

A Search for Great Grandparents by Dave Hegdahl

This is the story of my search for my Norwegian immigrant great grandparents and the searches brick walls, the help I had, the frustrations, and the great joys of that search.

In 2007, I decided to learn more about my origins. While much of my German and English genealogy in the U.S. had a good start at being documented by earlier generations, I had nothing on my Norwegian side so I started with that side, --with zero-no documentation and no expertise.

Though my Swedish/Norwegian wife tells me I act 100 percent Norwegian, ... I'm only one quarter Norwegian, all of it obtained from my two Norwegian immigrant great grandparents. Christ Hegdahl I learned was born in September 1855 and came to the U.S. alone in September 1883. Tina Berg, I learned, was born December 15th 1865 and came to the U.S. in either 1888 or 1890.

Focusing first on Christ, I started by trying to find, talk to and visit as many of my living relatives as I could. This was a rewarding experience; I had eager participants. A family story said Christ followed his brothers over to Minneapolis. I started looking at the handful of Hegdahl families in Minneapolis at the time. I visited the Minnesota History Center, and with my first personal computer, found there were genealogy websites. By 2009 I had found a Hegdahl in Norway who sent me his whole genealogy, but he was not related; and I did not find others. I had hit a 'brick wall' trying to jump across the Atlantic. But by 2009 I'd learned a lot and had also learned that there are always alternatives.

Two events broke me through that brick wall with Christ, the first occurred when I located Christ's unmarked grave in Minneapolis in May 2009. As I left the cemetery I noticed the markers of a couple, John and Charlotte, Hegdahl, both unknown to me. I found a death certificate for John Hegdahl at the History Center late in the 2009, it listed, Mother: Mattie Trygstad, father Christ Hegdahl!! My first thought was "Oh, no, now I have two Christ's to sort out!" I remembered seeing a request from someone looking for that unusual Trygstad name on Roots Web and wrote him a letter.

The second event occurred in February 2010 when we attended the funeral of my dad's cousin. My wife Shirley drew me aside to look at the caption on an old picture: "The story has it that when the Olsen's left Oslo, they changed their name to Hegdahl because there were too many Olsen's." I'd been looking for the wrong name in Norway! But now was faced with perhaps the most popular surname in Norway to sort out!

Only a few days later I received a response to my Trygstad letter. It started with this line: "Are you the great grandson of Kristian Olsen Hegdahl?" It suggested I follow an enclosed link to the Norwegian Digital Archives and the Trygstad family living North of Trondheim in Verdalen, Nord Trondelag; Mette Serine Torrisdatter (Mattie Trygstad) was my Christ's first wife!

With Norwegian language and this new to me Digital Archive facing me I joined the Sons of Norway in April 2010 and found our genealogy group. By this time, I'd learned you should never work on the tree alone. I learned much more about Christ by learning more about Mattie through that link. Mattie and Christ had two sons, John was their second son born in 1885 in Minneapolis, where Mattie died in Jan

1891. I also found that the family story should be that he followed his brothers-in-law, not his brothers, to Minneapolis.

Well, what about my great grandmother? Known in my searched sources as Tina, Tena, Lena, Lina, Bentina, Berntina, Bertina, Tina A. ... Berg?

Born somewhere in Norway of unnamed Norwegian parents, I learned a lot about her once she got to the U. S. and over her life with Christ. Trying to find her origins in Norway has been my real 'brick wall'.

When looking for her, all those potential first names don't help in trying to sort down to one person. Being a single woman in 1890 Minneapolis when we have no 1890 census and women were documented largely through their men doesn't help. But the largest brick in that wall seems to be that on April 30th 1891 she was admitted to Bethany Home in Minneapolis, giving birth to her daughter Bessie Florence the next day.

Bethany Home was a home for unwed mothers in trouble, who were welcomed in under agreement that they would stay for a year during which they were provided for and taught how to be better citizens and mothers. In order to protect, and separate from their past lives they were given a pseudo-name which the inmate could retain or give up when they left. Their original names were not made public. They also had the choice of giving up their child for placement or taking it along when they left.

Only fragments of Bethany Home records have survived. They are stored at the Minnesota History Center; I looked through them with great anticipation. But the original names for that timeframe are not there. I did find Tina and Bessie there, documented to stay their year as Bergs. They left in May 1892. About a year later, on July 8th 1893 Tina and Christ were married in St. Olaf Church in North Minneapolis.

Assuming that an immigrant would be least likely to change her first name I assembled a top twenty-five-list from the 98 Emigrant databases in the Archives focused broadly around 1888 and the first names, and have begun searching for birthdates and families. The Genealogy Group's collective knowledge of search procedures, Norwegian databases, the historical Norwegian naming system, and websites and the group's willingness to discover, share, educate, befriend, and focus has been invaluable to me in all my searching.

