

A TRUE ACCOUNT OF SERVICE, SACRIFICE, AND FAITH

Andrew Daniel, Christina, and Johanna Mortensen

By Greg M. Mortensen

My Great Grandfather and Great Grandmother, Anders and Ane Catherine Mortensen, were some of the early converts to the church in Denmark. Like many of the early converts to the church, they left everything they had to come America and help build up Zion.

They initially settled in Spring City, Utah, and my grandfather, Andrew Daniel Mortensen, was born there. In the 1880's, when my grandfather was still a young boy, the family moved to Franklin County, Idaho, which is basically where the town of Preston, Idaho is now. They were some of the early pioneers and settlers in that area.

It is about my grandfather Andrew Daniel Mortensen, my grandmother Christina Gregersen Mortensen, and my other grandmother Johanna Sorensen Mortensen that I want to focus on in this brief account. My grandmother Christina passed away while my father, George Andrew Mortensen, was young. The Lord, in his mercy and tenderness, sent an exceptional woman, Johanna Sorensen, to help out my grandfather with the children. Grandpa Mortensen later married this saintly woman and she became a mother and stepmother to my father.

By way of background, life was not easy for Great Grandpa Anders Mortensen and Great Grandma Ane Catherine Mortensen. They lost 5 of their 8 children in their journey of faith and joining the church and settling in Idaho. Their early faith and sacrifices continue to produce gospel fruit and family joy to this very day.

Concerning their move from Spring City, Utah to the Preston, Idaho area, Grandpa Mortensen (Andrew Daniel) told of the journey from Spring City, Utah to their new home in Idaho. It was a long, dusty old road. They followed the creeks and the trails and were more than three weeks on the road before arriving in Idaho. Their earthly possessions consisted of a wagon, a team of horses, and a single cow that they led behind the wagon.

Upon arriving in Idaho, Great Grandpa and Great Grandma immediately built a dugout and went to work. They survived that first winter in the dugout, and then built a crude small log home which was so humble that it leaked and the wind would blow through it during storms and cold weather. The harsh pioneer life of an early settler surviving under these conditions eventually took its toll on Great Grandmother Ane Catherine, who was a delicate and refined woman used to being around people and to more of a city type life with its conveniences. Eventually the pioneer life took such a toll on her that she had to be put in an institution and could no longer raise her children. Truly, they had sacrificed much for the gospel, even to the point of my Great Grandfather Anders Mortensen losing his wife to the strains of the hard life and having to live and raise his children by himself. Yet he did it! And through it all he faithfully served in the church and community. In fact, he was called to preside over the members of the church in that area and, as the members later expressed in a written letter upon his death, "He was always on hand day or night to administer blessings to the sick and dying, always on hand advising the old and young to walk in the path of duty."

With their mother now in an institution, My Grandfather, Andrew Daniel and his brother had to take care of themselves much of their boyhood as Great Grandfather fulfilled the role of father, mother, farmer, provider, spiritual leader in the community, and all the rest that went with pioneer and early settler life. Like his own father who was a kind, hardworking, and faithful servant of Heavenly Father, Andrew Daniel grew up being industrious and hard working.

Through thrift and hard work as a young man, he was able to save up and buy a very sporty buggy and felt he was starting to succeed in life. But the Lord had other plans for Grandpa Mortensen. Grandpa was called to serve a mission to Denmark. True to his faith and the faith of his father and mother, he willingly sold the horses and harness and the buggy and left for Denmark. While in Denmark he was a good missionary and served faithfully. He then returned home to Idaho to start all over again.

Grandpa Andrew told one particularly touching story from his mission which illustrates his faith, his humility, and the hard work of his mission despite discouragement. In those days, he didn't have a companion and so would have to go tracting by himself. One particular day, it was raining really hard all day and he was not having any success. He looked off towards a hill and saw a house on top of the hill quite a distance off the main road. Since he hadn't been having much success where he was, he decided to go up to that house and see if they would listen to and accept the gospel. So he left the main road and trudged up the hill. When he got close to the house he could hear dogs barking – all sorts of dogs. His first instinct was to question whether he dared proceed and if doing so was prudent. But summoning his faith and the courage borne of that faith, he continued on. Upon reaching the house, he knocked on the door. A lady came to the door and, seeing him rain soaked and his humble condition, she made all kinds of fun of him. There were several other ladies in the house, and she proceeded to call for them to come and laugh and point their fingers at him. He was humiliated. Rejected and dejected, he turned and walked down the path towards the main road. As if what had already happened were not enough, when he was almost to the bottom of the hill he heard the lady call out, "Sic 'im! Chew 'im up!" Grandpa glanced over his shoulder and there coming down the hill at full speed was a big dog intent on getting Grandpa. "What do I do now?", he thought. And then as the dog was almost upon him the Spirit whispered to him, "Turn around and face the dog and open your umbrella." So he turned, opened the umbrella, and shouted, "Boo!" That old dog stopped dead in its tracks! The bristles stood up on his back and the dog turned around scared to death and ran back up the hill. Though humiliated, the Lord had protected his servant and Grandpa's faith never wavered.

