

Early days of Mary Sørenna Lund

**Family Story from 1895**

She learned to read at the age of four, because her father read the newspaper, and she thought that must be a good grown-up way to behave. He pointed out a few words to her, and then told her she must wait until she was older to learn more - in effect, she was too young to learn. That must have been like a red flag to a bull for her, as she pestered for more words until she could build sentences, and until she could begin to connect the sounds she saw.

By the time she went to school, she was well away into the world of reading. She read avidly all the rest of her life until failing health prevented it.

**Family Story from 1890's**

She learned to knit in school, a Catholic school run by the nuns in Silkeborg, Denmark. Knitting was a skill taught at the school, and it became a race. The young girls started out at recess sitting on the bottom step of the school. When they had knitted one row, they moved up to the next step. After another row, one more step. There were a dozen or so steps, and they raced up and down by this method. Young Mary Lund was a fierce competitor, and she learned to knit very fast. She was also a great talker, and by the time I knew her she could knit and talk at the same time with only infrequent pauses when she had to turn a heel or otherwise change the pattern.

**Family Stories from Early 1900's**

We have a letter in a box upstairs, that my Grandma Wendelboe (Mary Sørenna Lund at that time) wrote to her mother in 1910. She was twenty that year, and the letter is a long epistle written shortly after Mary arrived in Canada

The possibilities for jobs in Denmark looked dismal when Mary was finished her schooling, and for a time, washing bottles to be reused in the local brewery was the job of most of the immediate family, giving a very low wage with no hope for advancement.

The father of the family was a paperhanger and house painter. Because Mary was the oldest child and had helped him at this work, she was granted her papers to be a "maler", too. A newspaper article from Silkeborg says she was the first woman there to get such a license.

Then she read about the "Last Best West of Canada" and began to agitate for friends and family to go there. When an agent came to town, she signed up. Her family was not so keen, and the cost was high, so she came by herself to Central Alberta.





Passport photo for Mary Sørenna Lund, Denmark, 1909

*Mary Sørenna Lund*  
*Denmark*



## Mary Came from Silkeborg

She came to a farm where the contract said she had a job. In actual fact, the family assumed she would marry one of the sons and help build the homestead and the family, at no cost to them. When she did not agree to this, she had to move on out of a bad situation.

*Blackfalds Alberta Canada  
17 August 1910*

*Dear Mother:*

*Now I will gather myself together and let you have proper information on how I am. The ticket was good until Stettler, because this station for a few years has been terminal for the RR that goes out in the eastern direction. The agent did not know that the Rail had last fall been extended to Castor so it was unfortunate that I landed in Stettler, which is a little bigger than Thorsø, from Tuesday 26 to Friday 29. Without money, without knowing the language or knowing a soul, I was in a tight spot.*

*Now, I did have four dollars and with them I went and got a room in the first hotel and then went out to see if I could find someone who could speak either Danish or German. Wandering around in the town I came to a church and though I did not believe there could be such a (\*\*\*) building I soon found that it was a Catholic church. The next day I happened on an old Dansker(Dane) from the district between Aalborg and Randers, and he helped me by all means except with money.*

*(The Canadian Government had placed ads and contracted with agents to facilitate the immigration agreements for Northern Europeans. At that time these were Canada's preferred choice as settlers.*

*Indeed, if it were not for the early letters, we would really never have come to know she had ever been anyone else but our cranky old Grandma. And we would never have thought of the courage it took to come out to a job, and then, when the boss wanted to marry you so as not to pay you, go on to another position in a new land.)*

*The first day I came I had written a card to Notre Dame, but I was stupid enough to put it on the train and thereby lost four days. Mail car out to Notre Dame goes from Stettler to Notre Dame on Wednesday and Saturday, and if I had mailed the card at the Post Office then Pete \_\_\_\_\_ (\*Last name omitted for legal considerations) would have received it on Wednesday evening. Now( because it was sent by train) went to Castor on Wednesday and since there is only one train in each direction each day, it came back on Thursday and only went to Notre Dame on Saturday, so that I got it there myself Saturday evening. It was real lucky that the agent in Kobenhaven wrote to Pete and told him that my ticket only was good to Stettler. That letter Pete received on Wednesday, so went to Castor on Thursday, stabled horse and buggy, took the train Friday morning and so it went until I found him on the street as I was going to the RR to look for him.*



