

Autobiography of Nels A. Nelson
16 Nov 1874 – 28 Oct 1939
son of Elizabeth and Mathias Nelson

I was born 21 miles from Namsos, Norway, away back in the seventies (1870's).

I remember well the old farm called "Aaneng", situated on the beautiful rocky shore of the Namsen Fjord.

Aaneng was a so called prosperous farm in those days, altho' we all virtually earned our living by the "sweat of our brows.

Fishing was the chief industry, and I was the eldest of four children, and also the only one of any assistance to my father, it was a lot to get up about 3 each morning and row the boat while my father gathered in the herring nets.

Apparently these nets had to be taken up before daylight to keep the big fish from eating the trapped herring.

One summer I hired out to a dairy farm hearing cows and sheep. The "salary* was 10 Krone for the season, which is approximately \$2.60. I also received a pair of canvas pants and a pair of pigskin moccasins. As the aforesaid money was the first I ever earned I thought it was some salary for a boy of eleven years old.

The resources of Aaneng made it self-supporting, providing all hands worked, of course. The only other alternative was to starve. We had three or four cows, four pigs, a dozen sheep and a few goats (the latter to warn the sheep of the approach of bears or wolves). This supplied meat, milk, butter, cheese, wool, lard, tallow and leather. The hides were taken to the tannery once a year and brought back tanned; then the shoemaker was sent for to make up the yearly family requirements of footwear. We each had one pair made for us, but no "flapper" styles, mind you - they wore made to wear, not for looks. The community shoemaker would stay until the job was finished and was usually paid off with the surplus leather, which he could use on the next farm, where they were less fortunate than we were, or perhaps had a larger family.

When butchering an animal not much was wasted. We made blood sausage, etc., and while it is doubtful if we saved as much by-products as a modern packing house, we certainly made good use of everything we could. We even made table spoons from cow's horns.

Clothing was provided in the same way. My mother would shear the sheep, card and spin the wool and weave the cloth; the only outside expense was that we had to take the cloth to a woollen mill to have it shrunk. I participated in the indoor sport of hand carding the wool, nor will I ever forget the first pair of socks I knit. This was not my duty, but I just took it up as a side line to show that I could do it. At that time my sister, who was 2 years younger than I was, was being taught her knitting. The weaving loom was homemade, the uprights being 6x6 inch timbers, as I remember it took up about 8 x 8 ft of floor space. This would not be considered an attractive piece of furniture in a modern day living room. In most cases my mother made all the clothing for the family, but I remember one time the community tailor on his annual trip stepped off at Aaneng and I got a suit of tailor made clothes that were, oh wonder of wonders, pressed, because the tailor carried a flatiron with him. I don't know the reason for this extravagance, unless my father felt flush. He had probably sold an extra barrel of herring that year, which would have brought him in five krone (\$1.30). We was rather extravagant anyway, for he ran a three-quarter inch water line from a spring into the barn so that mother would not have to carry water for the animals during the long winter. This was considered a wonderful improvement and was the talk of the whole community, as it was the only installation of its kind in Vemundvic Sogn (municipality/county). You see, it was mother's job to milk and my job to feed all the animals.

Candles were made by dipping wicking in liquid tallow repeatedly until the proper thickness was attained. This was part of my winter "chores", altho" I can't say it was very interesting to "grow" candles.

We prepared and smoke cured our year's supply of meat. Also some of the herring was smoked, but all other fish was caught as needed. For blankets for our beds we used sheep skins and I'm here to tell the world they were nice and warm.

The ground in that country having been tilled for centuries it naturally needed fertilizer, and this limited the area to be planted. However, sufficient rye, barley, potatoes, turnips, carrots and onions were produced for home consumption. During the planting and harvesting season the women were "allowed" to help do the work, as no farm implements aside from the hoe, rake and scythe were used. Threshing grain was done by the old flail method, and from year to year I was supplied with the proper size of flail; also scythe. The grain was taken to the old fashioned mill stone flour mill and put thru' on shares - as there was our years' supply of flour and vegetables. There only remained for us to buy sugar, salt, coffee, tea and a few incidentals. The only fruit in that cold country was the Irish Potato. With an abundance of milk, cheese, smoked meats, sausages, vegetables, barley bread and all kinds of fish, what more did we want? This wholesome food is what made the sturdy Norwegian race.

