

The Life Story of

MAMA & PAPA

in Brazil

collected and written by Hans P.Larsen

The material for the life story of Hans Peter Larsen and Laurine Petrine and their family was obtained from memories of events told to me by my father Robert, my aunt Augusta and my grandmother Laurine, supported by old documents presently in my possession. Since their children always addressed them and referred to them as Mama and Papa those names will be used here throughout.

Hans Peter was the son of "indsidder" Jacob Larsen and Bodil Johansdatter, born October 27, 1868 in Sprove, on the island of Møn, Denmark. The Danish word "indsidder" refers to a person who rents a house from an estate owner and who usually works full- or part time on the estate, which in this case was Marienborg.

There were 9 children in the family: Frederik, Annette, Kristian, Hans Peter, Marie, Thea, Marius, Adolph and Harald. Annette emigrated to South Dakota in 1882-83. Some time later Thea also went to South Dakota, but later returned to Møn. Sixteen years old Hans Peter took off for Brazil; and in due time Adolph and Harald found their way to USA. Frederik, Kristian, Marie and Marius stayed in Denmark. Frederik learned the painters trade, and Hans Peter and Adolph both apprenticed as blacksmiths.

Hans Peter travelled from Hamborg Germany with steamship to Brazil in 1884 and settled in Campinas, a city in the State of St. Paulo. Except for the pocket-size diary from his trip over I have seen no other records of his early life there. It is not until Laurine (Mama) enters into the picture that we again hear about him.

Laurine Petrine was born November 3, 1871 in Fuglslev, Djursland, Denmark to "indsidder" Jens Peter Lassen and Ane Cathrine Larsen (called Trine). She had 3 brothers: Marcus, Johannes and Laurits. Sometime around year 1888 the parents emigrated to Campinas, Brazil with the 3 boys, leaving Laurine behind until they could afford her ticket. Somehow the family got acquainted with Hans Peter. When they told him about the daughter they left behind, he loaned them money for the ticket. It is said, that he also told them that if he liked her and they got married, the debt would be forgiven.

So it came to be that Mama travelled alone to Brazil some time after her parents and brothers had left. It was a long trip for a young girl who had never been anywhere. Her school teacher Tovrbro once told her that she need not learn any arithmetic, since she probably would never get more money than she could easily count. Besides, she could also forget about geography because she would most likely never go anywhere. Years later when she happened to notice his tombstone in Aalsø cemetery his predictions came to mind.

Her trip was not without memorable events. Arriving in Hamburg Germany by train, the journey continued by steamship to Rio, Brazil, and with train to Campinas. Before entering, she was led through customs. There was a long wait with many people in line ahead of her, and before she knew it she had to go pretty badly. Finally a customs lady waved her in and directed her to a small room. Thinking that the lady had noticed her predicament and was showing her a toilet she started to relax, but discovered to her surprise that the room was used for body search. By now unable to hold her water she let go until, thoroughly embarrassed, she was standing in a great big puddle.

The journey took several weeks. A week out to sea it started to storm with strong winds and huge waves. A lot of people got seasick, but Mama was OK. Many of the 3rd class passengers brought food along for the trip. One day a woman sitting next to Mama was eating from a boiled hen when she suddenly became seasick and vomited all over herself, including the hen.

When Mama joined her parents and brothers in Campinas they lived in a barracks as did many other families who were not well off. Many orange trees with very sweet oranges ringed the house. During her first days there Mama just couldn't get enough of that wonderful fruit and ended up with stomachache and

diarrhea. In her own words, "I ate oranges during the day, and defecated oranges all night long".

There is no record of when Mama left Denmark and when she arrived in Brazil. We know however, that Papa married Mama in January 1891. He was 23, and she was 20 years of age.

