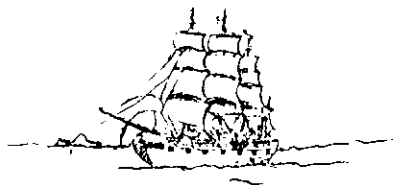


MY GRANDPARENTS

Frank and Johanna Isokääntä Wilson



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HONORABLE MENTION
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DOROTHY M. FINE

1747 Ledgewood Drive
San Jose, CA 95124
(408) 264-1984

Preface

Within the covers of books and manuscripts in libraries and historical archives one readily finds the life stories of the distinguished, the rich, and the famous citizens of the communities in which they lived. Seldom does one find the life stories of that vast majority of ordinary citizens living in those same communities. They were ordinary people who went quietly about the business of daily living. They were the ordinary people who worked very hard to provide for their young families. They taught their children to be responsible citizens. Somehow, fame and fortune escaped them.

It is time, I think, to take a glimpse into the lives of two such "ordinary" people who came to San José as immigrants from Finland. They met, married, raise their family, and lived out their lives in San José, California.

This story is in celebration of my paternal grandparents -- Frank and Johanna Isokääntä Wilson.

Dorothy M. Fine

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MY GRANDPARENTS

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My many memories of my paternal grandparents span a period of time of over forty years.

My grandfather, Frank Wilson, was born 12 May 1852 in Finland, a Grand Duchy of Russia. 1852 is the year I have been told that he was born, and this seems to be born out on records, but to-date no official record of his birth has been found. He had light brown hair and blue eyes. I always thought of my grandfather as a very tall, very large man, but that was from the perspective of a small child. Imagine my surprise to find on the Great Register of Voters for Santa Clara County for 1892 that he was only 5' 6" tall.

He emigrated to the United States in 1875 and probably spent several years, possibly, in Minnesota before coming to San José, California. Unfortunately, my grandfather's Finnish identity has been lost because he changed his name when he came to America. And, neither he nor my grandmother ever revealed his Finnish name to anyone, not even their children.

In 1879, on the 14th of May, he signed a Declaration of Intent to become a United States citizen. On November 25th, 1881, having been in the United States five or more years he was granted his citizenship in the Superior Court of Santa Clara County by Judge David Belden.

On the 1880 United States census he is found living with the Bernard S. Fox family at 305 White Road. This was probably the location of the well-known Santa Clara Valley Nursery and Botanical Gardens of that time which was owned by the Fox family. In addition to the Fox family, also living at this address were one Chinese servant, one nurseryman, three farm hands, one white and eleven Chinese coolie laborers. My grandfather was listed as a farm hand. Grandpa often told of how, as a young man, he helped plant the sycamore trees that once lined both sides of the old Oakland Road in San José. This must have been while he was employed at the Fox Nursery.

My paternal grandmother, Johanna Fredrika Michelsdotter Isokääntä was born in Kalajoki, Oulu County, Finland on August 7, 1863. Her parents were Mikkel and Fredrika Talus Isokääntä. In 1879 she left Kalajoki and moved to the town of Ylivieska to work as a housekeeper or maid in order to earn enough money for her passage to America. She was 18 years old in August of 1881 when she sailed from Finland to come to San José, California. Her purpose in coming was to, and she did marry Charles E. Johnson, obviously not his Finnish name, to whom she had been pledged in marriage by her father. She and Charles were married October 22, 1881 at Trinity Episcopal Church in San José. Ten months later Charles Johnson was dead. On August 18, 1882 he died of pneumonia. He is buried at Oak Hill Cemetery in San José in a cemetery plot for which my grandmother paid \$11.25.

Information from my cousin, Elizabeth Wilson Bissett, relates that her father, Fred Wilson, told her that Johanna went

to work as a maid or waiting on tables and it was then that she met Frank Wilson. Uncle Fred further related the following story: Johanna had a natural rosy coloring in her cheeks and when Frank Wilson first saw her, he thought it shameful that a Finnish girl would do anything like putting rouge on her cheeks. When he found out that the rosy color of her cheeks was her natural coloring he became very interested in "keeping company" with her and it wasn't long before they were married.

A very romantic tale, BUT Frank Wilson knew Charles and Johanna Johnson -- he was a witness at their marriage!!

