

## Aunt Annie



Who was Aunt Annie? She was the person who made it possible for me to come to America, and in so doing shaped my life in a decisive way. This story is my very belated way of acknowledging to my family how important she was in my life, and also to document for our family history something about her life and what a remarkable person she was.

Actually She was my step-aunt since she was my father's half-sister. Her mother died when Annie was eight months old and my grandfather remarried the woman who became my grandmother; her son Axel was my father. Annie grew up on the Norrgårds farm together with her brothers August and Alfred, sister Ida, her father and her step-mother.

Her life as girl and young woman on Baggholma was, as it was for all women in those days, rich in chores and duties and short on glitzy entertainments. There was cooking and cleaning, carrying water and carrying out slop, there was feeding the animals and above all there was the twice daily chore of milking the cows which then fell to the women in the house. For modern urban people it is almost impossible to

imagine what an implacable constraint it is in premodern rural households to have cows. As my father sometimes observed, having cows is almost like being in jail.

In the wintertime the cows stayed in the barn and were fed and milked there, but in the summer the cows were grazed on a nearby island so they had to be milked there. Every morning the women of Baggholma used a rowboat to get to the island, scout around until they found the cows, then milk them, carry the milk to the boat, row back home and carry the milk back to the house. That was the routine, unless the cows had decided to swim to another island because the grass was greener over there; in that case the women had to get back in the boat and row to that island and look for them there. And then do it again in the evening, every day. The rest of the day there was work in the fields with the haying in early summer, and grain harvesting in late summer and fall, followed by digging up of potatoes and root vegetables. Once every summer the sheep, which were grazed on another island, needed to be shorn, which involved a trip to another island, chasing down the sheep to a suitable place by the water where the boys and men in the house held watch over them while the women did the shearing. Later in the fall there was the butchering of the animals for the winter meat supply with the attendant curing and smoking of the meat, and possibly accompanying the men for a couple weeks at the fishing camp to catch and clean the herrings intended for market. In short, idle time was not a problem in summer and fall. In winter the kids had the chance to attend school for four grades and be taught the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic plus some history and geography. As for all children coming from a small insignificant part of a small insignificant country like Finland, I believe geography must have been her favorite lessons, the subject that opens the window to the world and sets the imagination on fire. That is one of the rewards of being born in small insignificant places, it gives you a bigger, wider, more fantastic world for you to explore. It gives you a world without any s-hole countries, only exotic, romantic, amazing, intriguing countries. Part of the price I paid for moving to America was the shrinking of the world.

At the age of twenty Annie decided to set out to explore this big world. She spent a couple of years in Stockholm, working there learning the art of cooking. In 1927 she emigrated to America and settled in New York, where her brother Alfred already was established. In New York she found work in the kitchen of wealthy New York families and made a good name for herself within that exclusive circle, as these excerpts from her letters of reference show. Some of the families she worked for were at the very top of New York society, even of historic significance in the US, as indicated by the brief biographical sketches that I took from Wikipedia. For a young woman coming from the peasant chores of Baggholma to work in the houses of people like the owners of major New York newspapers, or partners of major investment banks must have been an exciting revelatory experience, something to tell people about. But Annie never talked about the famous people she had known in her life, except that she once mentioned she had at one time been the cook for the king of Siam. It was only when I recently was going thru her mementos I was given after her death, that I found these reference letters and realized the level of people she had associated with. I can't describe how much these letters moved me, and impressed me, thinking about how much they must have meant to Annie, how she made sure that they were always preserved. And what a quality human being the letters revealed to me, her competence, her dependability her attention to duty, her modest dignity.

Some of the letters:

Mrs E.T. Stotesbury, [Whitemarsh Hall](#): “...Annie is a first class and a real artist a real artist in catering for parties, and is honest, sober, and has a very pleasant disposition”.

Mr E.T. Stotesbury was a prominent investment banker, a partner in Philadelphia's Drexel & Co. and its New York affiliate J. P. Morgan & Co. for over fifty-five years. He was involved in the financing of many railroads. Whitemarsh Hall was one of their residences.

Mrs J.D. Wooster Lambert, 720 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y.: “...Annie Nordling is an excellent cook and is capable of preparing any size party. Her dishes are always attractively arranged, and I consider her a good manager in every respect.”