My winter sports were skiing and tobogganing, and my summer sports were picking rock from the fields, taking the animals out to grass in the morning and bringing them back at night; supplying fresh fish for the table, and picking wild raspberries and strawberries.

The Lutheran religion was so strict that if I did not have sufficient wood in for Sunday I had to go to bed because it was a sin to carry wood on Sunday. There was nothing doing on Sunday except feed the animals.

In addition to all of the above activities I went to school. My sister and I packed a box of food for the week, took the boat and rowed to the community school, which was about two miles up the Fjord. We did this for two seasons.

The lure of America brought father to Wyoming, where he started work. After about a years' time he sent for us. I was then about twelve years old. Now landing in New York and the trip to Laramie, Wyoming without any knowledge of the English language, was not an easy task for a woman with four children. I remember one of my brothers got lost in New York and I found him again, but of course New York City was not as large then as now.

Shortly after arriving at Laramie my father sent me out to Mr. Davies' ranch to work for my board in order to learn English, and let me tell you that the English language is not the easiest one to learn! In about three month's time a message

came that my father was dead, so I went home, I then got a job on another ranch at \$10.00 a month, and in about six months my mother died.

This left me the head of a family of four children at the age of thirteen, without a relative on this side of the Atlantic, and not a very good knowledge of the English language. I continued ranch work for about three years, as ranch hand and cow puncher, but this class of work was not attractive to me. These days were not too rosy, as between getting some schooling, learning English, and scrambling for "beans". I did not have much time for recreation. I can't say that I missed any meals, but I postponed some at times.

I then got a job in a railroad shop at 16 1/4 per hour. I was "batching" and keeping my brother Ed in school, so I could not take an apprentice job (less than .16 rate) because I would have been short of cash while learning a trade. Due to slack business on the Union Pacific during that period not many promotions were made, so I went southward. I landed in Jerome, Arizona, one of the worst rough-and-tumble mining camps in the southwest. Cow punching was tame to this life - gambling, liquor and all that goes with it, was in full swing. The free and easy do as you please life was rather fascinating, as "safety first" was not then heard of and many miners were killed.

I worked in the foundry and smelter of this Copper Mine (which was one of the largest in the world) for \$2.50 per twelve hour day. The foundry and main office were built on the slag dump over the underground working. One day the office and part of the foundry disappeared into a cave in the 175 ft. level. The chemist, chief engineer and a laborer went down with the works and were killed; I went down part way, but did some fast foot work and am still on top - that was the end of my first lesson in mining.

I then picked up a partner, bought a "Rocky Mountain Canary" (burro) loaded him up and started out overland traveling "by hand" looking at the north end of the burro going south. Globe, Arizona, was our destination. We saw the ancient Montezuma Castle and well on top of the Mogollon Mountain, then we went over the rim and down the Tonto, feasting our eyes upon the wonderful country where Zane Gray has laid the scene of a good many of his books. We made camp for several weeks at the site where the Roosevelt Dam now stands. It was very hot in this valley and my first realization of what I had heard before came then, viz: that

everything in Arizona either sticks or stings - that is, all bugs wear a stinger and all the trees wear thorns. Among the most poisonous creatures to be found there are the rattle snake, scorpions, tarantula, gila monster, centipede, child of the earth and hydrophobia skunk, so sleeping on the ground is not always safe. When in a district infected by the little hydrophobia skunk, experienced campers build their beds up in the trees to be safe. If there are no trees you stand guard while your partner sleeps; if you are alone it's just too bad.

I landed in Globe, Ariz., in October just before the railroad was built in there. Globe, like all other eastern mining towns, was wide open and a little rough in spots. I went right to work in the Old Dominion Copper Mine, where I stayed for eleven years, starting in as a mucker and wound up as a foreman. I gained a lot of experiences in all departments; I also took up a correspondence course in mining.

After eleven years I resigned and took charge of the Arizona Michigan Mining Company in the Globe district, but no ore was found so that was that.

However, I immediately accepted a position as Superintendent of the National Mines and Smelters Co., in Magistral Durango, Mexico. The mine was sixty miles from the nearest railroad on the Farral line. This was during the Mexican Revolutionary War, and I must say I had some thrilling experiences with the bandit followers of Caranza, Poncho Villa, Orozco, and many other so called generals. No law or order prevailed and everyone was in danger of their lives. As many as 2000 bandits would come in the little village where we were and rob the stores. The so-called captains would walk into the Company mess house and demand dinner, but would not pay.

