

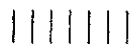
# The Patriarch

*Papa (Axel, Hulda's husband) always used to scold me  
because I could never tell you children  
about money matters.*

HULDA MAINQUIST, UNDATED LETTER

When I was not more than ten, my dad piled a big scoop of cole slaw on my forest green Melmac plate. I felt more like I was one of his cows than one of his little girls. Even though I was a meek child and I was scared, I protested, "Dad, I can't eat this much." He replied, "My father used to say, 'If you don't like what's on the table, you're not hungry.'" This was the first I had heard of my grandfather, Axel Mainquist, and I didn't like him.

Luckily, my mother could see from the other side of the dinner table I had too much cole slaw. "Evert, that's too much." Dad spooned some of my cole slaw back in the serving bowl, and I was rescued from my grandfather's influence.



In 1868, the year of the great drought in Smaland, Sweden, my grandfather, Axel Mainquist was born to Anders and Helena. Vilhelm Moberg, author of *The Immigrants* series, wrote that hardly a drop of rain fell that summer. Often the grain never even formed ears. Moberg's mother picked hazelnut buds to stretch what little flour she had for bread. The most unfortunate died from malnutrition.

The political climate was not hopeful for the poor either. People without property were not even allowed to vote, and opportunities to improve one's financial status were rare. An aristocrat could even claim a man was not qualified for political office because his father was poor. It pleased poor Swedish immigrants in the United States that several of their kind had been elected state governors, and also that others who had come with little to America became wealthy as any Swedish nobleman. This was clearly a land of opportunity for the able bodied and ambitious, like Anders and Helena.

In 1870 when my grandfather was two, his family immigrated from Sweden to farm in Stanton, Iowa. There the soil was so rich and the climate so favorable that it was claimed that you could hear the corn grow at night, but the immigrant couple never forgot the hardships of their homeland.

Hulda, Axel's future wife, described her mother-in-law, Helena as "a religious,

## THE PATRIARCH

energetic, commanding individual" and her father-in-law, Anders, as "a retiring type." My father often talked of how when the couple drove to town, Anders held the lines, and Helena held the whip. Little else is known of the couple or Axel's childhood.

When Axel was working for his parents, he hauled a load of corn to town to sell. "The roads were bad," my Uncle Allan said. When Axel got to town, no one would buy. Part way home, he halted his horses in the middle of the road, backed the wagon into the ditch, and dumped his unwanted cargo. "I suppose the horses were playing out, and he was getting mad about it," Allan mused.

Despite his temper, Axel had a mind for making money. Even with ten children to raise, he could afford a wind-up phonograph--a rare luxury in the 1910s. In the evenings at the Mainquist farm in Magnet, Nebraska, the family gathered in the dining room. Axel--and only Axel--put the records on, turned the crank and then laid on the couch to enjoy the music. Over thirty years after his death, my sisters and I would listen to the same records he did, "Yes, We Have No Bananas," "Barney Google and His Goo-Goo Googly Eyes," and "K-K-Katy." However, we did not hesitate to wind up Axel's phonograph and put on his large, thick records on the turntable ourselves.

Each of his children were granted \$1,000 to begin adult life. The sons received their gifts at age 21, and the daughters received theirs when they married. One-thousand dollars was enough money to start a small farming operation. That meant Axel and Hulda spent over \$100,000 in 1997 dollars for their nine Mainquist children who reached adulthood when the most any sons from other families usually received was a gold pocket watch on their twenty-first birthday. It was important to Axel that his children have an easier start than he did.

Part of his business management was making efficient use of the labor of his children. Every morning, he issued his sons work orders in Swedish. The youngest son swished the flies off the cows. The next son took care of the calves. The next job was helping with the cows. If a Mainquist son was lucky, he was promoted to the prime position of caring for the horses. As a boy, Roy (my father's brother) remarked, "I wonder what the old man has for us to do today."