### Mary Came from Silkeborg

*My shoes were so dreadfully dirty so I bought a pair of boots and a blouse that was so lovely, I thought. At 4 o'clock we entrained eastward to Castor, where we found his youngest brother Martin and a neighbor who waited for us. Two hours later we were on our way to their home, the other two in a wagon, we two in the buggy. At six o'clock the train came in, and at eight o'clock we drove out of Castor. I heard myself it is 4-5 Danish miles, and we drove them in 2 hours. The neighbor's wife was very glad to see me, she had been saying she would not stay there if Pete did not get married.*

*It was just at haying time and they were very busy. The house is made like most peasant houses - logs that are laid on top of each other with smaller logs pressed into and nailed into the cracks between. On the roof, which is made in the same way, is laid sod. The inside is much better than you'd think. A sort of heavy cardboard the same breadth and thickness as the heavy paper used in the country at home is nailed on wall and ceiling in the same way as hangs our (wall)paper. the stove stands simply on the floor and the chimney is just a plain pipe of tin which goes right up through ceiling and roof. When I came there was nothing in the cabin but a bed in which 3 slept and a trunk. In the time I lived there, I slept at the neighbors. They were very hospitable, thirty years, childless, she was very clever at cooking and baking, but never in my life have I seen anyone so ragged(shabby).*

*The day after I arrived, Pete asked me if the understanding was that I would stay. I replied that I would stay but that I wouldn't get married, and without that there was absolutely no more discussion about the possibility of my staying here. IF you could have heard him, Mother, how he pleaded and asked and begged me to stay, not that day, but later.*

*Then he talked to Brenhams ( the neighbor) and they advised him this is what we should do. I should continue sleeping at Brenhams, but we should cook our own meals. Thus it should go until the harvest was completed. Then Pete would rent out his land and we would both away from the place. He would help me find a job, which is an easy matter here in Alberta, and the he would go to the States to work for the winter. So we drove to Castor, bought table and chairs, and such things and Marius drove up to Kris's place (he has rented his land out and works for our neighbour on the left) and got his stove, and then everything went excellently. People here bake and wash and churn their own butter, though we have not a cow, but we could buy butter from a man who only lives 8 miles south from us. Brenhams have one cow, but that was not enough to supply the milk, let alone the butter. Margarine is not to be bought here. Butter can be bought in Castor, but one never knows where it is made so it is usually rancid and smells far off.*

*Meanwhile for a few days it went real well, but the people began to be busybodies. They said nothing to us but to the neighbor, and of course he passed it on to Pete. Many of Pete's friends came and congratulated him, or also asked him when the wedding would be, and when soon it got so bad I decided to move before my good name ( and his too) was completely ruined.*



## Mary Came from Silkeborg

*On this colored map you can see the route I traveled. From Calgary you go northward to Lacombe, that lies where my pen marks off in the east. You can see Stettler on this map, but Castor is where my line ends. Then an 18-20 English miles northwest lies Notre Dame.*

*Now! Kris, he that is eldest after Pete, knows a Danish family in that little station town of Blackfalds, that lies between Red Deer and Lacombe.*

*The husband is a smith and has a nice board house besides his smithy. The wife is a practical nurse and has learnt ladies tailoring and sewing. Kris wrote to them to see if they could have me a while until I learned the language and can take a place! Pete would really rather, when he realized that I (with risk of seeming ungrateful) never would marry him, have had me go home again, but I don't want to do that, and now he has no more money.*

*Wednesday the answer came but we didn't get it until Thursday. For the whole week it rained and thunderstormed each day. They will gladly give me shelter in Blackfalds as long as necessary and I packed my clothes and planned on going to Castor on Saturday: but for the first the weather was so bad, and for the second there was no train on Saturday. Then we decided to drive to Castor on Sunday, stay overnight there and I would take the train 7 o'clock Monday morning.. And Pete and Martin, who wanted to go along, would then take a little trip out to Martin's land and see if his wheat was ripe. He has a homestead, as they call it, 2 miles southeast of Castor, and has only been at Pete's some weeks to help him cut hay This was an excellent arrangement, but a man come on the road with a sled.*

*I have said it thundered and rained each day but .this is something no one takes any notice of unless it rains so much that it interferes with the work. It rained, however, so much that we did not get to start in the forenoon and then - now comes the awful part.*

