

A FAMILY VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES

by Johan F. Somsen [1089]

On the occasion of the American Somsen Reunion Yvonne [3926] and I travelled to Baldwin, WI, USA, this summer. We had been looking forward to meeting old friends again very much and to get acquainted with new members of our worldwide family. Though Baldwin was the main goal, our trip was not limited to Wisconsin only. On arriving in the USA we always love to pay a short visit to New York and after the marvellous family reunion in Baldwin we made a 3500-mile trip through this enormous country together with a distant cousin, Ken Anderson [3934], to our final destination, Los Gatos, in the neighbourhood of San Francisco. From there we flew back to good old Europe.

New York

After the thorough safety checks at Schiphol we were flown to New York by a big grey bird of United Airlines. This ever sparkling city kept us in her spell for three long days. It was a constant race from one museum to another and in the evenings from one theatre to the other. We had a very special encounter with Marnix Somsen [228] and his wife Allette [3757] with their newborn baby Julia [4939]. They were to be the first Somsens in a long series that we were to meet in the USA.

After New York the most important part of our journey began: **the Reunion in Baldwin**. We were picked up at the airport of St. Paul-Minneapolis by an old friend: my cousin Paula Crist-Somsen [816]. We had met Paula for the first time at the great reunion in 1997, next during a trip in 1998, once more during a short stay of her in Amsterdam and now for the fourth time. She had planned a lunch for us together with her husband Bruce [817] and their eldest daughter Jennifer [2764] on a lovely terrace on the banks of Lake Minnetonka. It was extremely pleasant and it set the mood for the excellent atmosphere of the next couple of days. Jennifer changed her plans and decided to come to Baldwin that very evening instead of Saturday. After a lightning visit to Paula's sister Mary [820] and her husband Michael [2798] we left for Baldwin. On Friday afternoon and evening - the unofficial part of the reunion - there was a get-together and a dinner. Meeting each other again was very impressive.

Apart from the other six Somsens from The Netherlands, Teun Hunse [68] from Canada was there and of course a large group of American Somsens - mainly members of the organizing committee - most of whom we had already met before. It was awesome to see all those old friends again. Don [831] and Irene [832] Somsen and of course Marilyn [3850] and Ward [3858] Olsen-Lear, our hostess and host in Baldwin. Marilyn, who was to sparkle in the following days as chairwoman of the great Somsen party. And how good it was to see Cindy [814] and Ron [822] Zignego-Somsen and Sally [2771] and David Berkholder-Rasmussen. And of course I should not forget the almost complete family of John Howard Somsen [2353]: his extremely sprightly mother



*Back, l.-r.: Jaqueline and Brad Olson
Front, l.-r.: Ward Lee and Marilyn (Berkseth) Olson-Lear,
chairman of the Reunion*

Janet Somsen [2324] and his three sisters Judy [2354] with Paul [2369] Zavracky-Somsen, Jeanne [2356] with Richard [2375] Connell- Somsen and Jane Strong-Somsen [2355].

And fortunately there was more time now for closer acquaintance with Marieke Edwards [725] - our American treasurer - and her husband Michael [3159]. In 1997 there had not been enough time for that. Unfortunately I cannot be complete in this summary. If there is someone I have not mentioned it does certainly not mean that I have forgotten him or her. There were many hugs that afternoon and conversations were animated and endless. Late that night Ken Anderson [3934] arrived. He arrived from California in a 30-foot camper in which we would join him after the reunion for a trip through America. It sure got late that night.

For an extensive account of the reunion I would like to warmly recommend Marilyn's article elsewhere in this magazine. I would like to confine myself to some impressions.

The official part started on Saturday at 9 o'clock with registration of the guests. The atmosphere was sort of similar to 1997: a slightly nervous, but

mainly optimistic and cheerful tension. Some sort of curiosity about whom you would meet and at the back of your mind there was the awareness that you were all – sometimes distantly – related to each other.