Another one of Axel's management techniques was having his sons tear down old buildings to improve the appearance of his two Nebraska farms for more profit when he sold them. Consequently, when he sold the farm east of Magnet in 1919, he made a lot of money. Then he bought the old Ward place, another Magnet farm, for \$6,500. My father said, "I remember Dad talked about Jim Ward [the former owner] sitting downtown and boasting, 'I skinned Mainquist that time.' " With his children's labor, Axel fixed the place up. Land prices rose, and he sold the property for \$11,000.

## THE PATRIARCH

After Axel read his list of work instructions to his sons--tearing down buildings, field work, or animal care--early in the morning, Allan hitched Mike, the best horse, and then drove the buggy to the house where his father could take the lines in style. Axel then spent everyday in town doing business in at his stockyard and inspecting his butcher shop and livery stable. He came home for supper, checked the boys' work and then returned to Magnet in the evening.

This inattention to the actual work of farming as opposed to its management was clear to Roy. He recalled his father's attempts to teach him to plow. "I was just a little chap. He got the walking plow in the field right west of the cattle shed down there--fifteen acres or something. I drove head down a couple of rounds. Then he gave me the plow. I couldn't push the plow. I couldn't even turn it around the end [of the row]. I couldn't even lift it!"

Axel tried to teach Roy to milk at an early age, too. "I was a small fry," Roy said. "I couldn't hardly get my hands around the teats." Axel couldn't remember how to milk because he just took care of the hogs and did business in town. Axel got more milk on his hands than in the pail. This is the only time the Mainquist farm owner was remembered to milk a cow.

With money from selling his livery stable, he bought a Brush automobile with wooden axles and two cylinders in the early 1910s. The canopy was like a buggy with no windshield, and the engine was smaller than an oil barrel. It was not for winter travel.

As Axel drove across the countryside, people stopped their work and watched. For some people, it was the first car they had seen. They marveled at the Mainquist wealth, but a few observers looked forward to the day Mainquist would be bested.

Axel took his sons Allan and Roy along for one of the first rides. Perhaps he wanted them witness the reward of hard work and thrift.

However, the transmission ground and jerked as their father learned to shift the car in the bumpy field. The boys wondered if they were going to fall out of the car. When they looked over the side, they were thankful that at least they would fall on the soft field instead of hard dirt-packed road. Axel couldn't get the vehicle turned around until he finally hit a fence post. He swore loudly, "*Ga til Farran.*" Roy and Allan clearly understood although they did not speak the language. My grandfather swore so much in Swedish, my father could still quote him verbatim when he was an old man.

Roy remembered going to Wausa in the Brush to get his teeth filled for the first time. They got on the flat a mile or so south of Wausa. When they came off the bridge there, the car made a awful racket. The engine had fallen out. They went to a nearby farm to call into town. A man named Plank came out, put the car together again and took the Mainquists home.

## THE PATRIARCH

The same thing happened another time. Axel went up a hill and across a bridge. The car didn't start, it knocked, and a lot of parts fell out. Soon it was sold at a loss. The first cars were called foolish carriages, and perhaps their owners were called fools.

Axel drove his buggy with his best horse Mike to his stockyard weekdays, and he always wore a suit and hat, in keeping with his status. Unfortunately, he closed all his deals with a drink. My dad said quite a few of the old Swedes drank too much like his father. In fact, Swedish temperance unions were formed to combat the problem.

When Axel got drunk in town, Will, the oldest son, had to drive to Magnet to get him. One winter day Will found his father unconscious in his big sheepskin coat on the bare ground in front of his horses. It was humiliating to pick up his drunk father in public.

Once Axel passed out while driving home, and his horses ran away. Another time, the team went straight through a cattle crossing fence (a temporary fence that guided cattle across the road between pastures). Eventually Will found his father's liquor bottles and drained them on the ground. Axel immediately threw him off the farm.

When the town of Magnet voted to go dry, Axel drank in nearby McLean because it was still wet. Later, Axel made deals with a moonshiner in the machine shed on his Buffalo, Minnesota farm. The bootlegger stored his wares in the bottom of his outhouse, but Axel didn't mind.

