

Arvo's Heartbreak

By Frances Harrington

My 2nd Great Aunt, Laura Frank was born December 13, 1873 in Ylitornio, Finland to Alexander and Maria Greta Frank. In 1887, at the age of 14, she immigrated with her older sister Anna. They moved to Duluth, Minnesota and stayed with their other sister, my Great Grandmother, Olga and her husband August Johnson who came to the United States in 1881.

Laura was a beautiful woman and in 1893, at the age of 19, married 24-year-old John Matt Miettunen who had come to the US the same year she did. In 1894, their daughter, Aili (pronounced Allie) was born. Eight years later, their only son Arvo was born.

Aili grew up and married Lieutenant John Saari in June 1918. John was a doctor assigned to the Medical Readiness Corp and they were living in Chicago, Illinois awaiting his orders.

In 1918, Laura, John, and Arvo were living in Brookston, Minnesota (a town 27 miles west of Duluth). They had a small store where Arvo worked along side his father. The main industries in that area were lumbering, iron ore mining, and farming. This kept the railroads busy with shipments of ore and lumber and their daily passenger runs. The tracks of the Great Northern railroad ran just outside of town. At milepost 62, private lumber contractors would stack piles and piles of wood materials, such as pulpwood, cordwood, fence posts and telephone poles on either side of the tracks to be loaded on the railcars as they stopped there. Because of the lumbering, the forests were littered with lumber waste, (saw dust, wood chips, twigs, branches, etc.). This waste was supposed to be cleaned up periodically but it wasn't always done like it should have been. Conditions in the area had been extremely dry for the past two years. In fact, it was the driest it had seen in over 40 years. Take the dry weather and add dry wood and sparks from passing trains and you have a disaster waiting to happen.

Locomotives burned coal for fuel. For safety purposes the locomotives were supposed to have screens covering the stacks to catch the sparks and bits of burning coal from escaping. Many of the engineers made the holes in the screens larger (or removed the screens altogether) because they felt it

restricted the airflow and prevented the coal from burning as hot as it could which in turn reduced their speeds. On Thursday, October 10th, several small brush fires had started along the tracks because of these sparks. This wasn't uncommon. Most of the time, the people in the area along with the railroad workers would extinguish them when they saw the smoke. On Friday, October 11th, several of those small fires had started along the tracks with a larger fire near milepost 62. Several men and railroad workers from the area, along with John Miettunen and his bookkeeper Ray Paukka, worked through the night to put the fire out. They returned to their homes and jobs exhausted leaving the smoldering embers to die out on their own. Later Saturday morning, October 12th, a cold front came through and drastically lowered the humidity. Then the winds slowly started to pick up. Soon those smoldering embers turned into flames. This time the fire grew so large the men weren't able to put it out. All the lumber products stored at milepost 62 were now on fire. The winds kept increasing and soon the area was covered in black smoke and flames. The fire quickly spread in different directions with most of it heading right toward Brookston.

Around 3 p.m. Laura, John, Arvo, and Ray Paukka, decided it was time to leave so they hopped in their vehicle and headed to Cloquet where they thought they would be safe. Arvo, 16 at the time, was driving. Laura was in the front with him and the 2 men were in the back. The fire seemed to be coming in all directions and they could hear it roar. The high winds were blowing trees down and the thick black smoke was everywhere. Arvo was driving about 50 mph and didn't see the tree that had fallen across the road and the vehicle plowed into it. Laura went flying through the windshield. The 2 men in the back were also thrown from the car and landed in a patch of fire. It was the steering wheel that kept Arvo from being thrown out like the others but he was still injured. Dazed, he got out to look for his mother. He was devastated when he found her 30 feet away dead from a broken neck. Even though badly injured, the 3 men managed to make it to the nearby St. Louis River. The woods on either side of the river were on fire and even the logs coming down the river were burning. The men made their way into the water to escape the fire. They not only had to dodge the flaming logs but also the debris that came with the high winds. They stayed in the water until night and then went on shore. They huddled together by a big rock trying to avoid the winds and the ground that was still burning. In the morning they made it to the railroad tracks where they were finally rescued. The three men ended up in the

hospital in serious condition. Eventually, they were well enough to be released. (I would have said, “well enough to go back home” but they had no home to go back to, Brookston was burned to the ground.)