Subsequently we were referred to the photographers. Two tall and slender fair-haired Somsen twins: Pamela [3847] and Patricia [3848] Rice, assisted by their brother Edward Rice [3849], recorded everybody for posterity on photo and video. Actually this was the best place to learn everything about everybody, for you were asked to give a brief description about whom you were and where you came from.

After the official opening by the mayor of Baldwin the floor was Marilyn's in her role as chairwoman. She did a great job. It was a commanding event. Nearly 130 elated Somsens or Somsen-related people eagerly listened so as not to miss a single moment of what happened that morning.



l.-r.: Pauka Crist-Somsen [816], Melissa Crist [2765], Adrienne Crist [2766], Yvonne Reijs-Edel [3926], Johan F. Somsen [1089], Jennifer Vogel-Crist [2764] and Bruce Crist [817]

Exceeding

Being together with the whole company made the deepest impression on me time and again. The whole group is not just a total of all the individual members. There is something that exceeds this, something that adds extra value. It is not so easy to explain – maybe with the aid of psychology – but it simply feels like that and you experience it in this way. Also in the church of Baldwin on Sunday morning there was that same feeling again, but most prominent of all it was there at the ceremony on the Baldwin cemetery when a memorial stone was unveiled. A large crowd had gathered round the graves of Jan Hendrik Somsen [308] and his wife Janna Somsen-Rauwerdink [309]. After the solemn opening ceremony by two grandsons, the Reverend Phil Somsen [2685] and Don Somsen [831], several Somsens stepped forward to express their feelings at which especially Henry Northrop Somsen's [2453] speech was moving.

Henry, 93, our absolute senior but most likely with the most youthful sprit of all of us, stole away the hearts of everybody. Somewhere else in this magazine a special article is dedicated to him.

Actually all the time it amounted to the fact that we share something together. Something that may be called very special. Something we may be proud of with good reason. We have completely mapped out our own family history in the wonderful book *Somsen Omnes Generationes* by Derk [130] and Theo [227] Somsen and through this we have added an extra dimension to our individual identities. And now we have been collectively busy to keep our own history up-to-date for well over five years. The Somsen Foundation and our Magazine *Somsen Horizon* play an important role in this. And, last but not least, together we have had two beautiful worldwide reunions. Everything is largely dependant on the passion in us to be ready to keep putting the shoulder to the wheel. This awareness was also very profoundly alive in that company near the Somsen monument on the cemetery of Baldwin on that Sunday morning. The sense of pride to be part of this family and the wish to continue were clearly perceptible all the time and the presence of so many young people promises nothing but good for the future.

Farewell

During a final meeting in the Coachman Supper Club we said goodbye over a delicious lunch. Numerous pictures were taken, many warm hugs, good words and fine feelings were exchanged and then everyone went his way, a little sadder, but wiser.

Going West



l.-r.: Ken Anderson, Yvonne and Johan

Together with Ken we would travel to California in a motor home through many natural parks, through many states, for thousands of miles. The first stage was a short one. Close to St. Paul-

Minneapolis we had an enjoyable barbecue with a friend of Ken's and we also spent the night there. The following the day our journey led through the State of Minnesota, the state with the thousands of lakes, toward North Dakota. We could hardly get used to the idea that many of these states are a couple of times bigger than The Netherlands and as a consequence the distances are enormous. You simply drive for hours on end without passing through a town of some size.

North Dakota is an agricultural state. Fields as large as a Dutch village roll past the windows of your car. In the neighbourhood of Jamestown I consulted my database with American Somsens and it was an immediate hit. There were several of them. Since we did not have too much time we decided to try our luck at an address not too far away from our route. This turned out to be that of David [3501] and LaVonne Bear. Early in the evening we rang at their door. Next to the door



l.-r.: David Bear and LaVonne Bear-Finnegan

was a sign saying: *Two Old Bears Live Here*. An elderly lady answered the bell and she was a bit reserved, but when I said that we were Somsens from The Netherlands the door swung open wide and we were given a hearty welcome. It even turned out that David's mother – Genevieve Somsen [865] – was a sister of Ken's great-grandfather: Levi Somsen [851].

It was amazing to see how many documents the Bears had about our family and how they sympathized with the family.

