LIFE IN AMERICA

BY COLETTE RUSSELLE BROOKS

In 1870 Edla Alida Svensson, native of Nörro Mellandgard, Sweden, sailed the Atlantic with husband Gustave and settled in Norway, Kansas, where they were thereafter known as The Nelsons.

Of her father little is known. Of her mother, however, they say: "I dödbroken är om henne antecknat, att hone hade haft 15 barn, av vilka 2 avlidit före henne, 2 hadt utvandrat till Amerika och 11 eftrlevde henne it Sverige."

"In the book of the dead it is written she had 15 children: 2 died before her, 2 went off to America, and 11 survived her in Sweden."

My grandmother, Edna Harriet Clark of Nebraska, daughter of Edward and Augusta, was to become in her turn wife to Edwin Samuel Nelson, second son of Edla, and was to follow him to places far from her own family. Edla, widowed, went with them. Of her mother-in-law my grandmother would venture little, though through the years she kept diaries filled with observations about other aspects of her life. On this subject she was silent.

It is said, however, that on certain occasions she would turn away and would wonder, pointedly, how a person who had left the old country so many years earlier could still ask for "yam" and "yelly" with her toast.

Life in America, after all, called for adaptation. Especially once you knew you would always be lonesome for what you had lost.

FACT: "Picked 1st roses. Lovely." "Edwin under weather all day." "A new page. A new month. A new start." "So windy I could hardly walk."

My grandmother came from a long line of farmers, and though she was herself trained to teach school and keep house it always seemed it was actually the land and its needs that lured her.

Her grandfather had won renown in the 19th century for taking 540 acres of unyielding land and transforming it, miraculously, into a wonder that drew expressions of pure, unforced admiration from ordinarily taciturn men. His peach, pear, apple, and walnut trees stood in lordly complement to shade trees, evergreens, and shrubbery; grasses of clover, timothy, and blue abutted pastures where 100 head of Durham cattle and 100 head of hogs fed in leisurely fashion; 150 acres of corn "beginning to silk" (it is said) bordered acres of grapes in full growth; scrupulously-plotted lakes, wells, and springs snaked through 12 fields separated by 15 miles of hand-wrought hedge and stone fence; and over the whole, on a hill, stood an imperial two-story stone dwelling with porches from which one might look out upon this plenitude.

He labored over each square inch of his land for some 25 years.

And my grandmother, too, lost her heart to a succession of homes, gardens, and plots of ground, beginning modestly (*"Dimensions of our 1st little home in Belleville to which I came as a bride"*) and giving herself over, in time, to the management and upkeep of a whole array of rental properties. Toward the end of her life, when she felt the need to make provision for a final place to settle, she surveyed burial grounds with that same landowner's eye, choosing finally the one place where she and her husband might lie, in perpetuity, under the shade of the evergreens they had always loved.

And in the annals of Kansas agriculture they say this of Johnson "Stonewall" Clark: "Kansas would be the grandest state, in every sense of the term, of the entire United States, had we but a hundred thousand such farmers as the one of whom we are writing."

Gustave and Edla Nelson reared seven children together, only one of whom chose to remain in Kansas upon reaching adulthood, the others drifting westward across the continent as though caught in a wandering current. The first one to stop moving settled in Seattle, the last foothold to be had before land gave way entirely to sea, and slowly the others joined her, until a whole generation had gathered together as if to resist further dispersion.

And though they were to spend most of their lives in this new place, the images each retained and trusted most revolved around those early years in the Midwest—as though memory, once unmoored, lost its link to experience, its imprint weakening with each successive uprooting.