The first two years of their marriage they rented a barracks. Although Papa hated to shoe horses he did it to earn money. Many of the horses came straight from the Pampas, a treeless grassland, and were wild and impossible to handle. He would then close the door to the street, hoist the horse up in the air from a beam and beat the horse until it could no longer resist. Many times it could not even stand up, but had to be shod lying down. One even died. Mama felt terribly sorry for the poor animals and wept many times. Reproaching him for being so inhumane she got a tongue lashing in return. She said later that she often wished that police would have come and arrested him.

After renting two years Papa had earned enough money to buy the house and blacksmith shop which were to become their future home. The business soon prospered and came to include a plow factory "Fabrica de Arados" with several employees, and the family became rather well to do.

There were 6 children in all: Roberto Victor (1891); Anna Dorothea (1894) Augusta Joanna (1896); Eleonora Amanda (1898); Pedro Eduardo (1900); and Dorothea Bernadina (1904). Mama said once that it wasn't always easy for her to think of names, but since Augusta came in August she was named after that month, and since "Tulle", Eleonora, was born on a Monday she called her Amanda, which means "on Monday", in danish dialect "a'Manda".

When of school age the children were sent to a nearby german lutheran private school. It was Papas opinion, that the german culture and beliefs came closer to the danish way of life than that in the portuguese catholic schools. As a result the children grew up in a 3-language environment speaking danish at home, german in school, and portuguese in school and in the street. During her stay in Brazil Mama became proficient in german and portuguese as well.

Behind the house was a large beautiful garden full of tropical plants and flowers which included banana trees, orange trees, roses, orchids etc. and many colorful birds. Besides fruit the daily diet of staples consisted mostly of rice, beans and manioc (similar to yams). In contrast to Rio de Janeiro, where it was hot and humid, the weather in Campinas was reasonable pleasant, but continually hot with regular downpours. On occasion when a rainstorm was particularly strong the earth covering the graves in a nearby negro cemetery on a hill above their street would be washed away and parts of skeletons would come floating down the open street gutters.

The family associated mostly with scandinavians and germans; and the Isgren family has often been mentioned. Mama never cared much for the english, but felt that particularly the germans were sociable and friendly and managed to make out well economically. Most of the danes she knew drank too much, and were troublesome to others. During visits she often learned about local superstitions. A pregnant woman should never look at a snake. She told of a woman whose baby had scales all over its body because she had been frightened by a snake.

During Mamas first two years in Brazil there was a yellow fever epidemic. To be helpful Mama went to a house to assist with a birth, but as it turned out the woman had yellow fever. When born, the child was completely dark brown from all the quinine she had been drinking. It died four hours later, but the woman got well. They said that women had an easier time with the sickness during pregnancy or menstruation. When men got yellow fever, they couldn't urinate unless they drank parsley water,

Sometime later Mama herself became very ill with yellow fever, and had to stay in bed. She threw blood up continually and could see it running right down a rathole in the wooden floor by the side of her bed. One day her father came to visit. When he saw her he said to Papa, "Well, now we can see which way it is going with her". But Papa got mad and threw him out of the house. As for herself she didn't care whether she lived or died. She was treated with quinine, a yellow liquid that tasted awful, but while Papa held her, a man poured it into her from a beer glass. She eventually recovered.

When in the mood, Robert would tell about all the strange and exotic things in Brazil. Of the Piranhas in the river that could eat all flesh off an animal or person* who entered the water. Of the waterfalls in the Parana river, deep in the jungle, that roared so loud it could be heard from miles away, and when a mile away people couldn't hear each other talk. Of a large boa constrictor which had swallowed a whole calf. And of a blind insect with a pointed dart in front so poisonous it could kill people with its sting. One night when one had entered the girls bedroom they could hear its humming sound. When Papa was called he told them to cover up in bed until he had killed it.