In the morning, Axel was fairly pleasant with his children, but as the day went on, he became more critical. His children avoided him and quickly obeyed his orders.

Ironically, Axel cared so much about his children's well being that he saved a fortune, perhaps to give them an easier start in life than his. As a young father in his twenties, he had to support his rapidly growing family by farming rented land before he could buy his own operation. Axel tried what treatment for alcoholism was available, but the dicotomy of verbal abuse and generosity continued--to everyone's mystery.

Even though she was scared, Hulda sometimes argued loudly with Axel about his drinking during an era when wives were expected to suffer graciously and quietly--especially if their husbands provided luxuries like phonograph players and cars or gifts of \$1,000 to adult children. But Hulda was not a silent, serving partner to her husband's affliction. Without alcohol, she knew her family would have been happier.

Sometimes, in families with problems--such as alcoholism, infidelity, child abuse or mental illness--the parent without the problem ignores it. The difference between reality and that parent's representation of it is confusing to the children. Things don't make sense. The children wonder if their parents are impotent or they are uncaring. Home becomes a place where two plus one equals four, and loneliness and confusion reign.

However, Hulda never pretended Axel didn't drink, and consequently, her children

## THE PATRIARCH

knew two plus one always equals three. Perhaps that's one reason none of her ten children developed drinking problems. Despite the genetic influence of alcoholism, somehow all of them chose to abstain or drink very little and became happy, productive adults who got along with each other.

I believe Hulda cared about Axel, too. One reason I think so is an odd picture of the two of them I discovered in her photograph album. Their figures were carefully trimmed at the edges with no background--unlike any other pictures. Nearby I noticed a Mainquist family picture--full size with white borders--with the same figures. Since my grandmother didn't have a picture of herself with her husband alone, she laboriously created one with a pair of tiny embroidery scissors.

## Axel's Philosophy

Most of these maxims came from a list Axel dated 1922 in Shakopee, Minnesota. Axel went there for mudbaths--both for health reasons and social status.

*Don't play another man's game.*

*Don't buy whiskey just because you can get it.*

*If you can't afford to buy it, you can't afford to borrow for it.*

*Don't let the interest kill you.*

*Pen and paper is plenty, but good business is scarce.*

*Think twice before you speak, and think three times before you do anything.*

*Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it. (Mark Twain is the source of this quote.)*

*Any fool can make money, but it takes a wise man to save it.*

*Never sign paper for a stranger.*

*Never worry about things you can't help.*

## The Sweden of the First Mainquists

This excerpt is from *Smolennig Slekt* by Irving Olson, husband of Mary Mainquist Olson (my father's sister). It describes conditions in the province of Smaland, Sweden, my father's parents' birthplace. My Mainquist grandfather's family immigrated in 1870, two years after the disaster year of 1868 described by Olson.

*A wave of immigration came to Minnesota in the wake of disaster year 1868 when the specter of famine stalked the villages of Smaland. Potato and grain crops had been poor in 1867, a cold wet summer. When prices rose that fall, small farmers with grain to sell emptied their bins to pay debts, heavy after the "village shift" [land redistribution] and to help Norrlanders, who had no grain crop that year.*

*The first sign of trouble came on May 11 when a hot wind set temperatures soaring. One report says that in one hour the mercury climbed 18 degrees. The great heat had begun and would not abate until the end of August....The hot breath of drought and a blazing sun burned off dew and rain, scorched grain and grass, and turned forest mosses into tinder.*

*Fires broke out in June and blazed throughout Smaland until September. Woodland pastures and hay meadows with hay barns beside them went up in smoke as groves of spruce and pine exploded in flames. The roar of fire balls in the tree crowns sounded to distant towns like doomsday thunder.*

*Spring sown grains failed to stool and head; scanty fodder was salvaged painstakingly from short withered stalks. A light hay crop had to be mown a month early. Stony pastures failed and soon there was nothing to do but to cut down leaf trees to feed cattle and sheep.*