Five months after the death of her husband, Johanna Johnson married Frank Wilson on January 16, 1883 at Trinity Episcopal Church. A copy of their marriage license shows that Johanna gave her age as 22 when she was, in fact, still 19. Frank lopped off a few years and gave his age as 27, when he was actually 30.

Six and a half months later John Henry was born on the 29th of July 1883. John Henry is listed as the first-born child in the family Bible. John Henry's siblings were led to believe that he was adopted. In a family group picture taken on the occasion of Grandpa's birthday in 1913, John Henry appears in the picture. He is the "spitting image" of Grandpa! Was John Henry adopted, or was he "an early first-born"? We'll never know!

On April 1, 1885, a daughter, Amanda Evelyn was born, then in 1887 Francis Frederick was born and in 1888 Otto Alexander. The family was living at 57 So. Fourth Street. In 1890 they were living at 355 Park Avenue and on December 8, of that year Edward Leland, my father was born. The family moved again, this

time to 225 Locust Street where a second daughter, Vesta Josephine joined the family in 1893. Elmer Thomas was born in 1901 at 132 Reed Street. Vesta Josephine and Elmer Thomas died in January of 1902 within 15 days of each other of diptheria. The fifth son and seventh child, Amos Theodore, was born in 1904 at 741 Delmas Avenue where Frank and Johanna now owned their own home.

One thing I always knew about my grandfather was that he was a carpenter -- I thought. In 1982, while researching old San José City Directories at the San José Historical Museum, that all changed. Imagine my surprise to find that he was a beer wagon driver, he was a bartender in a saloon, and it is rumored that he once owned a saloon! I noted on pg. 403 of Clyde Arbuckle's HISTORY OF SAN JOSÉ, mention of this item printed in a small four page newspaper called the City Item.

"On January 18, 1884...."that San José had 2,200 voters and 108 saloons....three fourths of those voters patronized saloons which meant the town had one saloon for every fifteen voters."

In that same year, 1884, Grandpa worked as a bartender at the Horner and Kuntz saloon at 135 Santa Clara Street, San José, California.

However, according to my Uncle Fred, there came the day when Grandma "kicked over the traces" --- enough was enough. She demanded that husband Frank get a job that was not involved with the liquor business. That little incident must have taken place about 1893 when Frank was listed in the City Directory as being employed as a driver for the Garden City Brewery. The next year he was listed as a carpenter, and was so listed ever after.

I think Grandma must have had a few other words with Grandpa, because in 1901, after moving from rented house to rented house, "Carpenter" Frank Wilson bought land -- Lots 5 and 6 in the Leach and McIlvain addition as per Map of same and Recorded in Book D Pg 83 of Records of Santa Clara County. These lots were on Delmas Avenue in the Gardner District. The house was built on Lot 5. The Gardner District was not annexed to San Jose until March 8, 1911.

An article in the San José Mercury of November 16, 1913, pg. 14 discusses the installation of curbs and gutters and paving of the streets in the area under the aegis of the City of San José since the annexation. And, to quote, "During the past year the property owners have connected their premises to the sewers. There is not one street in the Fifth ward unsewered." At last "indoor plumbing" had come to 741 Delmas Avenue!

Frank Wilson borrowed money, he bought lumber. He built a house. Total cost \$950, which was paid back in yearly payments of \$150 plus six percent interest.

This was the house that continued to be the family home up until the death of my grandmother. It still stands today.

THE HOUSE GRANDPA BUILT FOR GRANDMA

Grandma must have been proud of the house Grandpa built for her. It was a typical Queen Ann style as were many of the turn of the century homes once seen in neighborhoods around San José before they fell to the bulldozer in the name of progress.

A picture of the house taken about 1914 reveals the white house with steep pitched shingle roof. It had a white picket fence across the front and small palm trees on either side of the walkway leading to the front door.

The house had a parlor, dining room, kitchen, three bedrooms, bath, large back porch and a full basement. The floor level of the house was eight or nine steps above the ground level.

The front parlor was not a large room and had a three-sided bay window that looked out to the street. There were always lace curtains at the windows. Arranged around the room were Victorian cottage chairs with cane seats and one rocking chair. In the center of the room was the marble top Victorian parlor table upon which rested the thick family Bible, printed in Finnish. The front bedroom opened off of the parlor.