My grandparents, who drove Alki Way and University Avenue and 45th Street in Seattle more times than they could ever count, remembered most immediately the winding country lanes down which my grandfather came courting in a carriage, or the six miles of country road my grandmother would walk in the predawn darkness each day to light the schoolroom stove before her students arrived. In later years, as the present itself lost its distinctive outline (*"am all mixed up on dates & days"*) those past moments seemed to arise with even greater clarity (*"Momma died 60 yrs. ago to-day in Deshler. I was the only family member with her."*)

And in histories of Seattle they speak of the Denny Brothers, city founders, of how they made camp in 1851 at the foot of the Columbia River in Oregon, and sent David, the youngest, up north to scout for a place where the party might settle. When he came upon the clearing that was to become the site of the future city, he sent this urgent message back to his brother: "Come as quickly as you can. I have found a valley that will house a thousand families."

FEELING: "Promise of hot day at 5:30 a.m. when we awoke." "It gets dark so early now." "Sunshine, lovely, chilly." "Whitecaps on Sound."

My grandmother was the slowest walker everyone swore they had ever seen, her two stick legs tottering down the street in ever-uncertain relation to its surface, pure will hardly able to accept confinement to so frail a form. Her diaries, too, had this feeling of fitful propulsion, each day's events recorded with a doggedness that seemed to suggest, in its painstaking sweep, the exertions of a planet that must spin not at once, but degree by degree, hour by hour, as it laboriously traces its orbit.

Sometimes, the diaries announce gaps ("*13 years later than previous page*") that might otherwise have proven almost imperceptible, had one simply attended to the day's doings; the menus, errands, and weather notations of the 1920's do not differ, essentially, from those of the 1930's or 60's, and most of the overt declarations ("2.3 *inches of rain fell in city*", "*8 hrs. 27 min. of daylight to-day,*" "*Sat in $5.50 seats in 2nd front right center row in balcony*") might well have been made on any one of a thousand days.

References to family members and friends were also seamlessly interwoven into these pages, over the years, death itself unable to effect their disappearance. ("*To-day is my father's birthday—105 yrs. old if alive*").

Sometimes, when I visited, she would have me sign my name on that day's page, her own children having begun the tradition decades earlier, her great-grandchildren, in turn, scratching their initials years later.

Always, singularity of occasion is subordinate to the sense of dailiness that pervades the diaries, and each day, once reported upon, seems both fixed and lost forever.

April 15, 1917, Sunday: "The folks are all here and ready to leave for Mason City in the Hupmobile. They intended to go early this a.m. but the weather prevented. I sure will be lonesome for them when they leave. We had ham, eggs, potatoes, bread and coffee for breakfast."

Very early on, my sisters and brother and I were carefully exposed to the vocabulary and world view of our family, the experience of generations distilled into a collection of attitudes, strategems, and idiosyncratic *pensees* that most of our peers found entirely foreign.

"Mangle" was one noun no one else seemed ever to recognize, though we knew the word and its variants very well, our grandparents having devoted hundreds of hours to the machine's operation, each of those hours logged in my grandmother's little books. *"Washed 2 prs. Edwin's work pants to-day. Mangled in basement all afternoon."*

Much of our continuing tutelage revolved around the worth and salvation of *work*, a word connoting both "bane" and "deliverance," birthright of those not born to "indolence." My grandmother had once worked in a broom factory for 50¢ a week, we were told—*"I was sure glad to get it"*—and that experience became for her the very crystallization of Adam's curse. *"Edwin cleaned and vacuumed good. He thinks house-work is hard. Ha!"*

Because earthly security would surely prove chimerical we were encouraged to acquire *skills*, those reliable "friends" who would never fail us. To that end I was enrolled in a summer typing class at the age of 10 and became proficient enough to delight my grandmother, who visited the class as often as seemliness would allow. *"Some 23 kids there typing to beat the band. Sure cute!"* As long as we studied the practical arts, we could never receive too much instruction: the world was difficult, waiting to ensnare us, and even the most able, if lax, might well make a fatal misstep. *"Am interested in that battle at Little Big Horn."*

And so I began to see that the family catchphrases—*"WORKED LIKE A DOG"*, *"WEAK AS A CLAM"*—were in their way impassioned commentaries upon the human condition, handed down by anxious elders.