*Around 8 as we sat drinking coffee, the thunderstorm was suddenly over head, and after it had rained really hard about 15 minutes it began to hail small hailstones. This meant nothing: it never used to hail more than once a year and this it had already done and this so thoroughly that Kris's wheat was completely hailed into the ground, together with most up in the vicinity of his place.*

*But Pete's and his neighbours' wheat stood straight and ready to harvest, and Pete had just bought a self-binder for \$190 three days ago and was going to begin harvesting the day after.*

*First there was some few hailstones between the rain, then nothing but hail, and at the last were as big, yes, average about the size of a 2 øre. ( a coin ). It hit so hard that earth and water mixed rose into the air for two feet. Martin tried to go over to the neighbours' but before he had gone ten steps from our door, his grey stiff felt hat, you know, one of the real cowboy hats, cracked so that it hung down over his eyes and he had trouble finding his way back to the door. Still the next day he had small blue-green bruises on hands and throat. 100 chickens were killed by the hail, they were old enough*



## Mary Came from Silkeborg

*they should soon be laying. The horses stood in water over the knees and the pigs were practically swimming.*

*But the worst of it all however is that all Pete's wheat was completely knocked so, smashed into the ground. Alone this amounts to about \$1500. He was naturally blackly desperate. The first year there was no rain. Result: no harvest. Second year all his horses died. Now in the spring, first two horses died, then the cabin burnt down, then I came and wouldn't marry him and then to crown it all, he gets hailed out and won't have any money to live on until next harvest, if he gets any wheat then.*

*You can understand that he is disappointed by the country. Since he has worked all over America before, he probably won't have any trouble finding work, but he doesn't want to be a traveling man again. He and his neighbour, whose wife hates the country and who is mightily glad about the hail, are selling all their horses and renting their land out. With these funds the neighbours are going down to the States and starting a restaurant. He has had one before but got tired of it and is sure he can work up a good shop. When they have got set up or built and well started I may go to work for them there, but until then I will stay here in Blackfalds with the Danish family I have told you about above. If I can get a job here in the town meanwhile I will take it because I can use the money even if Pete and Martin offered to give me what I need. Finally Martin would rather I stayed here over the winter so that he can easily slip over here to see me occasionally. He probably thinks that before spring he will have persuaded me to marry him, but that will be untrue if my nose does not freeze off me in the winter.*

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### **But a Wedding Did Happen - Elsewhere**

This letter goes on to tell how she has met on the train from Winnipeg another young man, a Dane from southern Alberta who wants her to come down there to work, as there are several families of his relatives who might hire her and she could get to know them, and him, better.

She married later that year into the large clan of Peter and Hansine Wendelboe, of Claresholm and Barons. Her husband, Mikail (Michael) Wendelboe, and his brothers and brothers-in-law homesteaded near to the post office and hardware store run by his parents. He started a blacksmith shop to shoe horses and fix the plows and other machinery that was used thoroughly in those days, often being loaned from one farm to the next until the plowing was done in spring, and then with similar rounds for harvest. This meant that there was a constant stream of people stopping for mail and other news, and usually staying for a meal, or perhaps two, before they headed out to their own homesteads around the country.

### **A Young Family Grew**

There was a new baby every year for Mary, ten in nine years altogether. My mother was the first of the seven who lived to adulthood, and as the





Wedding photo of Michael and Mary Wendelboe, Lethbridge, 1910



# AUCTION SALE

*I will sell by Public Auction on*

## WEDNESDAY, JAN. 7, 1925

Sale to start at 12.30 sharp, be on time so we can sell these goods in the warm part of the day

*at my farm, the North half of*

### Section 20, Township 12, Range 24

*Nine miles West of Barons on the Star Line and fifteen miles East of Claresholm*

*The Following Property to wit*

### 17 Head of Horses and Mules

9 Head of Horses

8 Head of Mules

*These Horses and Mules are good workers, well broke, and in good condition*

### 24 Head of Cattle

*Consisting of COWS and CALVES, YEARLINGS, HEIFERS, and STEERS*

### FARM MACHINERY

1 18-run Van Brunt Press Drill  
1 8-ft. Massey Harris Cultivator  
4 Section Harrow  
1 Harrow Cart  
1 14 in. John Deere Gang Plow  
1 16 in. John Deere Sulky Plow  
1 8-ft. McCormick Drill  
1 Dodge Touring Car 1917

7 Sets Double Work Harness  
5 Wagons 1 Hay Rack  
125 Bus. Grain Tank  
90 Bus. Grain Box  
20-H. P. I. H. C. Tractor  
3, H. P. Fairbanks Morse Engine  
1 Fanning Mill 1 Grain Pickler  
1 Spring Wagon 1 Buggy

*About 70 Chickens Some Household Furniture Remington Hammerless .22 Rifle, new*

*Terms of Sale—One-fourth Cash, balance on time to Oct. 4th, purchasers furnishing an approved note at eight per cent interest from date. A discount of five per cent will be allowed on credit amounts.*

M. O. WENDELBOE,  
Owner.

ED. POPHAM.  
Auctioneer.