The parlor was rarely used except for special occasions. I remember that it was then that we children could look at the pictures through the stereoscope which was also placed on the parlor table. What magic! We could put the pictures in the holder on one end of this viewer, look through the lenses at the other end and beautiful three-dimensional scenes would appear before our eyes.

The dining room was a larger room, but when I was growing up, it too, like the parlor was used only on special occasions when the family would gather together for dinner around the large oval table. I suspect it was used every day when all of the children in the family were growing up.

There were windows on the outside wall, these too, had lace curtains. On the opposite wall was a door leading to the middle bedroom. The wall nearest the kitchen had built-in cupboards forming a sideboard. The cupboards below had wooden doors. The cupboards above were separated in the middle with a shelf which held the Victorian clock. These upper cupboards had glass doors which were curtained on the inside. My curiosity was aroused when I was a child, I wondered what was behind those closed doors that never seemed to be open when I was around. It wasn't until I had my own home that the secret was revealed. Sometimes on my visits to grandma, she would lead me to the dining room, open the cupboard doors and there would be pieces of glassware and knick-knacks she had treasured for years. I have a number of her treasures which she gave to me one by one on my visits to her.

Except for the wall with the cupboards, the walls had wainscoting with green wallpaper above. Against the green wallpaper pictures in their ornate gilt frames were hung. Against the wall closest to the living room was a large sofa with wood arms upholstered in a green cut velour and there was a matching chair in one corner of the room by the windows.

The third bedroom opened off of the kitchen and between it

and the middle bedroom was the bath. It was a small room with a washbasin and an enormous bathtub. The bathtub was large enough to bathe four small boys at one time!

The kitchen was a large room with a pantry opening off one wall and the ceiling to floor cupboard for storage of dishes and pots and pans on the opposite wall was next to the big wood stove. In front of the lace curtained window stood the round table and next to it was the sink and small drain boards.

I discovered a very strange thing about the kitchen sink in grandma's house when I was old enough to stand on tip-toe and reach the water faucets -- the hot water came out of the faucet on the right and the cold water came out of the faucet on the left. That was not the way it was in our house! I have since wondered if that plumbing had been installed by son, John Henry, when he was learning his trade of plumbing!

Family and neighbors never rang the front door bell to enter the house through the front door on a visit to grandma and grandpa. Everyone went around the back through the screen door and up the stairs to the large back porch. At the top of the stairs was a closet which contained the old fashioned toilet with water tank up near the ceiling and a pull chain for flushing...that was a fascinating attraction to my children necessitating an unusual number of trips to the bathroom when we visited grandma!

There were two wash trays, an ice box (later replaced with a refrigerator), a day bed, a sewing machine, a rocking chair and an ironing board on the porch. With the advent of electricity and the electric iron to the house, the iron would be plugged

into the light socket that dangled down from the ceiling.

In addition to the house, there was on the property a hen-house and chicken yard. There were fruit trees, and several walnut trees, and plenty of room for a vegetable garden.

Grandpa was a lover of fine horses and often had several so there was a large barn on the property for the horses, wagon and buggy. In later years it was torn down and replaced with a garage although my grandparents never owned an automobile.

Then one day, in his later years, grandpa had a fall while working, possibly a slight stroke necessitating his retirement from active employment.

He would spend his days sitting in the large chair by the dining room window. Here he would read the daily newspaper and smoke his cigars. The standard birthday and Christmas gift for grandpa was a box of his favorite cigars. From the window he would watch the neighbors walking by on the street, or getting on and off the little yellow Birney trolley cars that bounced up and down as they ran along Delmas Avenue in front of the house. He could always tell you just when the next trolley was due to pass by and whether it was late or on time. And, he always enjoyed visits from family and friends.

In his lifetime grandpa had seen:

- . The horse and wagon replaced by the automobile.
- . Dusty streets in summer, muddy streets in winter replaced by pavement.
- . The horsecar and trolley replaced by buses.

- . The rise and fall of the "famous Electric Tower at Market and Santa Clara Street.
- . The damage and repair from the 1906 earthquake.
- . The rise of new civic and commercial buildings, and the expansion of the residential areas of San José.

He had been an immigrant to America, an ordinary man with an ordinary family, but in his trade as a carpenter he had his hand in the building of San José.