Erwing Blake Secretary of Mrs. Whitelaw Reid estate: “... Annie Nordling was employed by the late Mrs Whitelaw Reid until her decease, and after that at [Ophir Hall](#) in the service of H. M. King of Siam. Miss Nordling is an excellent cook, with a good disposition, and has shown that she is honest and sober.”

Whitelaw Reid was an American journalist who later served as editor, president and chairman of the family-owned *New York Herald Tribune*. Ophir Hall was one of their residences where Annie worked and where The King of Siam stayed during his visit to the USA in 1931. She mentioned once that she had cooked for the King of Siam, but at the time I was too preoccupied with my situation to fully appreciate what a singular item it was to have on one's resume.

Dudley Davis, 770 Park Avenue “...Annie Nordling is in every way a most excellent and reliable servant. She is clean, neat, prompt, honest, sober, willing, conscientious and efficient. She is a very excellent cook, whether plain or elaborate dishes are called for. ...I cannot recommend her too highly.”

In 1945 Annie and her friend Jane Williams got into [Annie's car](#) and proceeded to drive to San Francisco. It must have been quite an adventure for two women to drive across the country in 1945. There was no interstate highway system then with Howard Johnson restaurants along them, and probably very limited road maps with information about gas stations, hotels (motels came later) and restaurants. It must have been a true journey of exploration, driving from town to town on two-lane country roads, searching for accommodations and figuring out the best route to take. For many people this would have been an adventure to keep talking about both wide and long, but again, Annie did not spend much time talking about what she had done.

In San Francisco she proceeded to continue her career as a cook for wealthy families. When I arrived in 1954 she was working for the family of Frederick Hellman who was a senior executive at Wells Fargo, which was then owned by the Hellman family. Their home was a large house near Park Presidio with built in quarters for the domestic staff, where Annie lived before I arrived. The Hellmans also owned a ranch some 150 miles north of San Francisco where Annie traveled with the family and took care of kitchen operations there as well.

After her husband died she wrote to my parents and invited one of us kids to come and stay with her in San Francisco. I don't remember how it was that I was the one selected, but probably because I was the one studying English. Anyway, I went through the process of submitting my application for an immigrant visa to the US embassy. The waiting time for Finland in those days was about four years so I just put the paperwork in the bureau drawer and didn't think more of it. It was a possibility, but it was so far away in

the future that it wasn't a reality for my 15-year old self. When I got word from the embassy in 1954 that my visa would be issued the whole concept became a reality, and due to the fact that I had recently flunked Finnish in my matriculation exam, a very welcome reality. Now I didn't have live with the embarrassment of flunking out or trying to do the exam over, I could go to America and put my failure behind me. The last winter at home I worked on a fishing team that caught Baltic Sea herring using a purse seine under the ice. Fishing was good and from my 32<sup>nd</sup> share of the catch I had enough money to pay for my trip to America.

When I came Annie had to provide a place for me to stay, so she had rented an apartment before I arrived where she set up house keeping for herself and me; she could no longer avail herself of the free room and board where she worked but instead had to cover the expense of a separate household. That was just the beginning of the extra expense and trouble she took on for my sake. To put this in perspective, the monetary compensation she was paid, was just \$225 per month. (This is equivalent to about \$2000 per month today.) Adding the expense of an extra household to her economic burden was obviously not unexpected by her, but the additional problem of my medical problems is not something she could have anticipated. Instead of showing up ready to work and study and paying my share I was a huge extra burden on her time and energy and resources. For basically an entire year I was an outpatient at the UC Hospital in San Francisco while the urology team there was working on the correction of a congenital defect in my ureters. During this time one or both of my kidneys drained through a rubber catheter going through a hole in my side into a bag strapped to my thigh. There are a number of inconveniences with this arrangement; the main ones are infections due to walking around with an open hole into your body cavity, and the tendency of the tube to clog up due to urea which get deposited in the catheter. Some nights I would wake up in the middle of the night with the bed drenched by fever sweat so that the bed clothes had to be changed, and I had to wake Annie up for help. Or I would wake up during the night with unbearable pain in my side from the kidney bursting under the pressure when the catheter has clogged up, and I had to wake her up and ask her to take me to the emergency room. All this unplanned night-time activity, plus lots of planned hospital visits for testing and surgeries. And all the house keeping, the cooking and cleaning, and the worrying. How disheartening this experience must have been for Annie, how different from what she must have expected from bringing her nephew to stay with her in America, and how painful it must have been to be so little appreciated and acknowledged, how this kid, her brother's son so seldom showed her his appreciation or gratitude, never let her know what an enormous gift she was giving him, never told how much he owed her for her effort and care, for the energy and resources she devoted to him. I can't bear to think about how disheartening all this must have been for my aunt, how far from the positive hopeful time she must have imagined for my coming to America. But, in spite of my passivity and lack of appreciation for the enormous sacrifice she was making for my sake she took care of all my needs and problems without complaint.