Though there were difficult and trying mission experiences, there was at least one unexpected blessing that came from his mission. One of the families in Denmark that was friendly to the missionaries and who would invite them to dinner frequently had a daughter named Christina Gregersen. This daughter Christina immigrated to the US while Grandpa was still on his mission. She had a friend in Preston, Idaho, and so she settled there. When Grandpa returned from his mission, they struck up a friendship and were later married in the Logan Temple.

Grandma Christina was a very talented seamstress, in addition to being a hard worker and a caring mother, friend, and sister to all. She and Grandpa Andrew had 6 children – George (my father), Carl, Ada, Orson, Olive and Oliver. Ada, a beautiful little girl, got sick and died when she was only 18 months old leaving a big hole in their hearts.

When the twins Olive and Oliver were born, Grandpa Andrew and Grandma Christina could not help but feel that the cute babies had been sent from heaven above to bless and brighten their lives and home. And brighten their lives their home these two precious babies did! But less than a year after their birth, they both came down with pneumonia. The doctor was called and blessings were given. Dad (George), Carl, and Orson waited outside their bedroom as the doctor did everything he could for the precious little babies. After a time, the doctor, Dr. Cutler, came from the room with briefcase in hand, looking very serious. He opened the front door and left without saying anything.

A few minutes later, Grandpa Andrew and Grandma Christina also came out of the room. Their eyes were filled with tears. Father stood by the dining room table and said, "We will turn our chairs with backs to the table." (This was their practice when having prayer.) "We are going to talk with Heavenly Father about the twins."

Grandpa Andrew led the prayer. It was a very sacred occasion. Uncle Carl recalls what his father (Grandpa Andrew) said in that prayer. "Father in Heaven, we were delighted and grateful when our home was blessed with twins. We are anxious about them. We have done everything we know how to do. It is our deep desire that they be permitted to remain with us. But the Doctor has told us they are very sick and that their chance of survival is questioned. Oliver seems to be the most critical. We have unquestioning faith in Thee. Thou are all powerful. We submit our will to Thine. Thou knowest best."

Then with thanks of gratitude for many blessings, the prayer was ended. A short time after the prayer was offered, little Oliver peacefully breathed his last.

Grandpa had been called as a bishop after returning from his mission to Denmark - a position he held for 25 years. Despite the death of two of his children, he and Grandma Christina were faithful and continued serving those in the church and community. But only a few years later when my father was only 12 and Carl, Orson, and Olive younger still, another sickness befell the family, this time taking the life of his wife, and the mother of his children, Grandma Christina.

Grandpa and my father, George, got the illness first after they attended General Conference in Salt Lake. Olive believes that they caught it because Grandpa had been exposed while administering to another sick member of the church. Dad on the other hand believes that he was the one who got sick first which he thinks happened by being around other sick family members while visiting and possibly swimming on that trip. Regardless of who got it first and how they came in contact with the illness, the sickness soon overtook the others in the family and it was a very rough time for the family. For nearly three months Grandma Christina nursed all of them through the terrible sickness, until in December she too finally fell ill from it. My uncle Carl (who later became a Stake President and a patriarch in the Preston area), remembers her sitting against the wall by the old pot belied stove so sick she could hardly hold her head up. She was too weak to even comb her hair and asked 10 year old Carl to comb it for her. But when he went to help her she was so sick that the pain of a brush or comb in her hair was too much to bear. She went to bed and grew worse. Two days before Christmas, on December 23, she passed away. Young Carl, only 10 years old, was with her in her bedroom when she died while Grandpa and my father were trying to do some chores on the farm as best they could in their own weakened conditions. Carl ran and told his father, Grandpa Andrew, who rushed back to the house to find his sweetheart and dear companion dead.

There were no toys that Christmas – and not much joy. The only thing the children got that year was an orange in each of their stockings. It was a very bleak time for the entire family. In an act of kindness, a wonderful Relief Society President came to be with the family for Christmas to help. She could have been home with her own family but she didn't. She was there offering service and kindness in a time of great need and sorrow.