In January, 2013, we held a genealogy group search session based on all my information on Tina and the assumption that Tina, recorded on her marriage certificate as "Tina A. Berg", was using the same Norwegian naming convention as Christ, and his immigrant nephews, where "O." appeared as a middle initial for Olsen, the family name. In addition, the witnesses on that certificate were Miss Johanna and Mr. John Martinson, neither members in the church record, nor people I had come across in searching for Christ. Could they be Tina's relatives or friends who may have emigrated with her?

During the genealogy groups meeting we discovered someone, Bertine Andrina Andersdatter, who fit all the information I had on Tina! In addition, that evening I located two pairs of John and Johanna Martinsen's of about the same age very close by! After these years of searching, I was elated! BUT... the next morning one of the group identified that our Bertine had died before she reached confirmation age. She could not be Tina! This was later confirmed. I'd run full speed into another "brick wall".

After getting over the disappointment I continued to look for connections and came across a John Martinson in the U.S. who lived with his cousin August J Berg in 1930 Aitkin. Berg and Aitkin! Our family had a background in Aitkin. Two of Christ and Tina's daughters had spent some time there growing up, and later after marrying, had lived there. Maybe Tina had not given up that last name at Bethany Home? John Martinson had immigrated in 1888, the same year as two of Tina's sources identified that she had come. I could also trace his movements in the census back to 1900 Stillwater, a short train ride from Minneapolis. In November 2015, I found the death certificate of August J Berg's son, naming August's birthplace as a small town in Hedmark, Norway. I have three DNA matches from people whose families who had come from Hedmark and were not a DNA match to my Christ side 4th cousin. Along the way of this search path I had found two living relatives of August's, collaborated with them, and asked them if they had taken the DNA test.

On 8 November 2015, in our abbreviated genealogy group session we found John Martinsen, August Berg, and the whole Aitkin Berg Family tree back in direct line to the third great grandparents of my two collaborators! BUT... John had immigrated alone, and there was no Tina. A week later one of those living relatives of August responded that she had taken the DNA test-not a match with me. I'd hit the 'brick wall' again.

To date we have not been able to identify a single sibling, parent or any of Tina's ancestors nor where she came from in Norway... My real brick wall is still there.

Well, as I mentioned, there are always other paths to examine, and we have more solid approaches to try—but this is a lot of work, and very time consuming, and those collisions with brick walls are very trying...why do I continue to look?

Shirley and I took our trip of a lifetime to Norway, Sweden, and Iceland in late August 2013. On the 4th of September, our last afternoon in Norway, we got off the Hurtigruten ship in Trondheim, rented a car, and drove an hour and a half north to Stiklestad Church in Verdalen, Norway, built on the spot where St. Olaf had died in battle in 1040. It is also the church where Christ and Mette were married in 1882—we were trying to find out more about Christ. We discovered that because the site is so famous in Norway, there is a cultural center there, and being just a little into the off season it was fully staffed and underemployed. I told them why we were there and started to tell them what I knew about Christ, they asked more questions, and I told them more detail. They got on the phone in Norwegian, and asked more questions. Finally, they said they were sending us to an older woman, who had been in the area awhile, and was interested in genealogy; maybe she could help. Along the route we were directed to follow we passed Sakshaug church built in 1100, where Christ had been baptized, the 'new' Sakshaug church built in 1869, where he had been confirmed, and drove up the driveway to a small red house. A couple was sitting on the front deck and the lady of the house came out to meet us. At my driver's window she said, in good English, "I have found something about Christ, come on in". We got out of the car and I followed her to the door. As I stepped in she turned to me and said. "He was born in this house". That's why I keep looking!

After I had partly recovered we sat down to talk. Eli grew up just down the hill and was close to Marie, Christ's niece, the last Olsen owner of the house. Eli's mother bought the house from Marie, and it is now Eli's turn to own it. The House has original segments of the log construction exposed inside. They still use the 1809 fireplace. Marie left Olsen artifacts, a Psalmodian, several books complete with Olsen

juvenile's signatures, a sugar cutter, a clock, and other things. There was even more than just the house! Marie had left a family genealogical journal running back to my fourth great grandparents. I took pictures of every page! The warmth of our reception, including freshly picked lingonberries eaten together that beautiful afternoon on the deck, was exhilarating! It turns out that Eli also had some old photo albums at another location, and every-once in a while over the now four years since, she sends us a surprise, pictures of my ancestors as youth, young adults, and grandparents, and sometimes pages of the journal translated from the handwritten old Norwegian.

That evening in early September Shirley and I stayed at a renovated Christ era manor house close by and overlooking those two churches and the fjord. I got up early to watch the sunrise. Reflecting on the whole experience as I sat there, it felt the deep sense that I had come home. It was a feeling of a lifetime I'd like to repeat. That's why I keep looking!!