## Mary Came from Silkeborg

years went on she was increasingly looked to for help with the others. Family pictures from those days show rows of tow-headed sprouts lined up beside whatever vehicle was the current one, buggy or car. Many friends accompany the family here, as these made the occasions when the camera came out.

In early married life, the times were good, and the holdings of land and livestock expanded. This was a busy, sociable time, when many neighbours who stopped for mail and store purchases became friends. Mike, who loved horses, gradually acquired a barn full, and another shed for his mules.

### Hard Times Came Later

Then changes brought set backs. The change from horse to engine power meant horseshoes were not needed so much as an oil change, a tire repair, and a grease job. The drought cycle of the Palliser triangle came around, something unknown to them until then. The stresses of the times were exacerbated by the wish to "Keep up with the Jones's" (or the Odegaards and Svanes) Thinking that the set backs were temporary led them to further indebtedness, and Mike's drinking was also another problem.

The numerous members of the extended Wendelboe family did not all stay on the homesteads over the next years, and soon the family was spread far and wide, some moving to other provinces, and some returning to the U.S. from whence they had arrived in 1903.

During these years Mary and Michael sponsored her family members as immigrants from Denmark: Her sister Stense came in 1911; Her sister Dagny and brother Johannes and mother Neilsine Lund all came in 1918. This last group sailed on the Hellig Olav.

After they went bankrupt and lost the farm in 1925, Mary and Michael Wendelboe moved from the homestead and bought a small acreage on the same Starline Road, but closer to Claresholm. There he focused on blacksmithing, manufacturing plows and cultivators and repairing hand or farm tools that turned up at his shop. He also became a good mechanic. They raised a large market garden and kept chickens and sent their children to the Starline School next door. It was a discouraging stage in Mary's life. She wanted to be a success in the this new country and new world. The fact that others had "hard times" too did not comfort her much.





Mary Wendelboe, Claresholm, 1948



## Mary Came from Silkeborg

In the 1930's, money and credit were short, and the dust storms became so bad the children set the table with plates and cups turned upside down so they wouldn't have dust in them before the men came in for supper. As they grew up in these hard times, none of the seven children completed the high school courses. A hired girl could earn eight whole dollars a month and board at the farms around. That was a better position than at home. One daughter of the five maintains that they were such good household managers that there were always several farmers who wanted them to come and work - for the harvest season, or when the new baby came - to help the farm wives with the work. Even though wages were meager, the girls sent home money and used clothing from the farms where they worked, to help out with the younger ones at home. They became adept at mending, altering or re-sewing items to make them fit the new owners, at work and at home. For example, turning an adult coat inside out to cut it down for a new one for a child was a skill they all used later to clothe their own children.

### Success Returns After World War Two

When the second war ended, the seven children of Mike and Mary had wandered away to other towns, and they remained in those places. They started families or businesses, or tried farming, as more affluent times brought more opportunities to them all. Mary went visiting them, and took her handwork on the Greyhound bus, knitting and chatting with whomever she sat near. She might make a sale of embroidery or hand-knitted mitts if someone inquired what she was doing, did she sell her work, etc.

As an elderly woman, Mary took creative writing classes and history writing classes in Calgary while she was staying with her son and his family there. Her carefully edited works show the admiration she had for her mother-in-law, Hansine Wendelboe, and other pioneer women. A novel she wrote is also still with her papers. But none of her writing matches the spontaneous strength of her letters, which we all have as part of her legacy to us. They are filled with advice and weather reports and cheerful notes and are the basis for many more family stories.

Our further legacy is that we still have relatives all over the Alberta countryside and beyond. Some of these we may not even know about, but many we do know. We speak to each other every now and then, and express regret that we don't do more to see each other more often. And we all owe our being here to a stubborn young Danish girl who sailed off on her own to Canada in 1910.

*Cathryn Brecken*