The next morning – quite unexpectedly - they picked us up at the campsite for an extensive guided tour through the Jamestown area.

As soon as you leave the main roads the connections consist of long straight gravel roads, cutting through the endless fields. David took us to farmsteads and houses where once upon a time

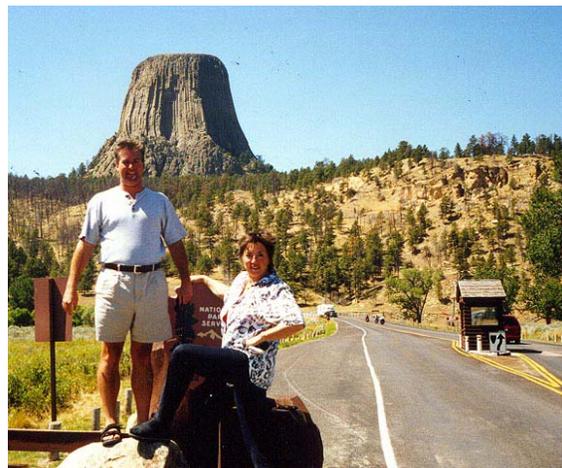
Somsens had lived and toiled. After saying hello to his brother Tom [3505] and after a brief visit to the cemetery of Jamestown with many Somsen graves we continued our journey to the west.

South Dakota is the state with the vast prairies. The roads are dead straight and the prairie is immense. The bison, almost extinct in the nineteenth century, is making a real come-back, but is now kept for its meat. Bisons are now kept on ranches, some of which are as big as the Province of Utrecht in The Netherlands. In a small town, Lemon, a California neighbour of Ken owned a bison ranch and a summer cottage on the bank of a beautiful lake. Ken had got the key of the cottage and we could also visit the ranch.

It seems unlikely but when I consulted my Somsen database it appeared that there was a Somsen in Lemmon. Unfortunately we did not find Karen Froelich-Raasch [2624] at home.

Our visit to the bison ranch was magnificent but what we will not easily forget is the way back to the summerhouse. The night before we had already been in the tail of a tornado. A boat that was parked on a trailer at the house of the neighbours had been lifted like a feather and had been parked underneath the deck of our residence. Only a few minutes earlier we had been eating there. But now things got threatening when we were on the road. Ink-black clouds gathered over the desolated prairie and our huge motor home changed into a tiny plaything. Not completely free from fear we approached a couple of trees at a snail's pace. One of the trees had been hit by lightning and lay across the gravel-road. And there we were forced to wait until the storm would be over.

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Devil's Tower

The journey went on through South Dakota to the small town of Sturgis where once a year thousands

and thousands of Harley Davidson bikers from all over the world flock together. It was a regular fair. On and on we went to the Black Hills with a visit to Mount Rushmore. The famous place where the heads of four American presidents are cut out in the rocks.

The next day we prepared ourselves for a long journey through the state of Wyoming towards Yellowstone National Park. But not after admiring the well-known **Devil's Tower** first, a very tall steep rock-tower which always attracts thousands of visitors. After that visit the vast plains of Wyoming with pumping units drawing the oil slowly out of the earth were a huge contrast with the extensive chains of mountains that came afterwards.

Yellowstone National Park was impressive in many respects. Its vastness, its commanding nature with its endlessly varying landscapes. Splendid waterfalls and geysers with the undisputed climax *'The Old Faithful'* and not to forget its very rich wildlife. All three of us were thrilled time and again to be in a position to observe so many species of big game at such close quarters. A black bear family by the side of the road was the absolute topper, but we did certainly not overlook a couple of elk nearby and a group of moose on the road either. We moved on along the snow-covered tops of the Grand Teton until we found a place in the dark to spend the night.

Our daily menu consisted of bison steaks, the size of huge pancakes. We had stuffed the freezer of our camper with them at the bison ranch in South Dakota. Ken and I used to prepare them on the barbeque while Yvonne was preparing lovely cold salads. Very often we also had corn-on-the-cob going with it. All this was invariably washed down with a little wine and in this way we actually lived a very healthy life for a couple of weeks. No fast food, no junk food, nothing of the kind.