Because of the illness, the funeral was held at the home, with those attending having to stay outside wearing masks. Grandmother Christina was dressed by the Relief Society in her wedding dress and looked so beautiful. A few words were said by one of the brethren, and a few songs were sung, including "Sometime, Somewhere We'll Understand", "We Shall Meet Beyond the River," and "Oh My Father." On December 26, the day after Christmas, they put her

coffin on a borrowed buggy while Grandpa with his team and buggy followed behind. The ground was frozen and the casket bounced and bounced as they traveled the long bumpy dirt road to the cemetery. At the cemetery a hole had been dug. When Carl looked into the hole he saw that there was a lot of near frozen water at the bottom of it. The thought of his beautiful mother being put into the hole and into the freezing water was almost more than his little 10 year old heart could bear. My own father (George) could never talk about that part of his mother's passing, so hurt was he as a 12 year old boy witnessing these events. The events and the somber scene were painful for the entire family. Yet it did not deter their faith!

After the burial, relatives and others told Grandpa that he would obviously need to farm out the children to different homes, with one relative saying they would take this or that child to care for them and another volunteering to care for another. But Grandpa Andrew, who had himself been raised much of his youth by his father without a mother in the home, refused. He told them, "You won't take my children! As long as I have two hands, I'll do the best I can and we'll keep our family together."

For three years he raised and cared for his young children by himself. In the summers he cared for them by himself. In the winter months he hired other ladies to come help. When he was by himself, every morning Grandpa made baking soda biscuits for the children. He tried his best for his children, but he was no match for the cooking and talents of their deceased mother. Even the women who came to help could not fill the void Grandma Christina had left. Nor did the hired women who helped during the winter months have the love for my father and uncles and aunt that they as children so longed for.

The hired women would stay in the house, while Grandpa, my dad, and my uncles (Carl and Orson) slept in a drafty, leaky, unheated shack outside. It was so cold that often they would wake to icicles hanging from their quilt. Despite the hardships, Grandpa was not released from his calling and continued serving as Bishop. And even with all of the burdens he was carrying as both father and mother, farmer, bishop, justice of the peace, along quietly carrying and dealing with his own grief, he was selfless with his service and his time. He always found time for anyone in need of his wise counsel or encouragement. Because of his selflessness and willingness to spend whatever time was needed with anyone needing to talk to him, his farm and livelihood suffered. He would help everyone else first, choosing to accept help or do his own work only after he was sure that others he had stewardship over had their needs met before being concerned for his own needs.

One cold winter night, after a bishops meeting, Grandpa returned home to the little shack he and the boys slept in. He kneeled down to the side of the bed where he and Carl slept. There, on that cold cold floor in the drafty, leaky, uninsulated and unheated shack, he pled with the Lord in prayer. Uncle Carl who was in bed but not yet asleep heard and never forgot that prayer. Grandpa told the Lord that he was lonely, that he needed a companion, and his family needed some help. He prayed that the Lord would open the way and send a companion.

A Miracle – And A Living Saint

The Lord did hear and answer Grandpa's prayer. That spring a sweet lady named Johanna Sorenson came. She had come over from Denmark alone sometime earlier. She worked in Salt Lake for a period of time and Grandpa heard about her from some mutual friends and relatives. Grandpa wrote to her explaining the situation and asked if she would like to come and be his cook. Bless her heart – she agreed to come!

Dad, along with all of the other children, remember that first day when this angel first came on the scene in their lives. It was spring in Idaho and the mud was a foot and a half deep on the roads. Grandpa had gone into town to get her in the wagon, which had a spring seat way up on top of the side boards. As the wagon approached in the distance, Dad, Carl and Orson were all there in the yard watching. They saw Grandpa and a lady in a blue serge suit sitting way up there on that seat. When the wagon reached the house, Grandpa helped this lovely lady down and introduced her. She shook hands with each of the children, quietly said hello, and went into the house. This was about 4:30 in the afternoon. At 6:00 sharp the word came, "Would you folks like to have something to eat? Supper is ready." Despite her having little in the house to work with, Dad went in and found the most wonderful meal on the table. This woman knew how to take what there was and make a meal. Breakfast the next morning was the same way.

While Dad, Carl and Orson were out by the barn feeding the cattle the next morning, Grandpa came over to the boys and asked, "Well, what do you think of her?" Almost in unison they replied, "Oh, she's too good for us." They all felt that she was surely too classy for them and their humble circumstances.

But that saintly woman stayed anyway. She was the sweetest woman. She could make the best pie and she baked the best meals. On summer evenings, Grandpa and this sweet lady could be seen out on the porch talking and enjoying visiting together. Not long after that, they were married in the Logan temple.

