

## Olaus Jorgenson's Waltz

Among the stack of sheet music, everyone took notice of that one piece of paper. It wasn't because of the music notated on the staff, but because at the bottom of the page Elmo Wick had written that his grandmothers brother played the guitar with his feet while at the same time playing the fiddle!

*I Learned This Tune From Grandmother's brother Olaus  
who played The guitar, WITH his feet as he played The  
Fiddle at the same time He also repaired and made  
Fiddles,*

Early in my research into the music collection of Elmo Wick I happened to mention that story to a family history researcher... who replied that she knew exactly who I was talking about. Before long I had a telephone number of one of the ancestors of Olaus Jorgenson. Gordon Jorgenson was the grandson of Olaus Jorgenson. Gordon grew up in Sunburg, Minnesota and was a favorite of his grandfather.

The first thing you need to know about Sunburg is that every family in town was of Norwegian descent, except for Mr. Dahlquist, he was from Sweden and he was the town undertaker. That's one reason why everyone would say that the Swedes will always get you in the end. Everyone in Sunburg spoke Norwegian even Gordon spoke nothing but Norwegian until he started elementary school at five years of age. Even until the 1950s the sermons in the church were all in Norwegian and then they only changed it so that two sermons a month would be in English and the rest in Norwegian.

Olaus Jorgenson was born in Minnesota in 1869, the youngest son of Norwegian immigrants Andreas and Marit Jorgenson who came to Sunburg in the mid-1860s. He married Ida Nelson (another Norwegian-American) in 1895 and they raised five children: Adeline, Minnie, Andrew, Noel and Orvil.



Ida and Olaus 1895 Courtesy of Gordon Jorgenson

Ida died in 1936, and Olaus never re-married. He lived alone in the old farmhouse and only used two rooms the rest of the house he abandoned.

## Olaus Jorgenson's Waltz

Olaus did indeed play guitar with his feet while he fiddled. Olaus was a well-known carpenter in the Sunburg area. During the summers, he built houses and during the winter he made furniture, but he had also invented a mechanism to play guitar with his feet. With his left foot, he could select a chord and with his right he would push a spring-loaded pedal which would strum the strings.

Gordon Jorgenson was born in 1933, the eldest son of Orvil Jorgenson. Orvil became an electrician and hoped to get work through the rural electrification program from the Roosevelt administration, but electricity came slowly to Sunburg, and Gordons dad had to find work in other places to make ends meet. Gordon spent most of his youth in downtown Sunburg.

The Jorgenson homestead where his grandfather Olaus lived was an easy walk, and many times when he was a young lad of six or seven Gordon would walk to the old farmhouse. Four out of five times that Gordon arrived to visit, his grandfather was pre-occupied playing his fiddle. Gordon found that he could come quietly through the old (unused) kitchen door and sit behind his grandfather while he practiced in the old living room which was now where Olaus lived. This was probably in the late 1930's or early 1940's probably around the time that Elmo Wick learned Olaus's Waltz. Gordon did not know Elmo by name although both were associating with Olaus at the same time.

## Olaus Jorgenson's Waltz



Olaus Jorgenson (courtesy of Gordon Jorgenson)

In the late 1940s, after the Second World War, the rural electrification project went through and Gordon's dad had work enough that Gordon could help his dad during the summers. Gordon and his father could run wires to two farmhouses per day. Olaus refused to get his homestead electrified because he had heard that electricity was dangerous.

Gordon graduated high school in 1950 and went to college at St Olaf in Northfield, Minnesota. While he was off at college the first roads were paved in Sunburg (previously all roads were dirt or gravel), and changes began to arrive in the remote little community. Gordon came back from college during the summer of 1952 with a camera which he used to photograph his grandfather and his guitar strumming invention.

Olaus Jorgenson's Waltz



Courtesy of Gordon Jorgenson



Courtesy of Gordon Jorgenson

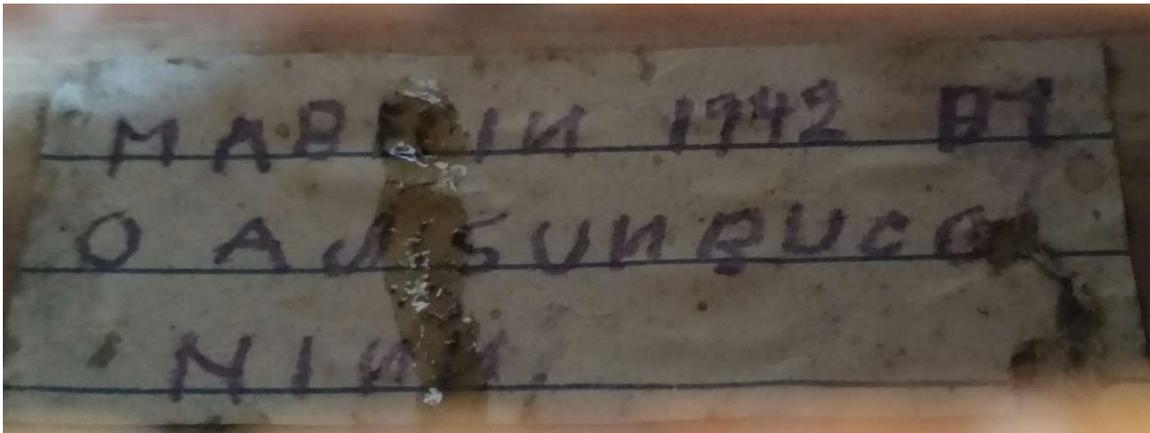
Olaus had also made several fiddles, of which Gordon owns one. Another is owned by Gordon's sister in St Louis, Missouri.

## Olaus Jorgenson's Waltz



Olaus Jorgenson's homemade fiddle

Gordon owns the fiddle (and bow) that his grandfather both made in 1942 and played. Olaus put his own label on the inside of the instrument which you can see below.



Made in 1942 by O.A.J Sunburg Minn

Olaus's spelling was never very good. Gordon said his grandfather told him that he had only gone to school as far as the third grade, which was common for farm boys during those days. He had no idea that his grandfather had composed any music.

In his later years Olaus enjoyed sitting on his back step and watching the deer. Olaus watched the deer enough to recognize them all and give them names. He also would feed chipmunks that would stand on his shoulder to take peanuts from his fingers. Olaus died in 1959 at age 89. His house is still in use on the south end of Sunburg.

Olaus Jorgenson's Waltz



The Olaus Jorgenson home as it appears today.