

Tuberculosis - The Tragic Story Of The Bernhard Olson Family

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streptomycin and other anti-tuberculous drugs were developed that TB could be effectively controlled and sanatoriums soon became no longer needed. The Otter Tail County Sanatorium closed in 1955 and was converted into a nursing home.

Tuberculosis still exists and plagues mankind to this day, with an estimated half a million new cases per year worldwide.

The Olson's Tragedy

In 1933, Nellie Olson fell ill and was diagnosed with tuberculosis. She was admitted to the Otter Tail County Sanatorium for treatment shortly after, but her health continued to decline. Nellie Olson died on July 3, 1934, at the OTC Sanatorium. She left behind her husband and thirteen children, the youngest just four years old. Nellie was 49 years old.

Bernhard and Nellie's 19-year-old son, Harold, who served as a pallbearer at his mother's funeral, suddenly took ill a week later. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis of the intestines and sent to the sanatorium for treatment and then to the Fergus Falls hospital for surgery. The disease had already progressed rapidly, and he couldn't be saved. He died on July 31, 1934, four weeks to the day after his mother. He was buried next to his mother in the South Immanuel cemetery.

The grief Bernhard and the children experienced must have been intense. But it would get worse.

Then a daughter, Bernice, just twelve years old, developed TB. She became the third family member to die at the OTC Sanatorium in 1940. Her older sister, Gladys, age 18, followed her to the grave in 1943. Both are buried in the Olson family plot at South Immanuel.

The "Forgotten Plague" hadn't



Bernhard Olson Family c1928 – This photo of the Bernhard Olson family was taken in 1928, about two years before the youngest daughter, Beulah, was born. Over the next two decades, the "Forgotten Plague" would claim the lives of five of the family members. (Photo from the Olson family collection)

forgotten the Olson family yet.

Clifford Olson contracted TB and entered the county sanatorium in 1941. He recovered after four years and was released for a time, but the disease returned, and he couldn't be cured. Clifford died at the sanatorium in 1945, at the age of 32.

The Dark Cloud Had a Silver Lining

Bernhard Olson must have thought that entering the TB sanatorium was a death sentence. He had lost his wife and four children to tuberculosis, and two more children had been stricken with it. Did they have a death sentence too?

Fortunately, they both were able to recover. A son survived his fight with TB and went on to get married,

raise a family, and celebrate holidays with grandchildren. He lived a long, happy life.

Beulah Olson, the youngest of the children who lost her mother when she was only four, survived TB as well, but it was also difficult. She was diagnosed with TB at age 11 when in sixth grade and sent to the sanatorium in 1941. The "Battle Lake San," as she called it, became her home for the next 4 ½ years. She was a patient there when her siblings, Gladys and Clifford, were patients and died. It must have been difficult for her, wondering if she would die too. But she had strong faith, she

prayed, and put her trust in God.

She learned how to knit and crochet from other patients. Beulah was unable to continue her education beyond 6th grade but was somehow able to receive a Christian education. She was confirmed in 1944 at the South Immanuel Lutheran Church.

Beulah's health improved, and she was discharged, but only for a few years. She was forced to go back in the late 1940s. This time she met another patient who told her that a cousin, Marlyn Westby from Pelican Rapids, had just entered the air force. The friend suggested that Beulah send him a letter, so she did. A pen

pal romance began with Marlyn frequently making the long trip from Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska to visit her.

After Beulah was able to leave the sanatorium and Marlyn was discharged from the air force, their romance blossomed. They were married in 1954 and began their family.

The "Walker San"

After the birth of the Westby's first daughter, Laurie, the TB lingering in Beulah's lungs became active for the third time, and she required sanatorium care again. But this time with a five-month-old baby girl she would have to leave behind. The baby needed more care than Marlyn could provide while holding a job. But fortunately, they had strong family support, and Beulah's brother and sister-in-law, Ernest and Marian Olson, took over caring for the young baby.

By 1955 the Otter Tail County Sanatorium had closed, leaving the Minnesota State Sanatorium, Agawah-ching, near Walker, as the best place for her treatment. While she was there, she gave birth to another daughter, Penny. Now Ernest and Marian Olson would have another baby to care for as well.

"Everyone cared for each other, and it was only natural to help those

in need," recalled Ernest's daughter.