She owned a house in the Sunset district of San Francisco, which she and her husband Olav had purchased, but which she had rented out after he died. The tenants moved out shortly after I arrived and she didn't get any new ones so she sold it a few months later. While the house was empty she put on a birthday party there for my twentieth and invited all her friends and relatives to come. This was the first birthday party I had ever been given. Of course, being treated to my first birthday party was only one of the many new eating experiences that Annie introduced me to, many of which I did not fully appreciate or come to enjoy until many years later.

After she stopped working and left her employer housing she rented the second floor of her friend Jane's house at [201 Stillings Ave](#) in San Francisco, where she remained until her death in 1979.

In 1932 Annie and Uncle Gus took a trip back to the old homestead for a visit. I remember one story that was told in our home from that visit. To show off her cooking talent she decided to cook a special meal for the family. Knowing that they never ate chicken at the Nordlings, even though they kept chickens for the eggs, she decided to cook a meal of chicken to give everybody a totally novel treat. So, she proceeded to go out in the yard and kill a chicken and prepared it in the tastiest way she could. After the meal she asked my father if he knew what he had eaten and he said no, but it sure was good. So she said "you just ate the rooster". The story does not reveal what reaction my dad had to this information. But chicken did not get added to the Nordling menu at least for as long as I ate my meals there.

Aunt Annie got married late in life to a Swedish man named Olav Pierson, who worked as a waiter in an upscale San Francisco restaurant called Fleur de Lis. He died in 1950 so I never had a chance to meet him. My aunt often talked about what a refined and meticulous man he was, a man with cultured habits who always dressed impeccably and knew the proper etiquette for each occasion. I got the feeling that she hinted at that I could have learned a lot from this man.

There was a small mysterious shop across the street from our apartment that piqued Annie's curiosity, so she went in there to find out what it was all about. It turned out to be the hobby shop of a man named Nelson Bohall, a 30-year old bachelor who was an engineer working for the phone company, PT&T, and lived with his parents, so he could afford to spend the rent money on his hobby. His hobby was to design and build various kinds of electronic equipment, like testers, amplifiers, speakers, and the like. His shop was equipped with professional tools, both mechanical, including a drill press and a lathe, and electronic, including oscilloscopes, volt and amp meters, and counters. He also had an extensive collection of classical records that he played on his music system with a professional turn table and amplifiers and speakers of his own design and construction. Annie told him about her nephew who had a lot of time on his hands and asked if he could come and spend time at his shop some time to learn about the fascinating stuff he was doing. Nelson graciously agreed to have me come and spend time with him and this became one of the influential experiences of my life. Nelson was one of the smartest guys I have ever known, and in addition the most accomplished electronics craftsman I have ever worked with. Most importantly, he was a great teacher, who was able to transfer his fascination with electronics to me and in the process teach me many of the fundamental concepts that had up to that time been a mystery to me. The end result was that my ambition for engineering became redirected from mechanical to electrical, which of course made a decisive difference. I got to be in on the birth of the whole technology revolution, vacuum tubes to transistors to integrated circuits, from computers to micro- processors to software, from modems to fax machines to cell phones. I got to do coding before coding became cool. To sum it up, it is impossible to overstate the magnitude of the gift that my aunt gave me in inviting me to come to America and the influence she had on my life, once I was here; the fact that she brought Nelson into my life, is virtually as big a thing in my life as bringing me here. My greatest regret now is that I never expressed this and acknowledged my enormous debt to Annie or to Nelson or let them know what an immeasurable difference they made in my life.

Whitemarsh Hall



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Ophir Hall



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201 Stillings Avenue

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Annie in Florida



Going back home for a visit in 1932



Annie in her car

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