He died on Tuesday, September 29, 1942 when he was 90 years 4 months and 17 days old. He is buried in the plot at Oak Hill Cemetery in San José which was purchased by Johanna back in 1882.

MY LITTLE FINNISH GRANDMOTHER

My little Finnish Grandmother stood less than five feet tall, even I grew to be taller than she when I was still very young. She wore glasses with thin gold frames. Her hair was pulled straight back with a little round bun at the back of her head. When I think of her, it is of her wearing her apron, and with her hands always busy. We visited Grandma frequently, and it was during those visits that I came to know much about my grandma, Johanna Fredrika Wilson.

It was my father's custom to stop by to see his mother almost every day. Sometimes just to visit, other times to do some chore she wanted done. On those visits, following old Finnish custom, everyone gathered about the round, oil cloth covered table by the kitchen window for something to eat, a piece of cake, pie, cookies, sweet roll, whatever Grandma had on hand. And, there was always coffee for the "grownups". The coffee pot was always on the back of the stove keeping warm while it became stronger and stronger as the day wore on. Grandma didn't have a fancy percolator, she had a blue and white enameled pan with a black handle, into this she spooned the ground coffee, filled the pan with water and put it on the stove to boil. When the coffee had boiled and was ready, she strained off the coffee into another pot.

As was Finnish custom, we always went home from our visits with some little gift, usually some kind of food. If Grandma had baked bread, it would be a warm round loaf of Finnish bread. Sometimes a toy she had tucked away in one of the huge closets in the house. As my brother found on a visit to some of grandma's

relatives in Finland in 1975, this custom still prevails in the Fatherland.

Sometimes, in the summer, when my brother and sister and I were older, Grandma would call us aside, give us a few coins out of her change purse and send us off to the corner grocery for a brick of ice cream. I don't see bricks of ice cream in the supermarket today, but it was a quart of ice cream shaped the size of a brick with a layer of chocolate on the bottom, strawberry on the top and vanilla in the middle. This was a special treat Grandma was giving us, and I suspect it was for her as well!

I often heard the Finnish language spoken by my grandparents. My father and his brothers and sister seemed to understand and could speak a lot of the language, however none of them became fluent in it, nor did they learn to read and write the language. Oh yes, I am sure they did know all those "four letter" words!

"Grandma, how did you learn to speak English?" I asked one day. She then told me that for a long, long time she could only speak Finnish. One day she asked husband Frank to purchase something at the grocery store on his way home from work. With that he told her she was so dumb she would never learn to speak English so she could do her own shopping. She said from that time on she did her own grocery shopping, and she learned English with the help of the grocer. Albeit, she always spoke with an accent.

She never learned to read and write English, she probably was always too busy with the many duties of caring for her

family to take time to learn. Many, many times I read to her the letters she would receive from her daughter, who lived in Tracy, or from nieces, who lived in Oakland. I wrote letters of reply for her as she told me what she wanted to say.

Grandma was certainly no "liberated woman". Her business was the business of caring for and nurturing her family. Her hours of work were from sun-up to well past sun-down. She did the washing by hand in the two wash trays on the back porch scrubbing the clothes on the washboard with a soap called Octagon, so called, I suppose, because of the shape of the brownish yellow bar. The clothes were hung to dry on the lines strung up in the back yard, or in the basement in winter. Ironing was done with the black flat irons heated on the wood stove until the time she had an electric iron. She cleaned, did the shopping, made clothes, worked in her vegetable garden, took care of the chickens, baked and cooked, and took care of six children.

She did her cooking and baking on the big wood-burning stove. At sometime a four-burner gas plate had been installed in the kitchen, but for some reason two of the burners never seemed to work! But not to worry, there was still the old dependable wood stove.

At least once a year the chimney of that old wood stove had to be cleaned of the build-up of soot. This job was one that my father was called upon, occasionally, to help with. The stove pipe had to be taken down, the chimney and the firebox of the stove scrapped clean of the soot. Soot came falling down every-

where it seemed, except on the newspapers spread around to catch it. Before this messy job was finished the stove pipe had to be replaced and the stove polished with the black stove polish.