While in treatment at the "Walker San," Beulah's health improved, and she was discharged after a year.

In 1956, the young Westby family wanted to start a new life and decided to move to Seattle, WA, where they added two more children to their home. Marlyn's career at Boeing paid well, and they were able to retire to Arizona. Beulah and Marlyn both passed in 2012 after 58 years of marriage. They are buried in the Pelican Valley Cemetery in Pelican Rapids.

I first heard of the Bernhard Olson family's tragedy with tuberculosis when I was put in contact with Laurie (Westby) Cannon, the oldest daughter of Marlyn and Beulah Westby and the granddaughter of Bernhard and Nellie Olson. She wanted to know how to donate an old family photo album to the Otter Tail County Museum because it has pictures taken of her family while patients at the county sanatorium in the 1940s.

Laurie told me the family's story. I found it fascinating, tragic, and heartwarming at the same time. I suggested it should be shared as many other area families likely had similar experiences with tuberculosis. She agreed, and I thank her for contributing to this article.



Beulah Confirmation 1944 – Although Beulah could not continue her education beyond 6th grade, she received a Christian education and was confirmed in 1944 at the South Immanuel Lutheran Church. (Photo from the Olson family collection)



Beulah, Bernice, Gladys 1937 – The three youngest Olson daughters were all affected by tuberculosis in the following years, claiming the lives of Bernice (in the middle with the guitar) in 1940 and Gladys on the right in 1943. The youngest, Beulah, would survive the disease. (Photo from the Olson family collection)



Clifford, Beulah 1943 – At one time, Beulah was at the OTC Sanatorium with her brother Clifford and sister Gladys. This picture of Clifford and Beulah Olson (right) was taken in 1943 at the sanatorium shortly after Gladys' death. TB would claim Clifford's life two years later, in 1945. The woman on the left is not identified. (Photo from the Olson family collection)

County Offers High School Students Career Exploration

More than 150 students from around Otter Tail County had the opportunity to explore future careers in high-demand industries. The Otter Tail County Youth Workforce Navigation Program organized field trips to 11 businesses representing the agriculture, automotive, healthcare, and manufacturing industries between October and January.

Students from Perham, New York Mills, Henning, Fergus Falls, Underwood, Parkers Prairie, Ashby, and Rothsay high schools attended the field trips to learn more about

career pathways in these industries.

The goal of the field trips was to show students interested in these industries that there are several pathways to choose from they may not know about yet, and these opportunities are available in Otter Tail County. For example, the automotive field trip showed students pathways in service and maintenance, sales, auto body repair and restoration, fleet management, and Commercial Driver's License (CDL).

The healthcare field trip showed students pathways in surgery,



The Youth Workforce Navigation program helped organize this group of participants from Otter Tail County schools to visit Pioneer Care to learn about healthcare related careers.



A group of Otter Tail County high school students learn a little something about trucks and the work place.

emergency services, long-term and memory care, nutrition services, healthcare information technology (IT), and more. The field trips were offered to students ages 16 and up and were made possible in part by the Youth Skills Training Grant, which Otter Tail County received from the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry.

Otter Tail County is partnering with Amy Johnson of Cardinal Consulting Solutions to be the Program Manager of the Youth Workforce Navigation Program and organize the field trips. Johnson shared about her experience attending field trips, "The most exciting part for me is to be able to witness firsthand when a student finds their spark to define a career path. Regardless of industry, that moment is the reward of this work. The value of our youth holding a defined career path is unmeasurable. Finding this spark affects their journey, the workforce, and even holds economic impact.

It's limitless, and it's impossible without these opportunities of career exposure and experience. Given the workforce shortage, it's imperative to offer these career experiences to high school students who are not so far from away from entering the workforce."

The Youth Workforce Navigation Program is building the future workforce of Otter Tail County and bridging relationships between schools and businesses. More field trips will be planned in the future. Businesses interested in engaging with students through business tours, classroom presentations, or internships can register on the K12 Navigator online tool. Schools throughout Otter Tail County are using the K12 Navigator tool to find businesses willing to offer career exploration experiences for their students.

Otter Tail County encourages employers of all sizes and industries to register their company on the K12

Navigator at www.k12navigator.org. More information about the K12 Navigator and the Youth Workforce Navigation Program can be shared by contacting Amy Johnson at ajohnson@ccsworkforce.com.

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