And if my grandmother were to see what I've done with my typing today, she might well be disconcerted, though a part of her, perhaps the part that loved to play the piano, would surely be pleased.

As a child I was once given a facsimile copy of the Declaration of Independence, a document particularly revered in our family because it was said that Abraham Clark, a distant ancestor, had resolutely affixed his signature to it in solemn defiance of charter, country, and King. Each time I took out my antiqued, artificially-weathered copy I would search it, expectantly, until my eye fell upon the tiny "Abra. Clark" in the corner, a signature less extravagant by magnitudes than that of John Hancock or others that cut, by comparison, a black swath across the page. It seemed to me, however, that my ancestor's reticence was fitting, suited to the calm determination of those principles enumerated in the text itself. And it pleased me that "the course of human events" could be affected by an actual flesh-and-blood figure to whom I was directly related.

I learned later that other Clark men had also figured in this tradition of quiet service to country. One had been a drum major in the Revolutionary War, and later a bodyguard to George Washington; one had spent the seven years of that conflict as a foot solder; another had fought in the War of 1812. Johnson Clark himself had been an Abolitionist, moving to Kansas for the purpose of persuading his fellow settlers to declare it a free state.

In consequence of this family history my grandmother became an active member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, serving for years in various of its posts, spearheading teas and membership alerts until well into her seventies. She especially enjoyed attending lectures on topics like "Abraham Lincoln, His Legend & Legacy." Though she sometimes grumbled about keeping the minutes or notifying the local newspapers, it was clear that she cherished her role as scribe and guardian of this sacred trust, and it dismayed her to watch as time itself did its own quiet work. *"We have lost so many members. Helen M. ailing & not present. She missed last meeting, too."* My grandmother also served for years as an election inspector, keeping the polls in her precinct functioning smoothly, one tiny part of a vast civic machinery.

And when I reprove myself for becoming too casual about privileges that others have struggled so for, I think not of the bone-chilling conditions at Valley Forge, of soldiers who had no shoes to wear in an Eastern winter, or of the many other historical vignettes my grandmother would sometimes sketch for her rapt listeners.

I think instead of a woman who arose at the first light of dawn for decades on election day, who made her way to the local school, opened the ledgers, and kept a vigilant eye upon the proceedings for as long as she was physically able. *"Gave Valentine's heart to every voter."*

According to the official tallies recorded by my grandmother, some 9,639,969 people attended the 1962 Seattle World's Fair; but, in truth, the actual figure must be reckoned somewhat lower, as she herself made at least 13 separate trips and took each of us as often as persuasion or command would permit. Her interest in the Fair's offerings was inexhaustible. It seemed that the spectacle, in its scale and very promise of excess, was the one event of the modern era that might offer her sure enchantment, drawing upon a lifetime's rarely-tapped reserve of expectation and surprise.

Our visits to the Fair typically lasted 12 or so hours. In the morning, we might troop through the Food Show, the Fashion Pavilion, the Science Building, and the Hall of Industry, with a lunchtime ride on the futuristic Bubbleator Elevator, a clear plexiglass ball that afforded us our first glimpse of what a world without floors and ceilings might look like.

Following this morning's work, we would move onto exhibitions from such faraway places as Canada, Sweden, China, Denmark, Britain, and Brazil, rounding the afternoon off with a wonderstruck tour of General Electric's *World of the 21st Century*. In the evening we would join thousands of others to watch the Canadian Tattoo or the Japanese Pearl Divers or the Water Ski Show, this last our favorite, as it appears we attended it many times.

Our whole routine would be repeated, with but slight variation, on our next visit, as though we had neither seen nor appreciated enough the first or second or third time round.

