

# A Family Myth

By Joan Rynearson

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We called my great-grandmother Gotsy - for what reason I haven't a clue. Her birth name was Berta Aãse. We knew she'd been born somewhere in Sognefjord, Norway in 1874 and died in Bothell in 1965. We ten cousins knew her well but she rarely talked about her past. When her daughter (my grandmother) was dying, she told her youngest son (my Uncle Bill) a story about her mother that had been kept secret for many years.



Gotsy and her husband Frank Anderson with great granddaughters Joan Rynearson (left) and her sister Jill Keeney c. 1960

Gotsy was illegitimate and ashamed of the fact. She did not want her progeny to know. However, according to Grandma, Gotsy's biological father was a person of great importance, possibly even royalty. In 1874, King Oscar II ruled both Sweden and Norway. His wife and family lived in Stockholm but he spent considerable time in Norway. He learned the language and grew to love the country that was considered a poor relative to Sweden. Pouring over Norwegian history, I convinced myself Uncle Bill actually resembled Oscar. I asked Uncle Bill at age 90 to submit a DNA sample to Family Tree, whose results established strong Norwegian roots. New to genealogy, I was unaware so many are motivated by family myths suggesting connections to important historical figures.

My cousins asked me to ferret out the truth. Having recently retired, I accepted the challenge and began by joining BIGS and attending a Scandinavian sub-group. I delved into Norway's genealogy websites but without even rudimentary knowledge of the language, I was lost. Priscilla Greenlees, a long-time member of BIGS and ardent genealogist, recommended I contact the Norwegian American Genealogy Center in Madison, Wisconsin. In particular, she suggested I contact Jerry Paulson.

Mr. Paulson agreed to help at \$40/hour, which struck me as remarkably reasonable. It took him just over two hours to solve the mystery. Fluent in Norwegian, he began with

church records for the parish of Sogndal and found Gotsy's baptism on 25 March 1875. She was born in the tiny village of Lavik on December 24th, 1874. Her mother (my great-great grandmother) was Mari Haakensdatter who lived and worked on a farm next to widowed Peder Nilsen, the biological father and my great-great grandfather. Mr. Paulson found more confirming information in the Sogndal bygdebok. He also kindly commented, "Bear in mind that illegitimacy in Norway was very common in the rural areas and for the most part didn't carry any level of shame."

In 1882, Mari and Gotsy emigrated from Bergen to southern Minnesota on the Allen Line, another record Mr. Paulson tracked down. Mari joined her brother Ivar who had emigrated in 1879. When she was 14, Gotsy's Uncle Ivar impulsively decided to move his family to Port Orchard and took Gotsy along to help with his children. He was not happy there and returned to Minnesota after a couple years. Gotsy, however, did like it and chose to stay. She went to work as a maid for a Seattle family. Shortly after, she met my Swedish great-grandfather at a Sons of Norway dance in Ballard and they married in 1900.

I sent a letter to my cousins that began, "It appears we can all put away our crowns and tiaras. Instead, we should sharpen our shovels and hoes." I included copies of Mr. Paulson's report. Their reactions ranged from amusement to disappointment to angry denial. The oldest among us who's approaching 80 was the most reticent to give up her assumed royal heritage. I'm not sure she's forgiven me yet.