Robert has also told us that one night when he was a boy he woke up from a sudden bright light that filled the bedroom like daylight. When he looked up he saw the outlines of a lady in a long white dress and a veil coming through the doorway towards him. Frightened he quickly pulled the bedcover over his head and waited. He then heard footsteps in a dragging motion going slowly past his bed and stopping by a nearby wall. Then silence. A bit later he lifted the cover to take a peek and saw the lady standing in front of the dresser mirror. In the bright light he could see her, not only from behind, but being transparent he could also see the front of her. She was young. He again pulled the cover over his head and waited what to him seemed a very long time. He then again heard her dragging footsteps coming past his bed, and when they vanished through the doorway the bright light suddenly disappeared and the room was again in total darkness. After waiting a while he ran into Mamas and Papas bedroom and told them what had happened, afraid to go back to his bed. But they told him that he had just had a bad dream, that he should think nothing of it and go back to bed, which he did. However, he knew better, he had been wide awake, and all his life he never forgot this strange vision.

Robert described the school and teachers as being very good. He enjoyed school, particularly art and gymnastics it seems, and he saved most of his art work and commendations from his gym teachers. He was fond of vaulting and tumbling, and participated with fellow gymnasts in building human pyramids during school exhibition programs. On one such occasion the student on top was painted with gold paint all over his body for a special event. Afterwards he collapsed and died shortly after, because all the pores of his skin had been completely sealed by the wrong kind of paint.

Besides the regular school subjects which were taught in German, the education included the reading and writing of Portuguese. The streets where they walked to and from school were colorful with people, many of them black, but Robert didn't think highly of their morals. Occasionally, when he and other big high school boys came walking back from school they would be propositioned by young black girls.

Papa was intelligent and clever with his hands, and his biggest hobby was taxidermy. He made himself a substantial collection of stuffed colorful birds from toucans and birds of paradise to parrots and hummingbirds. Robert told about a visit with friends where the lady was doing some fancy intricate embroidery. She asked him whether he thought he could do such work with his coarse blacksmith hands. He said no, but that he could stuff the tiniest humming-

* in minutes

bird. He then added: "Can you do that?".

Papa could be goodhearted and benevolent, but was also strict and short-tempered. Augusta remembers him mostly for his better qualities, the good times. For Christmas he knew how to make them happy with wonderful gifts and a Christmas tree decorated with candles, "nisser" and Danish flags. The tree was first made from tall bamboo, then later substituted with a German import, a green-painted spruce-like tree with branches on hinges for easy storage. And he would teach the kids the Danish Christmas songs.

It seems like the gifts were expensive toys imported from Germany. As for Robert they included a small-scale working steam engine, a hand-cranked movie projector with action pictures on a continuous strip of celluloid, and a stereoscopic viewer with numerous pictures.

For Easter he and Mama would secretly paint colorful eggs, each with a child's name on it; then make nests, also with names on them, to be hidden in the garden. Easter morning, when the hunt began, was exciting and festive.

In 1893 Papa writes home to his brother Marius in Møn, Denmark, and tells about his firstborn, Robert, then about 2 years old. In his view Robert was a tough little fellow who didn't cry if he fell and got hurt a little, but that it upset him terribly if he wandered into the shop to play. In the letter he further explained the value of Brazilian money, saying that if he was careful, income and expenses in a month would equal that of his brother in a year. He also promised to mail him a stuffed hummingbird. Another time he mailed a decorated metal box with tea to his sister Annette in South Dakota. This box was later given to me by Martha, Annette's daughter.

Papa was compassionate and not afraid of helping other people in need, including his countrymen and negroes. In 1888 when Emperor Don Pedro II was touring Europe, his daughter Isabella saw to it that negro slaves were actually emancipated. The government freedom act had been passed some years earlier, but nothing had been done. Runaway slaves were usually fitted with a hinged iron ring around the neck. From the ring extended a vertical bar with a hook or a crossbar at the top end. To prevent removal of the ring, it was fastened with a rivet or a sunken bolt and nut inside a short piece of iron pipe. With their new freedom now a fact many negroes came into his shop to have the neck irons removed. On such an occasion an employee in the shop had held the ring down on the anvil to cut the rivet with a steel chisel, but the chisel slipped and cut a deep gash in the man's neck. When Papa saw this he felt sorry for the poor fellow and using a steel file he carefully removed the head of the rivet so it could drop out and the ring come off.