Because we were reasonable children we mutinied, as it were, only once, refusing to sit through two successive tapings of the Ted Mack Amateur Hour television show at the Opera House. My grandmother watched this event by herself but took note of our resistance, it seems, for she later successfully lured us back. "*Rode Gay Way rides with 3 youngest. Took in Berlin Circus—talked to clown from Vienna.*"

I cannot now recall much about the exhibitions or shows we saw in such profusion, but I will always remember the night my grandmother drifted away from my sister and me, and my sister then drifted away as well, and I was left alone in that strange landscape, recognizing nothing, looking for the one shock of gray I knew better than any other sign or mark in the sky, and not finding it for what seemed to me forever.

September 9, 1962, Sunday: "*. . .To South Gate at 9 p.m. Lost C. & D. in restroom. Found in 'Traveler's Aid' at 10:40. A good laugh.*"

My grandmother was also a devotee of Grand Openings, seeking out new grocery stores or bottling plants or banks as if driven to baptismal witness. She loved the festivities —"*coffee, doughnuts, balloons, cigars, ball-point pens given to all*" —and considered each celebratory token a testament to nature's undeniable bounty. "*1 lb. bacon gift to 1st 100 ladies in line—I was #5.*"

One day, providentially, she determined that banks offered premiums to customers who opened new accounts. She took $250 and began to move it around, bank to bank, taking note not of need but of opportunity, letting one account lie fallow in order to activate another, reversing the intricate process whenever conditions warranted. Over the years she accumulated an array of goods: blankets, ice buckets, hibachis, umbrellas, fire extinguishers, corn poppers, cookbooks, trays, tables, calendars, etchings. Much of this booty ended up in her attic. It was discovery, not possession, that provoked her.

And if I were to characterize my grandmother in a word, and were not so fanciful as to term her an "explorer" or an "adventurer," I would call her a *forager*, one who prodded and shook and poked into each bit of experience, however unpromising, until she came upon something that sparked her interest, found some odd glint or angle of note in ground that others had already passed over.

My grandmother's diaries are resolutely unreflective, if by reflection one means that ready analysis of emotional states that we regard today as a given. As she grew older, particularly, she reported upon events as if the experience and its reverberations were of different orders, fact one kind of phenomenon and feeling another, their relation wholly unlike what she understood of the physical world, where cause and effect have a recognized correlation.

Sometimes, a mood seems to strike from out of nowhere, unheralded, and must be borne like a wandering ache. "*I feel so low to-day.*"

Sometimes, a delineation of errands or chores is interrupted—"*Pop discouraged. Who isn't sometimes?*"—and then resumed, without further remark, as though to say that ups and downs are just part of the long slope of a life, that sooner or later the specifics so vivid now will fade away, and only the most general recollection of the mood will remain, and the what or the why of it will no longer matter.

Sometimes, the behavior of family or friends is simply recorded, in stiff, resistant sentences, and left to speak more or less for itself. "*A bad day, but one to be remembered.*" And if the episode is so extreme as to defy reiteration, the whole page is left blank, with only an oblique reproach written in red. "*Lost Weekend!*"

Over the years she learned how to put beans on poles, and how to turn plants toward the sun, and how to adjust balky machinery; but the lives of those she cared most about proved more resistant to intervention. She could sometimes sense trouble coming but had no way to ward it off, her skills of little help. It was a powerlessness she could never fully accept. *"Where have I gone wrong?"*

Strangers were always offering my grandmother money, not because she looked tattered or needy but because giving up two bits or a buck seemed the least costly way of avoiding entanglement in the torturous scenes that ensued whenever she stood upon Principle.

Nov. 20, 1962, Tuesday—the bank: It is late afternoon, and my grandmother and sister are at the head of a long line of people who would like to get home for the holidays. She has discovered an 18¢ discrepancy in her account, 18¢ that the bank has appropriated without her permission. Ha! She will set this right, she will talk to the teller. My sister, not completely her grandmother's granddaughter, tries to slip away but is brusquely collared and brought back to what is now the most conspicuous spot in the bank. The squall continues. The teller, who has put the records aside, reaches into her own purse and gives my grandmother a quarter. She begs her to keep the change.