*Drovers [cattle dealers] began moving cattle to the marketing yards in July only to find prices slashed in half by Danish buyers. An ordinary cow in the fall in 1868 brought but half the price in the spring of a sack of stone-hard Russian flour. The few who found enough fodder to carry their cattle over the winter were well rewarded in 1869 when farmers tried to replaced breeding stock sacrificed in the summer before....*

*Road building and other projects paying for work with grain were started, however tardily, and soup kitchens were opened in towns. Only the destitute were eligible for help, and many of these would not admit desperate need.*

*....The resourcefulness of the Smalander came into play. Recipes for making famine bread out of lichens, mosses, roots and berries suited for stretching flour were circulated. The best varieties were identified and their preparation by soaking, drying and grinding were described. A grind made from the white inner bark of pine was a favorite mixed with*

## THE PATRIARCH

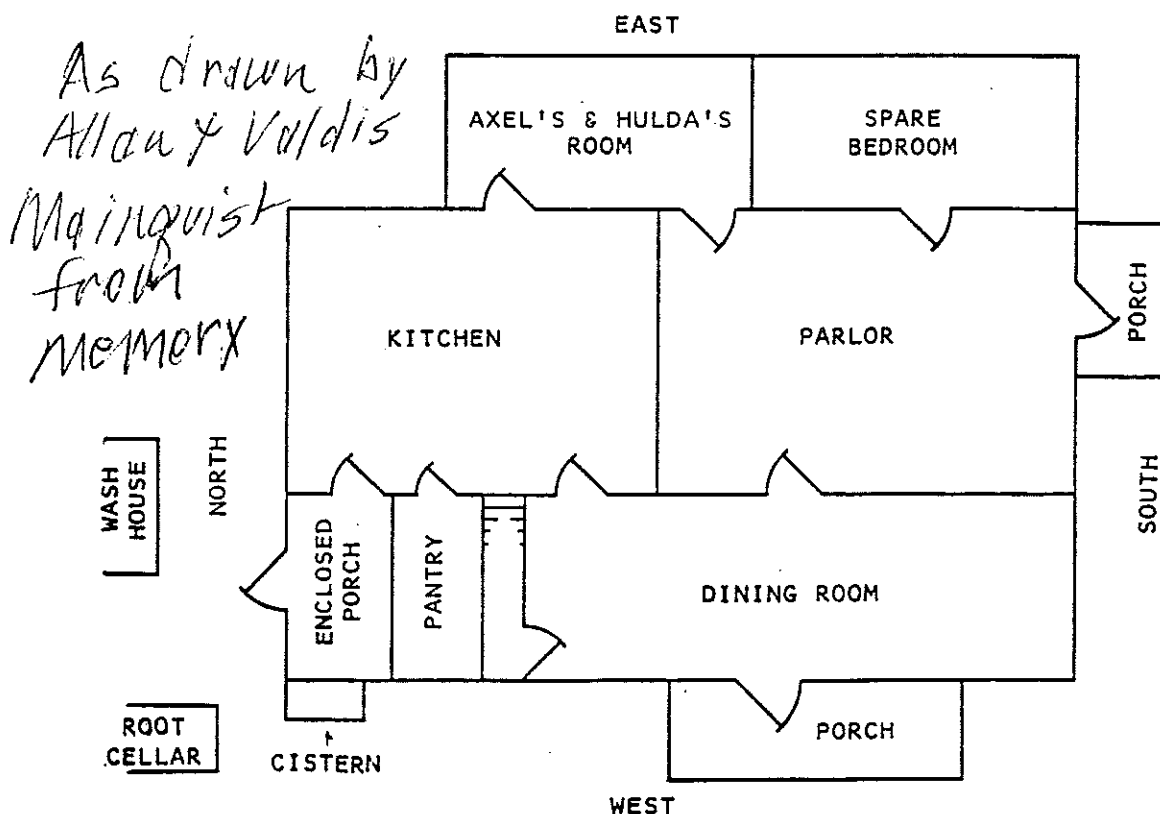
*rye, oat and potato flour....*

*The incentives were there, but the means to pay for 5000 miles by land and sea were hard to come by. The destitute had no chance, and well-to-do, no reason to go. Families with little to spare pooled their surplus and sent the one most likely to succeed and to help the rest. Some families compared the cost of fares for all with the cash value of their possessions and if prospects for having a little left over looked good, auctioned off everything but the clothes on their backs.*

