

Emil and Thua Harrison
on their homestead,
where they lived from
1909 to 1917.



What My Parents Taught Me

A witness of
faithfulness
and generosity
in the midst
of adversity

LILLIE HARRISON

My parents, Emil and Thua Harrison, were humble Christians who emigrated from Sweden. Though Sweden is a picturesque country with forests, flowers, and lakes, its stony land left many people in poverty.

Dad was eight, the youngest, when his family arrived in America. His dad passed away two years later. Mother came alone at eighteen. She was the youngest in her family and was eight when her dad died.

Dad and Mother, whose parents had been friends in Sweden, met and married in South Dakota. Their honeymoon was very humble. After the wedding they traveled by horse and wagon with their earthly possessions to the uninhabited prairies. The first night on the homestead they slept in the wagon with a tarp over it. The wagon was their living quarters while they built a barn they shared with the horses until they completed a one-room house, their home for the next eight years. Mother's Swedish Bible with God's promises gave them strength and guidance.

My parents, who by that time had a son, next moved to Minnesota, where my sister

was born. Not long afterward, they moved again, a move that took them through happy times and deep waters. Over the next few years, they gave birth to two more children—my younger brother and me—and buried their firstborn. My mother's sister, her only sibling in America, died the same week as my older brother.

After two seasons of crops that were destroyed by hail, Dad was unable to make the mortgage payment. My parents' savings from twenty years of married life were gone. As the country sank into the Great Depression, they were left penniless.

They started over by renting the farm from the bank. Though we lived nine miles from town, transients (bums as we called them) often appeared at our door. They were common people, like us, who had lost their jobs. They rode the rails, seeking work. Dad couldn't hire them, but he offered an evening meal and lodging. This meant that the men slept upstairs on the straw mattress in the bedroom I shared with my sister, while Sis and I slept on the floor in the living room.

Mother said we must share what we had.

After breakfast she would give them a bag lunch and they would leave—destination unknown. Feeling inadequate with their Swedish accent, my parents shared the gospel by saying table grace, evening devotions, their actions, and attending church regularly.

My mother always raised a huge garden. Every evening we hauled water for the garden. We picked wild chokecherries and gooseberries. Mother made chokecherry syrup—Dad’s favorite on Swedish pancakes. One year she gave away more than eighty bushels of tomatoes.

Coming from poverty we were taught to “waste not.” During the Depression this was true for everyone. We shared magazines, newspapers, clothes, leftover yarn and fabrics—even tin cans—with neighbors. Magazines became picture books with a little cutting and pasting.

Mother, like others, was innovative in salvaging, whether yarn from unusable sweaters or fabric from clothes. Feed and flour sacks became blouses, dresses, shirts, and curtains. Scraps of fabric became quilts. Discarded toys and dolls, donated by the wealthy, were restored and placed in the Salvation Army box. Tin cans were used for “kick the can” games.

Each December when Mother packed a Christmas box for the Salvation Army, she would say, “God has been so good to us.” Every year it contained at least 100 pairs of hand-knit mittens, baby and children’s clothes, quilts, restored toys and dolls, carrots, potatoes, six dressed chickens, and the picture books. Remembering the pastor, he was given a pint of cream on confirmation Saturdays, and a chicken at Christmas. Mother’s letters home to Sweden always contained a dollar bill.

My brother once had asked Mother,

Always looking at the brighter side, Dad said, “We still have each other, and God is still on the throne.”

“Who are you sewing for now?”

She told him: “The family with five children who moved into the vacant farmhouse down the road. He lost his job.”

Mother made all our clothes, and she altered patterns to fit the people she sewed for. While delivering the clothes, my parents used the opportunity to invite this new family to church. They came for several years.

The farm was eventually sold. In those days, March 1 was moving day for farmers. But where would we go? Dad had found a farm for us to move to; but then on February 28, he received a telegram with the line: “I will not permit you on my farm.”

The telegram was from the former owner of the farm we were supposed to move to. He, too, had lost his farm in



The Harrisons on their fiftieth wedding anniversary

the Depression and become very bitter. Dad knew what that message meant. Under the circumstances he would not take his family there. It could cost us our lives.

I was twelve, my sister was fourteen, and my brother eight. The weather was cold, raw, and rainy—it couldn’t be more bleak, with the dirty snow starting to melt. Our hearts were sorrowing inside. Where would we lay our heads that night?

The new owner was coming to our farm and we had to leave. Dad arranged for my cousin, working for a neighbor,



Emil and Thua Harrison were married on September 8, 1909.

to care for our cattle, horses, and pigs until we had a place. The chickens went to market. Our belongings were scattered on seven different farms. We had no place to call home.

As my brother was ill with pneumonia, our loving neighbor took him to her home. Dad, Mother, Sis, and I started down the rutty muddy road, tears rolling down our cheeks, leaving behind sad and happy memories. Always looking at the brighter side, Dad said, “We still have each other, and God is still on the throne.”

Since we had no phone to call anyone, Dad drove to his brother’s farm, twelve miles away. He took us in for a week while Dad rented another farm, and the family got it all together.

During the three years we spent on this farm, my parents faced more challenges, including a severe drought. One year, the entire oat crop was seventy-five bushels—in a good year, we got that much from each acre. We herded cattle along the side of the road to feed

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Lillie Harrison lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and is a member of Crosstown Covenant Church. Growing up, she attended Covenant churches in Lundby and later Willmar, Minnesota. She recently returned from Knoxville, Tennessee, where at age eighty-six, she was the oldest member of the prayer support team for CHIC, the triennial youth event. (See story on page 20.)

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on Russian thistles when hay and oats were scarce. That winter, Mom had serious surgery at Christmastime, and Dad walked three miles each way in the snow to visit her, when the roads became impassible. Just before they moved to their last farm, a chimney fire broke out on a night when it was twenty below outside. Dad and two neighbors fought the blaze by shoveling snow on it.

Dad spent the last seven years on that last farm, near Willmar, Minnesota. When my brother turned eighteen, not long after Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the Navy. Without his help, my dad could no longer manage the farm, so my parents sold off their livestock and machinery and bought a small house in town. Dad worked at the grain elevator until he was seventy. Mother spent her time knitting sweaters for servicemen, and making quilts for the poor.

My parents spent their last years in a nursing home. Dad read the daily news to a blind man. They listened to ball games. He served the Lord to the end. His last words to a nurse were, “The Lord has been so good to us, soon I am going home.” My parents had their devotions. He was taken to the hospital. They lay him on the cart. He went home to glory.

Mother spent her time knitting mittens. She served the Lord to the end. She had prayed she wouldn’t have to go on welfare. After paying her final bills, closing her account, there was less than \$25 for me to pay. God answered her prayer. Long after she had forgotten even who she was, her hands remember how to knit. Among her belongings were mittens she had knitted for others.

My parents’ motto was, “Do everything as unto the Lord and always go beyond the call of duty.” Through deep waters and happiness, God was always there for them. They left their children and grandchildren a legacy of faith in God, integrity, a love for others, and the church—a legacy money can’t buy and hands can’t touch. We can’t measure how rich we are. Praise God. □