Until it was prohibited by City ordinance, the family always had chickens. When it came time to stew up an old hen, Grandma could catch just the right one, then wring it by the neck until it was dead. Sometimes she raised ducks and geese, and often a turkey or two for the holiday dinners...I think she raised geese so she could have a good supply of "goose grease". According to my father, goose grease, along with castor oil, mustard plaster , and the annual Spring tonic for the children of sulfur and molasses were standbys in grandma's repertoire of "home remedies".

Speaking of turkeys, I remember the first turkey I cooked for a holiday dinner when I was a bride. I ordered a turkey from a near-by turkey farm -- that is what my mother always did. On the appointed day I picked up my turkey. It was cleaned, but the feathers were still on the turkey! What to do? I went to grandma's with my turkey, that's what I did. Grandma would know what to do with it. And, she did, of course. Although I thought we would never finish pulling out "pin feather". I went home with my turkey and with the turkey wings with long strong feathers. This was a handy item for reaching up and getting cobwebs off the walls, or used as a feather duster, or a whisk broom. My turkey turned out fine, but that was the LAST time I ever bought a turkey that wasn't ready to bring home, stuff

and roast.

Summer was the time for canning the fruit and making the jams and jellies from the fruit that grew on the fruit trees in the garden. All to be stored in the basement for meals during the winter months. The fruit was cooked in an open kettle on the hot wood stove and put into cans. The lids of the cans were then sealed all around with a hot brown wax that would have to be chipped off when the can was opened. Not a very scientific method according to recommended canning methods today, but then I never heard of anyone suffering any ill effects from eating grandma's canned fruit.

In the Fall the walnuts were gathered and dried on trays, the hulls removed, leaving an ugly brown stain on your hands. When the walnuts were dried, grandma shelled all the walnuts. Anyone who arrived at grandma's during the shelling season helped. I learned from her how to crack a walnut to have it come out with two halves, not in small pieces. For years she sold the walnuts from the three trees in the yard and usually made enough money to pay the property taxes.

Today we are urged to recycle cans, bottles and newspapers, but years ago Grandma knew all about recycling. She saved every little scrap of cloth and made patch work quilts for the beds which had feather mattresses that you sank down into at night when you "stayed over" with Grandpa and Grandma.

Her knitting needles and yarn were always to be seen on her rocking chair in the kitchen, or in her hands, usually with a partially knitted sock on those fine little steel needles. I

have seen her rip out old pairs of stockings and use the yarn to knit a new pair. I have a cotton bedspread which she knit with those fine needles on one of the beds in my home...and that was not the only one she ever knitted.

Grandma saved everything from the gifts she was given for birthdays and Christmas down to the string tied around packages. Every piece of string was tied to the end of the string ball that sat on a chest in the kitchen in the basket she had carried with her on her journey to America from Finland in 1881! My brother Ed, sister Jane and I have all had our turn of having Grandma tie a piece of that string around a loose baby tooth and yank it out.

Grandma was ahead of her time -- she probably originated the first comic books! She saved the Sunday Funny papers and sewed them together to make large books. Books, Ed, Jane and I spent hours pouring over as we sat on the day bed on the back porch. My absolute favorite was "Tillie The Toiler", then "Jiggs and Maggie" and "Barney Google."

I have inherited from the genes of "my little Finnish grandmother" the inability to dispose of anything I might be able to use someday!

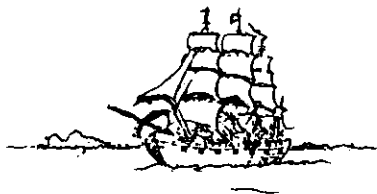
For thirteen years, after his death, Grandma lived alone in the home her husband had built for her in 1901 at 741 Delmas Avenue. Then her daughter Evelyn, herself a widow, came to live with her.

She had the courage to leave her family and homeland to travel alone across the ocean to a strange new land where she

didn't know the language when she was but a young girl. The only other member of her family to come to America was her sister Amanda Josephine who came in 1884.

She raised six children to be respected citizens. She gave generously of what she had, and asked little for herself. She had mourned the deaths of two husbands, two infant children and one adult son. She was always there when you needed her.

Grandma died on January 28, 1961. She was 97 years old. My little Finnish grandmother lies beside her two children and and both of her husbands beneath the trees at Oak Hill Cemetery in the plot for which she paid \$11.25 in 1882.



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