*So it happened...that from some home in almost every village of Smaland a younger brother, a newly wed pair, a son and daughter or an entire family bade farewell and set up for Karlskrona, Malmo or Gothenborg. Converging at the seaports the emigrants formed a stream flowing from Sweden to the American Midwest....*



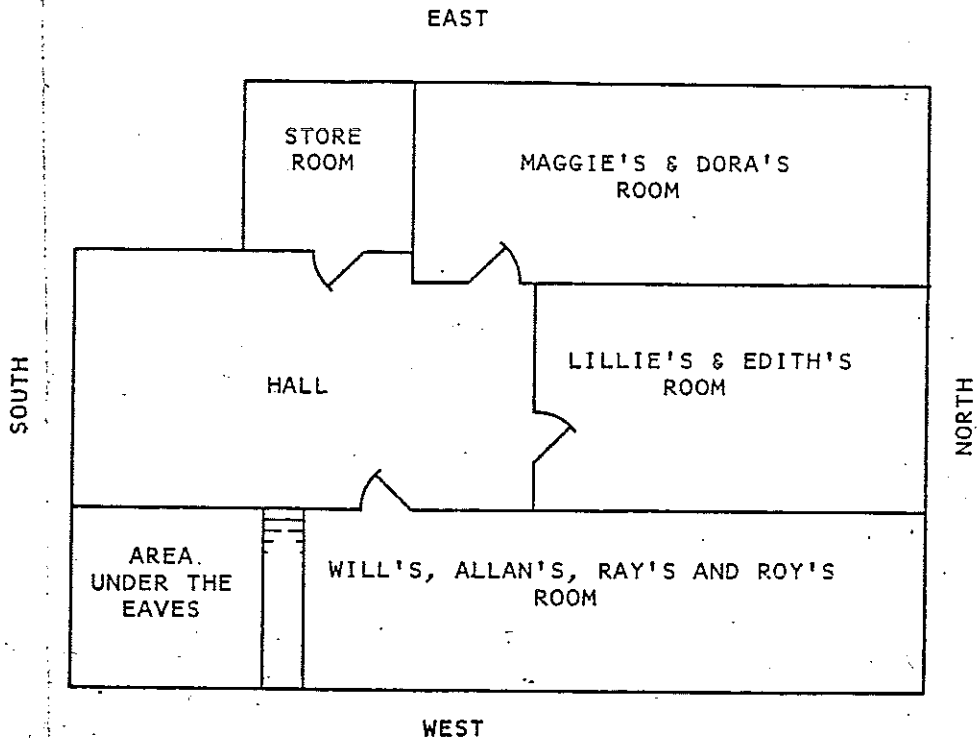
## The First Floor of The House East of Magnet



The family usually ate in the dining room at a huge table about eight by twelve feet. In the one corner of the dining room, Axel kept his chew tobacco and snuff. The parlor was used only on Christmas and for company. The cistern provided underground storage for water, and the pantry stored groceries. The root cellar stored canned goods and vegetables for long periods of time, and it was used for protection during storms as well. The women canned in the wash house in the summers to keep the kitchen cool. My father, his sisters Dora and Mary, and Allan's sons, Bruce and Vance, were born in Axel's and Hulda's bedroom.

*also Allan and Roy*

## The Second Floor of The House East of Magnet



Before World War I, Axel and Hulda stored about a dozen sacks of flour and sugar in the southeast corner of the hall. Prunes, raisins, dried apricots, blankets and quilts were kept in the storeroom. The dried fruit was ordered from Sears. My father's brother Allan (and probably the other brothers and sisters) stole dried fruit from the storeroom. My father was sleeping downstairs, and his younger sister Mary wasn't born yet.