March 2, 1969, Monday—the bus: My grandmother has been waiting for the bus, but it is late, and she decides to buy a bottle of bourbon at the liquor store nearby. Her transfer is valid until 1:00 p.m. She catches the next bus at 1:10 and is told she will have to pay full fare. She decides she does not like this bus driver, he is just one more young man of the sort who has lately made her life heck. She stands her ground. The bus idles at the corner. Passengers jump up and offer to help pay her fare; two hippies reached into their backpacks and pull out mounds of nickels and pennies. My grandmother waves them all away. She will walk.

Aug. 22, 1971, Tuesday—Small Claims Court: My grandmother, as landlady, has come to a standoff with a tenant over a disputed deposit of $15. He has taken her to court. She stands before the judge and explains that she is not the villain, she is the aggrieved party, this man is the one who should be ashamed of himself. The judge listens to both sides and suggests they settle the dispute themselves. Hugh, the man, offers to split the difference and to give my grandparents a ride home. She says no thank you, we will take the bus. She gives him a check for $7.50 but later writes, for the record, *"That Hugh lied re: everything."*

And if I had kept a diary during those years, I would certainly have recorded scenes such as this: we are at the Royal Forks Restaurant, my grandmother's favorite, a serve-yourself smorgasbord. "ALL YOU CAN EAT" for $1.95. We make several sweeps past the steam tables; we enjoy the food, though we do not actually understand our grandmother's enthusiasm. But it is fun to go out. In time we are finished and ready to leave. Our grandmother puts on her coat and walks back to the serving tables. We watch. We have seen this happen before but cannot believe it is happening again. We walk out to the parking lot, we pretend not to know her, but it is too late, for the manager has seen the steam coiling up from under her coat and he stops us. "Madam," he says (we finish the sentence for him) *"Please open your purse."* When she does, the large plastic bag full of pork chops and chicken is exposed for all to see. He sighs. He is a nice man, she is a steady customer, but they are once again at loggerheads, lost in disputation over what the phrase "all you can eat" actually means.

And when I think of these tales, I think of the time my sister was undergoing a stormy adolescent crisis and my grandmother, worried, wanted to help. She remembered a book she had recently read about; it wasn't geared to the problems of young girls, but it had something to say about stoicism, about toughing it out. She wrote a note to my sister. 'Here's something you might want to take a look at—a book called *Six Crises*—by someone named Richard Nixon.'

FACT: "54 years ago to-day since my 1st date with Edwin dear!" "I have to feel just so to write." "Awake for hours." "Rain, sun, wind, cold. I am old!"

My grandparents' lives were intertwined for 68 years, 64 of those years in marriage; they met at a Ladies Aid Social in 1909 and began at that moment the complex process of interconnection that would one day result in others regarding them as but one being.

And this union, in its early years both blessed and darkened by the abiding presence of Gustave and Edla and Edward and Augusta, came to seem in time a towering achievement in itself, devotion forged out of the fragile materials of effort and faith, a feat to cast its own luminescent shadow upon generations yet to follow.

Of their two children, one married early and more than once, while the other simply waited, profligacy and caution two aspects of the same impulse. Why risk attempting a state that, in its ancient incarnations, seemed already more or less perfectly realized?

And to their grandchildren, the very notion of two people declaring themselves destined to share one life together would seem as old and odd to the ear as talk of Noah's Ark.

But I have sometimes wondered what it would be like to live as though one were loved, not for moments, intermittently, but for far longer, troth pledged beyond mere trial; until, in time, a whole family arises, anew, and is drawn into the day's regularities. *"We stayed home all p.m. Jimmie phoned. Phyllis phoned."*

FEELING: "Sunshine but unsettled." "Noticed a black sky north." "Sat & looked at steady rain." "Stars out at 6 p.m."

On Jan. 15, 1967, according to my grandmother's notations, I sat at her desk and read her diary. I was 14, she was 76. It was a Sunday. Scattered clouds filled the sky; the temperature crept up to 51 degrees during the late afternoon.

