to advance opportunities for handicapped individuals on the local, state, and national levels. She was a founder and charter member of both the North Dakota Association for Retarded Citizens and the Central Association for Retarded Citizens. She was a two-term president of the NDARC and served on the board of directors for many years. She coordinated and served on an educational panel which traveled to every area of the state working to establish Special Education classrooms in the schools, and she taught leadership training seminars across North Dakota. Leslie worked beside Olga in all these endeavors and they proved to be a powerful team leaving a lasting legacy which has benefited countless individuals. Olga was also committed to other organizations, taking an active part and holding office in many church, community, and state organizations.

In keeping with their adventurous spirits, one of Leslie and Olga's favorite things to do was travel together. They traveled on five continents and in later years took close to 20 trips by cruise ship. Olga could read and speak three languages, and Leslie was known by family and friends as a "walking encyclopedia." Olga died July 30, 2000, and Leslie died February 2, 2002.

Larry, recently retired, now spends as much time as he can on the farm. After his graduation from NDSU, he worked his entire career in Quality Assurance Management for major fresh and frozen food

companies on the West Coast. He and his former wife, Jan, have two sons. Don, along with his wife, Lynette, and their son, Nicholas, live in Indianapolis where Don works for United Airlines. Stephen Leslie lives and works in California.

Laverne, also recently retired, lives in Bismarck, and she, too, spends as much time as possible on the farm. She was a teacher and Speech/Language Pathologist who worked most recently at Mandan High School. She and her partner, Gwyn Herman, an assistant Professor at the University of Mary, sing and play in their two-woman band, Sunrise, providing entertainment for dances, programs, church services, and other functions.

Jim is the Mercer County States Attorney, and his wife, Shirley, owns CIA, a business which specializes in wedding cakes, invitations, and accessories. Jim and Shirley live on a farmstead near Stanton. They have two daughters, Jamie (Mrs. Josh Meier) who is an investment banker in Portland, Oregon, and Laura who is working and attending the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks.

David lives independently in his own apartment in Minot. He was married for ten years to Peggy Brennan Johnson who passed away in 2001. David married Frances on September 24, 2004. David is actively involved in working to improve conditions for people with disabilities. He has been involved with the People First of North Dakota organization and Magic City Advocacy. He has testified at hearings which have been instrumental in getting expanded bus service in Minot and automatic doors in businesses, such as Wal-Mart. David has served as president of Magic City Advocacy.

Dianne, who has degrees in Psychology and Education, is presently working in health care as an independent massage therapist in Bismarck. She also teaches part-time at Bismarck State College through the University of North Dakota, Williston Branch in Bismarck. She has three daughters and one son. Kyla is a music teacher and performer in Minneapolis. Achala (Jessie) is an artist who lives near Boulder, Colorado. Lindsey is a student at the University of Montana in Missoula, and Benjamin, a falconer apprentice, is a student at Bismarck High School.

Marilyn, who has lived in both China and Japan, has Master's Degrees in both Psychology and Chinese Medicine. She is an owner and practitioner of the Jade Screen Clinic in Eugene, Oregon.

The Johnsons are very musical, and Leslie and Olga enjoyed not only attending concerts and other musical events, but they always encouraged music in their household. Johnson family gatherings still invariably lead to some form of music fest, either practicing for an upcoming event or breaking into a spontaneous jam session. All of the Johnsons, parents and children alike, enjoy performing in the musical spotlight; everyone plays at least one instrument, and they all enjoy singing. Most of the children have played in dance bands, and this is reaching into the next generation. In the early 1980s, a Johnson family country band called Calcuhn was popular in central North Dakota. The uninitiated had no idea that the name of the band came from a variant spelling of the Norwegian word for "turkey"!

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Larry, Leslie, David, Jim;
Dianne, Olga, Laverne and Marilyn (in front)