Circus was very popular in those days, and when a travelling circus came to town Papa would bring the whole family to see it. The older children remembered it vividly, and particularly Robert kept his fascination and enthusiasm for circus performances all his life.

As mentioned earlier Mama had three brothers, Johannes, Laurits and Marcus. Johannes made a living making fancy walking canes and umbrellas. He died some time during the First World War, 1914-18, and never married. Laurits, called Lau, was a blacksmith and had apprenticed in Papa's shop. He married a very beautiful Indian girl, and they had two boys. Marcus had a very colorful background.

Augusta remembered Marcus as a good uncle, always in a happy mood. But Robert has told me that he also could be quarrelsome and was prone to getting into fights. He apparently never learned a trade, but was involved in a number of unusual endeavors. Physically he was very strong and had among other things performed as strong man and weight lifter with travelling circuses. He married a Spanish girl, Maria. They had one child, a girl. Maria's parents owned a factory in St. Paulo where they made shipping bags for the coffee industry.

Marcus died sometime between 1908-09, and had a very violent death. But as to the actual cause there is some disagreement. Augusta told that he was shot in the stomach by some bandits. Roberts version of the incident is more detailed and dramatic. Marcus had apparently gotten into^a severe fight and a couple of police militia soldiers had been sent to his house to arrest him. He chose to resist and barricaded himself behind a locked door and wouldn't open up. When the soldiers then busted the door open he was standing in the doorway with a large axe, ready to strike. At that moment one of the soldiers rushed at him with a drawn saber and hit him with such a force that his head was split down the middle.

Augusta remembered Mamas parents, Jens Peter and Trine, as wonderful people. They died around 1904-06. Shortly after grandmother Trine died their grandfather came to their house sick from a heat stroke. When Dr. Toffoli was called and came to treat him he prescribed leaches to suck blood from his bald head. Augusta remembers going along to the pharmacy to pick them up. The dog Freja, which he had brought along, had been tied to an orange tree in the garden.

It is obvious from these stories that Papa very much was the dominant figure in the family. He could be kind, charming, helpful and benevolent, but he was also strict and short-tempered. During his last years he became gradually more difficult to get along with, was hard on his employees in the shop, grew suspicious of everybody, even his own family, and jealous of Mama.

Once, when he had beaten Robert rather severely Mama decided it was best to leave him for a while. With Robert she boarded a train for St Paulo and they stayed with her brother Marcus and Maria. Some time later after their departure Papa felt bad about the trouble he had caused and wanted them back. To make things good again he sent the girls out in the garden to pick all the roses, which he then packed up and mailed to Mama. It was shortly thereafter that they returned to Campinas.

There has always been some speculation about Papas mental condition, whether it was caused by the constant heat, the stress of running the business, or whether it was the result of an inherited condition, or perhaps a combination or accumulation of factors. Robert told me that sometime in the late 1880s he had sought a patent on a steam turbine, only to find that it had been patented a year or two earlier, a disappointment that he never forgot.

On the 10th of November 1908 he took his own life with a revolver, shooting a bullet into his temple. Deadly wounded he remained unconscious until the next day with fluid oozing from his brain until he died. Good old Dr. Toffoli was again called, but could do nothing. The death certificate states his time of death as Nov 11, 1908 and the cause as "cerebral hemorrhage". The old family friend Mr. Isgren is shown as one of the witnesses on the document.

Papa left no statement, so the exact reason for his decision will never be known. It was the family's opinion that he himself was aware of his condition and afraid of its consequences. Knowing that his brother Kristian in Møn Denmark developed mental problems as a young man, he might have wanted to make sure that he didn't end up in a mental institution in Brazil.