She had given me a blank book of my own that Christmas, and on this day she presented me with a red pen, just like hers, and explained what the phrase "red letter day" means and why it was advisable to make special entries in a color that leapt out at the eye. All memories were significant, it seemed, but some were very much more so than others, and writing of them in red ink would ensure that those privileged moments were not lost in a mass of less important material.

I kept my diary up for almost two weeks. It is, in tone and substance, remarkably like my grandmother's: an exhaustive rendering, unembroidered, of every single thing I ate, said and did each day. All of the entries are written in red.

"Such a flood of memories!"

On Feb. 9, 1964, my grandmother had given me another book, *The Well-Bred Girl in Society*, by Mrs. Burton Harrison. She had had this primer for 60 years, and its no-nonsense admonitions had served her well.

"To wear gloves while assisting at tea-table seems out of place." "Men tire of crowding around a mere beauty to receive subdivided portions of her attention, and join with others in ringing the changes upon her charms."

I attempted, diligently, to absorb this information so conscientiously passed on, and by the time I had finished the book I knew more about mere beauties than any of my contemporaries, and had determined never to seem simply the coquette while dancing the quadrille. By my grandmother's lights, I was prepared to enter the world of the 1960's.

These two books remain in my possession today, but I would give them up without a thought if I were able to recover the red pen, now long lost. For that pen, given its transformative power, seems to me to embody the very essence and mystery of *legacy*. Something happens, and someone takes note, and perhaps writes it down, and one world, one day, opens suddenly onto another. And what is passed on is not the how or the why of what happened, but a way of being itself. It is a kind of watchfulness, a capacity that deepens with age, and it invests each moment with the promise of being infused, forever, with life.

December 9, 1971, Thursday: "My sister Viola's 68th birthday. How well I remember that dusk when I saw old Dr. Hurney going into the section down the track & told papa *who rushed home & there I sat under office telegraph table cowering. No lock on freight room door. I phoned Viola to-nite singing 'Happy Birthday.' She got our card today."*

Once my grandmother moved away with my grandfather she never again lived near her own family, and the separation always saddened her. The diaries are filled with aching references to her sisters, whom she wrote twice a week for most of her life, and to her parents, who remained "momma" and "papa" long after she herself became an elderly woman. She never spoke of this feeling, however, and so we children were hardly aware of it.

One day, as I prepared to return to college, I came around to the house to say goodbye. We talked for a bit until I got up to go; I mentioned, on the way out, that I would miss the family when back at school. She seemed suddenly very interested; she remarked that I must also have missed my school friends while here at home. I agreed. So, she wanted to know, how could I reconcile these feelings, this contrary residency in two worlds at once?

I have never given the matter much thought, but together we struggle to puzzle it out as we stand in her doorway. Try as we might, there is no getting around it: if I am here, I cannot be there, and if I am there, it hardly seems possible that more than the faintest trace will be left of me here. And I am surprised, for what I have viewed as expansion of possibility, experience giddily compounded, transmutes now into something else, something tinged not with excitement but with sadness, distance, and loss, and I cannot see how this bleak awareness is ever to be surmounted. We are silent for some time.

Finally, I can reason and feel no further, and I speak.

"Well, you know, you're always missing somebody."

And at this my grandmother's face lights up, transfigured, as though she is herself surprised, as though she is silently saying: *this child understands.*

Edna Clark Nelson died on Aug. 28, 1977 at the age of 87. She would be 105 years old now if she were alive, and I imagine she will continue to age in this manner as I do, and I will continue to mark her anniversaries as they accrue, and I will miss her.

But in my mind's eye she remains forever present. It is a gray day; perhaps she is carrying a parasol (she never did call them umbrellas), perhaps she is pushing a shopping cart. As I see her, she stands, thin body tilted into the wind, defying time's edict, making her slow way to the house where her Edwin awaits.