

A Rose Branch on the Family Tree

by Jordan Hofer

My grandmother, Mary Hofer, passed away recently at the age of 95. As I reflect on the impact she has had on my life, I thought it would be of interest to those affiliated with Children's Home Society to know the significant impact Children's Home Society had on her life.

My grandmother always adored the fact that I was a teacher at Children's Home Society. Her mother, Rose, was orphaned as a young child in 1896 and was placed at Children's Home Society until a foster family was eventually found for her.



I would like to share a story with you about my family, more specifically about Rose, my great grandmother. Until very recently, our family had no information about how she came to be placed at Children's Home Society. The only thing we knew was that Rose had been at Children's Home Society as a young orphan around 1896. My family has a very complete family tree that traces our ancestry back in all directions, except for Rose's branch. It's been a dead-end - kind of a mystery - that left some family members feeling curious, unsatisfied, and itching to figure out.

My father, for reasons I will explain at the end of the story, became especially drawn to figure out this missing piece of our family puzzle. Who was Rose exactly? How had she come to be at Children's Home Society? What events had unfolded that had brought her to an orphanage at such a young age?

The following is what he discovered. I suppose I should also put some kind of a warning at the get-to, as there are details to the history which are disturbing and distasteful, to say the least. I don't suspect anyone will be too unnerved, but please know you may be in for a little bit of a bumpy ride. I hope you enjoy the tale.

As I said, my grandmother's mother was Rose. Rose Ness to be precise. That we knew. But what we didn't know was that prior to being placed at Children's Home Society, Rose was born in 1891 to her parents, Christian and Eliza Christensen in Clark County, South Dakota.

Christian and Eliza were married in February 1890. Eliza's married life to Christian was short and tragic, to say the least. Eliza filed several legal complaints against Christian, beginning in 1891, just one year after their marriage.

In one of the first complaints to Clark County, Eliza accused Christian of routine beatings that made her life unbearable. She petitioned the court for a divorce from Christian and custody of their children. Her petition for divorce was denied, which apparently was quite common in those days, on the grounds that her husband denied the allegations and was not agreeable to the divorce, and that the complaints of routine beatings were not sufficient cause for a court-ordered divorce to be implemented.

Eliza didn't give up her attempts to free herself from Christian, however. Later that same year of 1891, she brought forth another complaint of "cruel and inhumane treatment" to the Clark County courts. This complaint included reports of more physical abuse, as well as being provided inadequate clothing from her husband. As she put it, she had "no shoes, one worn out dress, and no hat." She also included in the complaint that shortly after their marriage in 1890, Christian's physical beatings had caused the miscarriage of their first unborn child. She insisted, "My life is in danger if I continue to live with the defendant." This legal complaint was, again, denied and no legal action was taken against Christian.

Incredibly, Eliza filed another complaint in 1891 against her husband, this time with the testimony of her sister's husband, Hans Olsen. No doubt, she hoped the testimony of a man would somehow convince the court to take her complaints seriously. Hans testified that he had seen Eliza covered in bruises, up and down her back, sides, and legs. He testified that the bruises appeared to be caused by some kind of "heavy stick or object." He corroborated Eliza's previous statements of lack of adequate clothing and shoes. He even testified that Christian had admitted to him on multiple occasions of the abuse he had inflicted on Eliza. Ultimately, the Clark County court dismissed this complaint as well. Christian, of course, continued to deny the allegations and, as the court put it, divorce was not feasible since "Eliza cannot work and the Olsens are not in a position to support her."

It seems at that point, Eliza likely gave up any hope or illusions that she would be able to free herself from Christian. There were no more legal complaints brought by her to Clark County after 1891.

The next time Clark County got involved in the marriage of Eliza and Christian was shortly after Eliza's dead body was found hanging from a tree near their home in 1896.

According to Eliza's tombstone, she was found dead in May 1896 at the age of 27. Christian was charged with her murder. He, of course, denied any wrong-doing and insisted that she must have committed suicide. She was, after all, found hung by the neck from a tree. Her complaints of suffering and unhappiness were well-documented, so escaping her miserable life by



suicide was completely understandable. The details of the court case were not well-documented, but the court ultimately rejected Christian's testimony. He was found guilty of premeditated murder. The evidence presented in court showed that he had first poisoned Eliza with arsenic, then strangled her, and then finally hung her dead body from the tree to stage a suicide. Christian was sentenced to life in prison, specifically "a life of hard labor in the penitentiary."

With Eliza dead and Christian in prison, there was no one (apparently) willing or able to care for their two young children, Rose and Curtis. Rose would have been orphaned around the age of 4 or 5, with her brother about two years younger than her.