This was a tragic event for the whole family, something they never liked to talk about. It is mostly through my conversations with Mama that some of these details have been told. Mama was now suddenly alone in Brazil with six children: Robert 17, Anna 15, Augusta 12, Tulle 10, Pedro 8 and Thea 4. What to do? She had problems with staying, as she considered Brazil a violent country. Both of her parents were now dead, and shortly after Papas death her brother Marcus had been killed. In the end she decided to bring the family back to Denmark, at least for awhile, to see if they liked it there. So after having obtained a written contract, the administration of the business was turned over to an attorney

who was to look after her affairs during their absence. They departed in 1910.

What each one decided to pack and bring along I don't exactly know, but it included family pictures, knick-knacks and other keepsakes. Robert brought along a number of things which included his fancy Christmas gifts, his school drawings, the gym teachers commendations, two slave neck rings and a set of hand cuffs, Papas diaries, a silver plated duel revolver in a lined box, a green stem glass with a picture of emperor Don II and his family, and a large trunk filled with stuffed tropical birds from Papas collection. All the things arrived intact, except for the trunk which had been plundered aboard ship leaving only a few torn-off heads from small birds.

Their first point of arrival in Denmark was at Papas home in Damme on the island of Møn. Where they met Papas dad, uncles, aunts and cousins for the first time. Alfred remembered their visit. After a weeks stay they moved on to the Fuglslev area in Djursland, Mamas childhood surroundings. The younger children were sent to school, the older ones found jobs. Robert apprenticed as a blacksmith at Mr. Loftagers shop in Holme. But for Mama it turned out to be a different life style. With the money eventually used up, she had to make a living doing laundry work on the surrounding farms. That was the time that she decided to go back to Brazil and sell the business. But World War I had just then started, and it was not until the end of the war in 1918 that travel was again possible.

The family had by now stayed in Denmark 8 years and did not want to go back to Brazil. All had gotten jobs, Robert and Peter (Pedro) had learned the blacksmith trade and some were engaged to be married. So Mama now travelled back to Campinas to sell the business and settle affairs, and to see her two remaining brothers again. But when she arrived Johannes had already passed away. She had no better luck when she showed up in the attorneys office to sell the house and shop. He simply told her that it no longer belonged to her. When she argued her case he took a revolver up from his desk drawer and placed it in front of her, telling her that here was money for her trip back to Denmark, and that he would give her 48 hours to get out of town. After final farewells to Laurits and family and old friends she went back to the house, scooped a couple handfuls of red dirt into a small paper bag, and left. On her return she gave the bag to Robert to be put into her coffin with her some day. That was done.

By now Mama had tired of doing laundry for other people and took employment as a live-in housekeeper for a well-to-do fisherman, Sigvard Møller, who lived by the ocean near Skovgaarde. She lived there for some 20 years and bore him a son, Albert. Her only wish was to some day to live her last days in her parents old home in Fuglslev. When the house came up for sale Sigvard Møller bought it and rented it out until Mama decided to retire and move in, some time in the late 1930s.

Mamas life had not always been easy. In later years she suffered from chronic ulcers that caused her relentless stomach aches. Often she had to lie down on the bed for hours on what she called her "Pinebaenk", her torture bench. Since most foods caused her trouble she drank lots of coffee, so she was not much more than skin and bone. But the coffee was always ready when I came to visit. She should also have the sorrow of losing three of her children within a five year period, Dorthea (mercury) Tulle (cancer) and Albert (acute appendicitis). Dortheas coffin was sent from Aarhus to Fuglslev, where it was kept in Mamas house until the time of burial. A window was temporarily removed for access. She loved visitors, and when you came, she would always liven up. She was the worlds best storyteller. Her last days were spent in a nursing home in Tirstrup, and she passed away at the age of 83, February 2, 1955.

-- The End--