

Unexpected connections: Janet Bolstad discovers WWII family history thanks to social media

By Karrie Carlson, Daily Journal Media, Progress, Feb. 24, 2024

With the world at one's fingertips through the internet and social media, many people have taken on the task of researching their ancestors in an effort to feel a connection to those who came before, or simply learn about the past.

What does one do with that information, though? What if someone were to find out that their family was involved in a historical event? That their farm was used to hide soldiers from harm or that their ancestors helped stop thousands from perishing in a nuclear bomb attack?

That is what Janet Bolstad learned, and more.

"In 2018, we had some cousins in Norway who found us on Facebook and on the internet," Bolstad said. "So we went for a visit and we met with a few more cousins, too."

After visiting Norway, Bolstad kept in touch with one of her cousin's close friends, who turned out to be another one of her cousins as well.

"We just kept exchanging emails and then he told me that about a year ago, they were going to do an anniversary ski run commemorating the six soldiers that blew up the heavy water plant at Rjukan."

Bolstad learned that during the historical mission of six skiers to stop nuclear bombs from being made, her family's farms in Norway were used as hideouts from the Nazis.

In 1943, Germany had control of Norsk Hydro's Vemork plant right outside of Rjukan. The plant was originally designed to use mountain water for electrolysis to produce ammonia for nitrogen fertilizer, and the plant had recently become the first large-scale production site of heavy water in the world.

Heavy water is water with a molecular weight of 20 instead of the typical 18 atomic mass units. An average person wouldn't notice a difference in the water, but if ice was made from it, it would sink in a glass of water due to the increased density.

"They were there trying to keep the heavy water from the Nazis because they were trying to build a nuclear bomb," explained Bolstad. Other missions to destroy the plant had been attempted but none were successful.

A third mission, Operation Gunnerside, vowed to try a different approach than the previous attempts. A small group of soldiers would parachute near the plant and ski to it, avoiding detection from the guards around the plant.

The soldiers infiltrated the plant and set bombs inside, then were able to escape without being caught. The bombing was done with no casualties and not one gun was fired by either side. The mission successfully put the German nuclear scientists way behind on development, which gave the United States time to overtake the Germans in producing the first nuclear bomb.

Once the mission was complete, the troops needed to get to safety. They got to Rena, Norway. Among the places the soldiers hid was Bolstad's great-great-grandfather, Peder Olson Bolstad's farm, where they hid out for a while.

The troops had to cross the Glomma river, which wasn't frozen over. "That farm is called Overjordet, and that's where this gentleman gets involved in this — because he knows the area," she said. "They were cold and completely wet and he knew where the sandbars were to cross the river. He saved the expedition when it got to this area of Norway. Everything was hidden from the Nazis and he knew where to get a boat and supplies."

When Bolstad got word that the expedition would be reenacted, she knew she wanted to be part of it.

With her two sisters and her niece accompanying her, Bolstad set off for Norway. "In March, we went to watch the military reenact this, and that's what our trip was for. We also met more cousins," Janet explained. The skiers, including the mayor, set off to ski the route the soldiers had taken — the 600 kilometer trip from the plant to Sweden. "They had to try to stay in forests. It's in a valley and there are mountains on both sides. It was 12 days with thousands of Nazis after them. They only had three days worth of food with them; but hey, they made it."

The reenactment had a solemn presentation with candles at the Glomma River. The next night, they were all invited to the mayor's home, where he showed them an actual sample vial of heavy water.

Bolstad's family holds an important place in history. Without the family's farms and assistance, it is unknown if the ski troops would've made it to safety after such a daring and historically significant mission.