

Augustana Endowment Society
Historical Reflections from Dec. 2018
by Janet Moline

O. N. Olson and the Carillons

Ida Wilhelmina Peterson (often called Minnie), our former president whom we focused on at last month's meeting, married Oscar Nils Olson in 1906. Since he has a significant connection with Augustana College, we will consider him, today.

Oscar was born in 1876 in the Skane region in southern Sweden. Unfortunately, his father died when he was 9 and his mom died when he was 11. Being an orphan is never easy, and it was particularly tough at that time because of the country's economic condition. Fortunately, a family two farms away took him into their household. He remained in that area until he was confirmed and had his first communion. The day after that first communion in 1890, he began his journey to the United States.

He landed at Castle Gardens, the immigrant arrival site before Ellis Island was opened, where he was met briefly by his brother. He went to Connecticut for 3 months where a family tutored him in English. He returned to New York and got a job with the famous J.W. Pinchot family at its mansion in Gramercy Square. He was a page boy and sometimes helped serve meals, polished silverware and washed glasses and plates. In 1891 he went with the family to its summer estate at Grey Towers. With an interest in engineering, he enrolled at the Cooper Union Institute, but then changed his education goals and went to Uppsala College in New Jersey. After two years he transferred to Augustana College in 1896 and graduated in 1898. During that time at Augustana he met Minnie Peterson at a skating party. Though that relationship was just a general friendship at that time, we know that it eventually would lead to marriage.

Still thinking of a career in engineering, he followed the advice of Gifford Pinchot, the famous environmentalist, forester and friend of Teddy Roosevelt, to go to Yale to study electrical engineering. During that year at Yale he decided to become a minister. He went to Mt. Airy Seminary in Philadelphia for two years and then transferred to Augustana Theological Seminary in 1902. Who knows if a vision of Minnie was in his eyes as a factor for that transfer back to Rock Island. He was ordained in 1903. His first parish was at St. Paul's in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago. His relationship with Minnie continued to deepen, and they were married in 1906 in Fort Dodge, Iowa, her home town. He remained in Chicago until 1913 where his daughter Heloise (Norm's mom) and son Marcus were born. He then moved to Augustana Lutheran Church in Sioux City, Iowa. At that time he served on the Board of Directors of Augustana and became president of the Iowa Conference.

He returned to Rock Island in 1926 to become the associate editor of the Lutheran Companion, the main magazine of the Augustana Lutheran Church which was published in a building on the site of present Sorensen Hall. In 1927 he became a professor at the Seminary. During that time Minnie was our Endowment president for a year. He was a delegate to the Lutheran World Federation convention in 1929.

He left the seminary in 1931 to accept a call to the church in Berwyn, not far from his earlier Chicago parish. In 1944 he was asked to return to Rock Island to be the historian and archivist of the Augustana Lutheran Church, a position he held until his retirement in 1958. When the seminary moved into its “new” library, now the Swenson Hall of Geoscience, his office, the historical records, and a display area were on the second floor, now the location of the geography department.

In 1953 Ragnar Benson, a Swedish immigrant who had become a major contractor and wealthy person in the Chicago area, wanted to recognize two of his pastors who had been so influential in his life as a member of St. Paul’s in Chicago and who had gone on to significant positions – Oscar Olson and Knut Erickson. Working with President Bergendoff, he donated money for a carillon to be located in Old Main’s dome. While the specific carillon equipment has been upgraded two times, it continues to chime out the hours of the day and once each day one or two hymns. For most of you they merely provide pleasant sounds, but for Norm and me, there is a special feeling as we realize that those bells exist because of gratitude for and remembrance of his distinguished grandfather, Oscar Olson. For a person who became an orphan at age 11 and came to the U.S. alone as a 14-year old and worked as a page boy and meal server, it is an amazing story. By hearing this story and thinking about one of our past endowment presidents, you, too, now may have a little more connection with those bells.