



History Nugget: Nels Martinson

Nels Martinson was a quiet man. He was born in 1838 in Sweden, six years before his half-brother Otto Martinson, who eventually became well-known in Wichita for his real-estate developments. Nels was the quiet one.

He came to America in the 1860's and settled in Andersonville, Indiana, a Swedish community near Chicago. There he learned English and gained his citizenship papers. He also married the love of his life, Nellie. Martinson family lore says that they met and fell in love while onboard the ship from Sweden. In 1866 while still in Andersonville, Charles was born, followed by Frank in 1869.

In 1870 both Otto and Nels claimed homesteads along the Cowskin Creek--Otto in July and Nels in September. The brothers likely came to America on the same ship, but they arrived in Wichita separately; Otto came with a friend, then Nels came with his family. Apparently little Charles died before the move.

Nels's homestead was the 160 acres at southwest corner of Maize and Central. He built a dugout on the west bank of the Cowskin behind where Dillons stands today, and the family settled in.

In 1871, Lulu was born. According to the Martinson family, she was the first white baby born in Sedgwick County west of the Arkansas River.

After Lulu's birth, Nels built a snug little farmhouse, and he continued to work his land. He didn't socialize much, not like his out-going brother, and he really wasn't very fond of farming. He would much rather watch his little ones play, see his wife smile, or read a good book, yet he was content.

Then in 1874, Nellie gave birth to twin girls. Little Kathrine was healthy, but the other baby and their mother died. Nels was beside himself with grief, to the point that he couldn't function. Otto stepped in to take care of the funeral arrangements. Nellie and the baby were buried on the west side of the Cowskin. Sadly, the location of the grave has been lost.

Nels was despondent. Otto tried to help with the farm and the children, but he was a single man with a farm of his own. He could only do so much. Out of desperation, Nels sent Lulu to Chicago to live with an aunt. Baby Kathrine

was given to the William Finn family to raise as their own. Callous as this sounds, it was not an uncommon practice in those days, and Mr. Finn was an educated man who had been Wichita's first school teacher.

After the girls were gone, Nels became a near recluse, even though he still had Frank who was about five years old. He did venture off the homestead to go to the Swanson's, the next farm to the north. Mr. Swanson had a large collection of books in Swedish, and he gladly loaned them to Nels. Apparently Nels could find some comfort through reading.

Perhaps it was something he read that gave him an ingenious idea. Then—as now—a variety of varmints roamed the creek. To keep his chickens safe from marauding predators, Nels built a chicken coop up in a tree. When it was time to gather the eggs, he would just climb up the ladder he had nailed to the tree.

Frank helped run the farm until 1893, when he left to join the Cherokee Strip Land Run. He staked a claim on the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River in Grant County, Oklahoma. Eventually Nels went to live with Frank, but just when is uncertain. He passed away in 1921.

In 1906, Sedgwick County bought a piece of Martinson land, and in 1911 the Swanson's purchased a parcel. Fellow Swede John Carlson bought the rest of the homestead in 1917. The Carlson family farmed the land until 1955 when they began to sell off parcels for development.

There is very little written about Nels Martinson, and there's nothing but his name on a map to mark his homestead. But this quiet, studious man did make a contribution to the settlement of far west Wichita.

Below is his gravestone in Lamont Cemetery, Grant County, Oklahoma; only Nels is actually buried there. The stone was placed by Kathrine and her family.



Many thanks to Don Martinson, Nels's great-nephew.