After a never ending trip through Wyoming and Idaho, past wild rivers, across endless plains and through marvellous mountainous country we finally arrived in Utah after thousands of miles.

In Utah there is a fairly large Somsen branch. They are all descendants of Levi Somsen [851] who was mentioned before. Levi came from the Somsen branch living in North Dakota, members of the 1851 branch. In 1902 he married Isabel Maud Tanner [852] who was a Mormon and they finally settled in Salt Lake City. It is the descendants of Levi then, who belong to this religion and even today they mainly live in the state of Utah. Getting acquainted with Ken's aunt Barbara [2520] in Salt Lake City was real great. During a festive dinner in one of the winter sport resorts in the surroundings



l.-r.: Johan Somsen, Barbara Somsen [2520], Don Somsen [873], Susan Somsen [879] and Ken Anderson

of Salt Lake City we also met her son Rolf and his wife Whitney and Barbara's daughter Sarah. We were the last to leave the restaurant!

Back home Barbara produced a large amount of genealogical data, collected by her father Laren Somsen [2395]. Also these Somsens turned out to have been extremely interested in the history of the family long ago.

The next day Don Somsen [873] and his wife Susan [2543] came for lunch. It was a warm and hearty meeting again after five years. We had met before at the reunion in The Netherlands in 1997. There is more about this renewed acquaintance in the article *'SOMSEN LICENCE PLATES'* elsewhere in this magazine.

The rest of the day was dominated by a visit to the city with the famous temple of the Mormons on Temple Square and of course we also visited the library with the huge genealogical database. Quite a lot of Somsens were recorded there but not by a long way the number that we have mapped out.

After a warm-hearted farewell to our dear and sweet hostess Barbara we went down to the south of Utah, where we visited the national parks Bryce and Zion. Sometimes it was like rambling in surrealistic landscapes that did not belong to this planet at all. The rock formations over there look so incredible that you hardly realize that they are real.

The final goal of our journey, California, came closer and closer. Only 650 miles separated us from our next goal: Lake Tahoe in the east of California. There was only one state in between: Nevada. But this state consists mainly of a vast desert. The long and straight road through this desert, where the next settlement is sometimes as far away as 70 miles, made us realise how insignificant we were. It is not so surprising that large parts of Nevada are being used by the army



*l.-r.: Lori Gordon, Ken Anderson, Johan Somsen, Zach Anderson (Michael's son), Andrew Anderson (Michael's son)
Eric Anderson (brother of Ken), Elizabeth Sterner (friend of Eric)
front: Michael Anderson (Ken's brother) with his youngest son*

It is the state where nuclear experiments were carried out and today there are plans for the storage of nuclear waste.

After a long, dusty trip we arrived at Lake Tahoe where Ken's Dad owns a nostalgic summerhouse with a splendid view of this beautiful lake. It was the perfect place to settle down for a few days after this endless journey through this enormous country. A place to gather some strength for the final stage.

This final stage led through the enchanting hills and mountains in this beautiful state. On passing through Nevada City, CA., we were very hospitably received by Ken's eldest brother Michael Anderson and his wife Lori. Also his sons Zach, Andrew and their baby were present. His other brother Eric with his partner Liza had also come over to meet us. Again we had a small but very enjoyable family reunion.

The last couple of hundred miles led straight to Los Gatos, Ken's residence, where we arrived at six p.m. That same evening we had a farewell party at his apricot farm where we met, to our great joy, another old acquaintance: Paul Anderson [2522],

Ken's father. Moreover, there were a number of his friends to enhance the festive spirit.

To round off our stay in the USA we paid a visit to San Francisco on the very last day and we visited the old Alcatraz prison in the evening.

Exhausted, satisfied, overwhelmed by this huge country and by the numerous encounters we drove off, together with Ken, to San Francisco Airport very early the next morning. After a hearty farewell we once again disappeared into the belly of a huge grey bird of United Airlines, which was to fly us back to Amsterdam.

Somsens of America,
we love you and we will stay in touch! ■