

Norwegian Sea Chest Revised Provenance

The sea chest measurements are: width 32"; height 19"; depth 16". It has been in the possession of my family since at least 1935 when I was born. The inside lock mechanism is intact, though the key is missing. The hardware appears to be hand-made and is also intact. The chest's internal and external finish is original and includes a yellow and blue painted band around the edge of the domed lid and the following inscription on the front panel on either side of the key hole:

Johan Johansen --- Bjorkli 1859

In this context, "*Bjorkli*" is one of many "farm names" such as Lernes, Ness, and Lian common to the region around Hemne, Norway and to our family.

For most of my life, the origin of this chest was a mystery. Now, with the great help of Agnar Merkesnes in Hemne, Norway and Melanie Moser in the US, whose mother-in-law is a descendant of Johan Johansen Bjorkli Sr., the history of the chest has become more, if not totally, clear. Agnar maintains a geneology web site in Hemne - called Hemneslekt - which has extremely detailed information on local families, much of it from church records, including dates of birth, death, and emigration. Details follow.

I was born in 1935 and, as a youngster in Minneapolis, I became fascinated with the chest which resided for many years in our basement. When I asked my mother where it came from, she only told me that it had belonged originally to a "relative" of her mother's. Her mother, my grandmother, was Ann Bendiksd Lernes who married my grandfather Anders Knudsen Ness (Andrew Knutson) in Canby Minnesota in 1881. Both Ann and Andrew were born in Hemne, Norway. Andrew, along with his parents and first wife, settled in Canby in 1872. Andrew continued to farm there for over 40 years.

What the Hemneslekt web site reveals is that Johan Johansen Bjorkli, Sr. was born in Hemne on 27 May 1824 and married Eli Eriksdtr. Lernes who was the sister of my grandmother Knutson's father. Johan and Eli were therefore aunt and uncle to my grandmother Ann. They had five children, including a son, Johan Johansen Bjorkli, Jr. (b. 21 Sep 1853 in Hemne, d. 1926 Abilene, KS, USA). The entire family emigrated from Hemne to Canby in 1881. One son, Eric, stayed on in Canby and died there in 1917. What happened to the parents and two of the children is not known.

The date painted on the chest is 1859, presumably when it was built, when Johan Sr. would have been about 35 years old and Johan Jr., about 6. What remains unclear is which Johan the chest belonged to and how exactly it came into the possession of my grandmother Ann. We'll probably never know. In any event, I am proud to be the current owner.

Gene Yeates
Orford, NH
January 2015



Norwegian Sea Chest 002



Norwegian Sea Chest 003



Norwegian Sea Chest 005