Throughout that Saturday the fires had grown and spread out connecting with other fires. The winds grew to around 70 miles an hour. Houses exploded from the intense heat sending burning wood everywhere. Pieces of flaming wood, sparks, and fireballs flew through the air and landed on houses or in fields and started more fires or struck and killed people as they tried to escape. Survivors later said the fire was so huge that it looked like a wall of flames 100 feet high and at times was 10 miles wide. The heat from the fire was so high some survivors had blisters without actually being touched by the flames. Many tried to escape the flames by driving their vehicles or horse drawn wagons loaded with family and neighbors right into lakes and rivers – not all survived. Entire families hid in root cellars and down in wells hoping to be safe from the flames only to be smothered by the smoke. People lost track of family and friends who only moments before were right next to them, never to be seen again. On one road, 15 vehicles full of people piled up on each other when the drivers couldn't see the sharp turn. They died when smoke and flames overcame them. By the time the winds finally died down around 11 p.m. the fires had just reached the outskirts of Duluth. Luckily most of the city was spared. Small fires continued to burn for days until it finally rained.

There are many more tragic stories from this fire. Stories of mothers and fathers who could only identify their children by their shoes or buttons or other pieces of clothing that weren't completely destroyed by the fire. There were loved ones who were never found or who just couldn't be identified. Entire towns had been burned to the ground. At least 600 people died and 1500 square miles were burned including: 38 communities, 41 schools, 4,000 homes, 6,300 barns and over 1,000 farm animals died. It is estimated 52,000 people were affected, injured, or displaced by this tragedy. The survivors who had no place to live overran hospitals, public buildings, private homes, farms or any other place they could find for miles around. Some people were even taken in by residents in nearby Wisconsin.

Many of the survivors later died because of their weakened conditions due to smoke inhalation and/or burns. Besides the fire there was a pandemic going on that saw its deadliest months in October and November that year and with

the overcrowding many became infected. Dead bodies had to be piled on top of each other waiting to be identified and buried. Some that could not be identified or had no family left to claim them were buried in mass graves.

Because of the pandemic, public funerals and open caskets were not allowed. Laura Miettunen's body was never recovered. She was the first official casualty of that ungodly fire. They held a memorial service at my Great Grandmother Olga's house a few days after her death.

Young Arvo's had a cousin, Hilma, who had gotten sick and was unable to visit him in the hospital so she wrote to him instead. She asked him what had happened that tragic day. He wrote back on October 28th explaining the death of his mother. In the letter he also mentioned that his sister Ailie, who was in Chicago, had gotten sick but was "almost completely well". He ended his letter by writing "you never know what a friend you have in your mother until you lose her".

Arvo's sister Ailie and her unborn child died of the Spanish Flu two days after that letter was written on October 30th. Her body was sent to Duluth to be buried next to the grave that was marked for her mother. Three days later, his cousin Hilma died of the same dreaded disease. My Great Grandmother Olga lost her sister, her niece, and her own daughter, all within 3 weeks time.

At only 16 years old, Arvo experienced that massive wall of flames chasing him and his family down, had been in an accident that killed his mother and seriously injured him and his father, was left homeless, and then had his only sister and his beloved cousin die from that deadly pandemic within days of each other. Even though it was not his fault, he felt responsible for his mother's death because he was the one driving. Arvo and John moved in with my Great Grandparents until they could get back on their feet. Arvo later went back to school and even on to college. He changed his name and got married. Try as he might, he was never able to put that nightmare and the heartbreak he suffered behind him. Arvo died of alcoholism at the age of 34.

Information taken from the Pine Journal.com, Waymaking.com, Minnesotagoodage.com, mnopedia.com, the Duluth Tribune, "Minnesota 1918 When Flu, Fire, and War Ravaged the State" by Curt Brown, "The Fires of Autumn" by Francis M Carroll and Franklin R. Raiter, Arvo's letter and other personal family correspondence.