It began to get serious when the railroad was cut and the American Consul was ordered to leave Mexico, but we stayed on and operated the mine under adverse conditions and with no assurance that we would wake up alive the next morning. It was getting hotter and hotter; in fact, they made it so hot our two neighboring mining companies had to pull up stakes and leave. I saw the end coming so I called it "deep enough" and crossed the border, where the atmosphere was much cleaner. Shortly after my departure, Mr. Smith, who had been left in charge, was hung and the power house was blown up by the rebels. It sure was a great experience!

In my sojourn in Mexico I acquired a working knowledge of the Spanish language, which is much easier to learn than English. I liked the country and the people if only they would get settled down.

I then went to work as Mine Foreman at the Black Warrior Mine, Arizona, and stayed there for about a year, but the lure of Mexico took me back to Cananea, Sonora, Mexico. There were big opportunities at that time in Cananea and I took a job as shift boss, but the revolution was still going on with the result that the company was obliged to close down and get out on two different occasions.

I will not forget my last trip over the border. Having charge of a large gang of leasors they concocted a charge against me of deducting too much moisture from their ore, so they had me up in Court. As I was my own lawyer it was necessary for me to use all the diplomacy I could with my Spanish vocabulary, which was rather limited when it came to law. The gang was waiting for me armed with dynamite, so I agreed to meet them at my office at 4:00 p.m. to settle all differences. Meanwhile I had received word to go over to the General Manager's house, which I did, and at 4:00 p.m. we were in Naco, Arizona, USA never again.

On July, 1917, I started up the Arizona Asbestos Association. This was the most fascinating experience of all, to go out in the wilderness, forty miles from Globe the way the crow flies, pitch my tent and start up an asbestos mine with two miners. After cooking our breakfast and putting a pot of frijoles (beans) on the camp fire for lunch, the miners started to work - Rick on tunnel 1 and Harry on 2. Those two localities had the best surface showings and Nos. 1 and 2 turned out a great deal of crude asbestos. The next winter we lived in tents, took our turns at cooking, and had plenty of canned food, but no fresh meat. Canned corned beef was prepared by all known recipes, but at the end of eleven months it did not look attractive. The burro train would come in once a month with mail, provisions and mining supplies, and that was quite an event. No matter how well we planned out our necessities to operate a mine and provide food for the men, we found that we invariably ran short of something we needed, even if it was only pepper.

More men were taken on and more tents went up as time went on; one of the miners brought his wife out so I was relieved of cooking. This women made the

trip out there on horseback, forty miles in one day, but she arrived happy and stayed for about a year.

More tunnels were started and the outcrop, all having asbestos of a good grade, so the prospect began to look like a mine. A boarding house was built; all the lumber and corrugated iron in seven foot lengths was packed from Globe on burros. Nine rails and cars were also transported over a very rocky trail on these faithful little animals, commonly known in the West as “mountain canaries” from their deep, vibrating, “sweet” voice. A Mexican is an expert burro packer; he can throw the diamond hitch on any kind of load, whether it’s bag of asbestos, a load of furniture or a mine car and it will stay put. At the end of the days' journey these burros are turned loose to rustle their own feed and in the dry season (which is most of the time) there is very little feed, so they come around the camp and eat the wrappers of ham and bacon and the labels of fruit cans for dessert. It is said the Mexican burro puncher puts green goggles on his flock and leads them to a pile of discarded sawdust (excelsior) for a treat of hay - a Mexican can get by with murder!

A road was built to the old government sawmill, lumber was hauled in, houses built, a compressor and rock drills were installed, and things began to hum. The office and compressor buildings were built of beautiful sandstone. The men employed were whites, Apache Indians and Mexican. The latter are more adapted to that class of mining. Fruit trees of all varieties adapted to the climate were planted; also fresh vegetables were raised from a small garden spot.

In about 1916 John-Manville acquired the mine and I went with it. Now, after all these years, I woke up to find myself alone, so I hurriedly took on a “trailer”. This proved to be an overload from the start and the brakes began to drag, so after three long years the “trailer” was dropped. That was a bad investment, also a dangerous one, and set me back a peg, but I came out alive. My Mexico revolutionary experience was a tame affair to my experience with a “trailer”!

Resources:

<http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc67066/m1/35/sizes/>