Grandma Johanna was a delightful woman. She had a wonderful sense of humor coupled with a down to earth practicality about her. She and Grandpa had three more children together, but Grandma Johanna never treated my Dad or any of the other children as if they were not her own. Perhaps most importantly, she did want saintly women do – she loved my dad and all of Grandpa's children.

Once, Steven (a son who was later born to Grandpa and Grandma Johanna) came home from school and said, "Mother, the kids at school tell me that George, Carl and Orson are just my half brothers. Is that right?" Grandma Johanna laughed and said, "Well, if that's right, then where is the other half?" And that settled the matter. No one ever questioned again whether they were a family and truly brothers and sisters.

Another time, she again displayed her wisdom, her love for these children of Grandpa's as her own, and her own unselfishness and selflessness for the sake of Grandma Christina's children. As a teenager, one of dad's brothers got off track and was doing things he should not do. When it came to a head with a hot-headed teenager creating a lot of contention in the home, Grandma Johanna told my uncle, "We can't have this. I don't want my boys (her own young sons born to her and my Grandpa) being brought up in this environment." To which my uncle shot back with typical teenage bravado, "You won't have to worry about it. I'll leave." My father jumped in and said that if his brother was leaving, Dad would leave too and go with him. True to their word and Grandma Johanna's determination that she couldn't have her own children subjected to the bad example of this uncle, both Dad and my uncle went and began packing their things and preparing to leave. Yet this sweet saint knew how to handle the situation in the Lord's way and she had the faith to do it. Rather than cling to her pride, she came to where the boys were, put her arms around Dad and my uncle and quietly said, "Don't go boys. I've been out there. It's a cruel old rough world. Don't go. Stay. We'll work it out somehow." And they did.

Every one of those children of Grandpa Andrew and Grandma Christina adored Grandma Johanna to their dying day. I never heard anything from any of them about Grandma Johanna my entire life except praise, love, and respect for her. For Grandpa, his prayers had been answered and the Lord had sent him a companion. For his grieving children who missed their mother and for whom life had been so hard, they had a new mother. And oh what a wonderful mother she was!

Life was still difficult. Grandpa was at risk of losing his farm, his house, and all he had worked for. Rather than take out bankruptcy he and Grandma chose to move to a very poor farm and rented a run down house, vowing to pay back every dime – if not in this life, then in the next – a promise he and Grandma Johanna were able to fulfill years later. About that time, my Dad was also on a mission to Germany, which was also about the time of the Great Depression. At a particularly difficult time financially for the entire family, Dad was also having a difficult time on his mission to the point where it looked like he would have to return home for lack of money to remain. It was at this critical time that Grandma Johanna's own mother passed away in Denmark, leaving her a modest amount of money. Without hesitation, Grandma Johanna rejoiced that they now had a way to help my Dad stay on his mission. She selflessly used that money for him, a young man who was not even her own son but one who she loved as though he were.

Because of her love and selflessness in all that she did, Grandma Johanna was loved and adored by not only Grandma Christina's children, but also by succeeding generations, including myself.

Grandpa passed away at the age of 78, leaving Grandma Johanna a widow for 23 years. Though left alone, Grandma Johanna never lost her faith nor her humor. She used the time to do temple work. For several years during the winter months as Grandma grew older, she came and lived with our family in Idaho Falls. Dad would take her to the Idaho Falls temple every day on his way to work, and I would pick her up after school after she'd spent the day at the temple. What a blessing that was for me as a young man to witness her dedication and selfless temple service. Rather than complain, Grandma Johanna looked at her blessings. She often said, "I never dreamed that I could have done this. I have prayed all my life that I might be able to go to the temple and do work for the dead. I never thought that the opportunity would come to me." In the three years she lived with our family she was able to do the endowments for over 1000 people, and did many more in other temples.

Another example of her selfless attitude and faithfulness was her perspective on the hard life she had walked into by accepting that job as a cook for my widowed Grandfather, and on the years of being left alone widowed herself. "Had it not been for your father [Grandpa Andrew]," she told my own dad several times, "I probably never would have married. I never would have had children of my own, and I never would have been able to do this work. I hope Andrew and Christina are happy." Even though widowed and alone, Grandma Johanna refused to allow jealousy or petty thoughts into in her life. She expressed gladness that Grandpa Andrew and Grandma Christina could have the time together alone in the next world for a while before joining them when her time came. True to the faith, Grandma Johanna never had a bad thing to say about anyone and found the good in all.

Selfless to the end. Loving and kind and always looking at the big picture. Truly this woman was a saint, an angel sent in answer to prayer, and a modern day miracle! As grandchildren, and great grandchildren, she is our grandmother! We all claim her! And we all love her, because as did the savior with his perfect example, *she loved us first.*