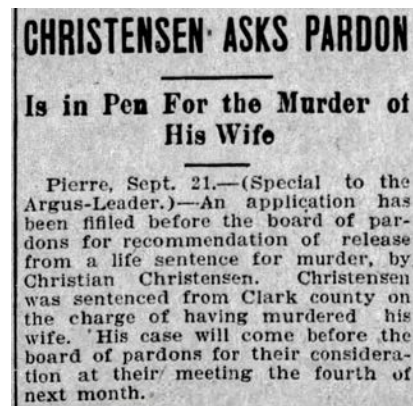


We know both Rose and Curtis were placed at Children's Home Society somewhere around 1896, just a few years after the organization was founded. We aren't sure how much time they spent at Children's Home Society, but we do know that a foster family was found for them, and they were both placed with John and Lena Ness, who had no children of their own. The couple's decision to take in Rose and her brother was prompted by the urging of their pastor, Reverend Henry Solem of West Prairie Lutheran Church, who was actively involved with Children's Home Society at the time.

John and Lena lived on a farm somewhere in the vicinity of Worthing, South Dakota. Rose lived the remainder of her childhood with John and Lena Ness. Eventually, she married a member of another (unrelated) Ness family, Carl Ness, and became officially Rose Ness. Rose and Carl had 15 children, including my grandmother, number 11, Mary Ann Ness in 1928. Rose died at the age of 59.



The rest, as they say, is history. And we now know how Rose came to be placed at Children's Home Society so many years ago. But there are a few more interesting footnotes to this story.



Perhaps the most disturbing development was that Christian, the convicted murderer of his wife, repeatedly applied for a pardon beginning in 1905, less than 10 years after the murder. He was eventually granted a pardon by the board of pardons in 1911 and subsequently moved to Wisconsin, presumably to escape his legal past and start with a blank slate as an unknown in a distant state. I will include a newspaper clipping from 1905, documenting his first request for a pardon.

Some years after moving to Wisconsin, Christian began communicating with his daughter Rose, probably in the 1930's. Although Christian never returned to South Dakota, he did send Rose a significant amount of money - presumably out of guilt for his crimes - that Rose and her husband used to buy 80 acres of farmland just north of the Ness family farm. Later in life, she sold their farmland and used the money to help purchase the original Ness family farm that she had been raised on. Amazing that she would wind up owning and carrying on the legacy of the farm onto which she had been lovingly taken in so many years before.

The impact of Children's Home Society on Rose's life is hard to overstate. As a young female orphan in 1896, her life could have unfolded very differently. But through the efforts of a new local charity, Children's Home Society took her in, cared for her, and was able to identify a local family to raise her. This not only directly impacted Rose, but all her future descendents, including my Grandmother, my father, and now me.

Until last year, our family knew nothing of Rose's parents, Eliza and Christian. It was my father who became especially interested in answering the questions that had gone unanswered for so long. He wound up going on quite a journey to discover the tragic details of Christian and Eliza Christensen. The quest involved wasn't fast or easy, but it was one of discovery. Although the reasons for Rose's placement at Children's Home Society are grievous and upsetting, they are the truth. And the truth is what my father was searching for.

The reason for my father's search carries with it sorrowful echoes from the past. In our family, there has been an ill-understood phrase used from time to time - "The Curse of the Ness." In today's vernacular, it might be better understood as "The Generational Trauma of the Ness Family." Knowing the whole story now, "The Curse of Christian Christensen" would be a more accurate description, as the Ness family is really the savior of the story, not the curse.

But at any rate, the "Curse of the Ness" was a phrase in my family that was murkily understood and sparingly used. This curse seemed to attach itself to various offspring of Rose. Keep in mind, this notion of a Ness family curse predated any knowledge of Eliza's murder by Christian. The family had no knowledge of those events. We simply had a knowledge that bad things and sorrowful events often seemed to haunt certain branches of the Ness family tree. Things like death, suicide, and depression seemed to be peppered-in amongst the tree branches more often than could merely be coincidence, it seemed.

My father had recently experienced first-hand some events that nearly brought his own life to a premature end. Fortunately, whatever curse there may be wasn't able to finish him off, and his life is now a testament to the power of Love over Fear, shattering the curse's power once and for all, at least in my mind. But that is what led him to seek the information included in this history and why our family now knows the truth about how Rose came to be at Children's Home Society.

Rose's legacy lives on. Her daughter, my grandmother Mary, who just passed away, lived a long life, blessed with family and love in abundance. Mary leaves behind a loving husband of 75 years. She may not have had 15 children like Rose, but she did have 4 children who blessed her with 13 grandchildren and 26 great-grandchildren. Mary and Rose's legacy of strength and resilience inspires members of our family. Rather than a curse, Rose's story is a blessing to our family that teaches us all how goodness can emerge from seemingly evil circumstances.

Through this story, too, I hope those associated with Children's Home Society contemplate the magnitude of this organization's impact on the state of South Dakota and its families. I hope you feel a renewed connection to our State's history, specifically the immense progress that has been made in the last century protecting and ensuring the rights of women and children. Imagine the far-reaching ripple effect of 130 years of service to children and families.

When I see the old black-and-white photographs of Children's Home Society and the children looking into the camera, I wonder if one of them might be Rose. While her personal story is certainly unique, the broad storyline is surely not. Many of those early children's stories may never be remembered or passed on, but they are real. I am so thankful to my father for rediscovering one of them. It is as a tribute to my departed grandmother that I share it with you.

