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Birger Sandzén

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PART 1

A BEGINNING: BIRGER SANDZÉN AND THE LEKSELLS– A SOLOMON VALLEY CONNECTION

SWEDISH-AMERICAN artist Birger Sandzén's arrival in America after studies in Stockholm and Paris was to be for only two or three years. American classmates in Paris urged him to travel to America. One of the early founding presidents of Bethany College, Dr. Carl Aaron Swensson's book about his struggles to get a college started in Kansas prompted Sandzén's writing to Swensson about teaching.

Sandzén felt that his teaching for two or three years could provide room and board and he would have time to further his career as a painter and then return to Sweden. Letters between Sandzén and Swensson and Swensson's final telegram "Come at Once" brought him at the age of 23 on September 4, 1894, to McPherson, Kansas. A short trip by wagon pulled by horses brought him to Lindsborg, where he met Dr. Swensson at the Main Building on Bethany campus.

His teaching assignment was to assist in vocal music and art, teach fencing and two languages, French and Spanish. He wrote, "At the age of 23 this new land offers countless possibilities for a young painter." He also felt that he was a pioneer in a pioneer college.

That first year, 1894, Sandzén met a lovely young girl, Alfrida Augusta Leksell. She was a charming music student who played the piano brilliantly in student recitals at Bethany College. Her father Eric E. Leksell and mother Charlotte, originally from Sweden, had moved from Salina to McPherson, Kansas. Eric became an early merchant in partnership with Anders Gustaf Sohlberg's Mercantile Company, a general merchandise store. The Leksell home was a fine large two-story brick home with a beautiful wraparound front porch on Kansas Avenue.

Alfrida heard Sandzén in a vocal concert that fall with her Bethany teacher Sigrid Laurin. She called upon Birger Sandzén at the art hall and he invited her to sit down and talk while he went on painting a watercolor. Alfrida was eighteen and he was twenty-three at their first meeting.

A short time later, Alfrida invited Birger and Bethany art teacher Olof Grafström on behalf of her grandmother to the Leksell home for the weekend. Sandzén was a distant cousin of the Leksells through Mrs. Leksell's family side of Engstrom.

Alfrida always wrote down her New Year's resolutions at Christmas time and hid them about the house. That year her mother found one stuck in her piano which read: (1) practice 4 hours a day, (2) do not eat between meals, (3) think of Birger Sandzén as only a cousin!

When Alfrida fell in love with Sandzén, her mother said she thought she had just fallen in love with a nose! The courtship of Sandzén was six years long because her grandmother wasn't too sure that this young Swede was going to stay in America, and she did not want her granddaughter to be taken to Sweden.

When it seemed that Sandzén's original plan of only two or three years in America was going to definitely be for many years, the marriage was approved. Birger and Alfrida married on Thanksgiving Day in 1900. The ceremony was performed in the bay window of her parents home in McPherson. At exactly the same time, which was late at night in Sweden, the wedding in Kansas was celebrated in a festive manner at Sandzén's parents home in Järpås, Sweden, by his minister father Johan Peter and mother Clara Caroline. The newlywed couple in faraway Kansas was toasted.

Alfrida's piano teacher, Laurin, was disappointed when she married and would not be continuing piano studies at an eastern music conservatory. She had taken lessons with other prominent instructors before her marriage and her career was very promising.

In 1906 at the ages of 57 and 52 Eric Ersson and Charlotte Engstrom Leksell moved from McPherson to Bogue in Graham County, Kansas. The McPherson store had let out too much credit during a depression and had to sell out. The Leksells, through a relative, purchased a farm. They sold most of their possessions, left Alfrida and Birger and friends, and traveled more than 120 miles to begin a new life.

Farming was not an easy life for the Leksells. The land was mostly pasture with a small portion tilled for row crops. The Sandzéns were frequent visitors and occasionally stayed for some time. Wild Horse Creek located near their farm became a familiar subject for Sandzén's paintings and prints. At one time he seriously considered building a summer studio on the Leksell farm.

On June 16, 1909, great joy came to the Sandzens when a daughter, Margareta Elisabeth, was born. Her talent and interest in drawing and painting at the early age of eleven was encouraged by her parents. Margaret became all and more than her parents dreamed of as she pursued art in college, traveled throughout Europe. And, like her parents, she was married on Thanksgiving Day in 1942, to Pelham Greenough in her father's studio.

Sandzén described Graham County: "Wild Horse Creek is a wonderfully picturesque creek, with trees, limestone banks and background hills. I have spent several summers there and I have done about 300 studies in and near the creek." On one occasion while describing the beauty of the farm, he expressed the hope that it would never be sold. When Margaret pointed out that there were some problems associated with the farm, Birger replied, "That doesn't matter. It's a fine piece of ground and we have plenty of good cottonwood trees, and the most beautiful limestone in Kansas."

In a letter to his mother Clara in Sweden, Sandzén writes July 12, 1908, "[A] week ago [we arrived again] at Father-in-Law's and Mother-in-Law's on the farm. . . . [Their] house is small (only 2 quite large rooms) but light and comfortable and provided with a rather large porch and roomy basement. It lies on a plateau that on three sides is bordered by a glen with a brook. A glen with running water here is called a creek (pronounced: krik). Our creek is said to be 3 Swedish miles long [approximately 18 miles] and is called "Wild Horse Creek" (vildhäst-kirken).

"On three sides of the house are small pretty clumps of cottonwood trees a sort of poplar. The seeds are large and wooly. From which this tree has gotten its odd name. The trees offer shade and coolness in the summer heat. In the closest clump, that is about 150 steps from the house, I have cut the grass and raked, so that there it is very inviting.

"It is generally a little cooler here than in Lindsborg, especially during the nights, since the altitude is about 2,300 feet above sea level, i.e. about 1000 feet higher than that in Lindsborg. The last days however it has been very warm (about 37 degrees Celsius [around 100 degrees Fahrenheit] in the shade) however not pressing, because the air is always light and clean."

In 1920, Eric Leksell decided to rent the farm to a tenant farmer. Sandzén writes: "Father-in-Law intends to rent out most of the farm. It is entirely too much work for him to take care of a large place especially since it is almost impossible to get a good hired hand. . . . It is clear that both he and Mother-in-Law have too much to do. . . ."

"I paint and draw quite industriously during the days. I do quite many of my outdoor studies in lead pencil and charcoal or water colors, because it is right heavy to carry a paint case and canvasses in the heat. Even if one has a light painter's stool, parasol and easel it still becomes a heavy package when it is warm. The painter's parasol is entirely indispensable (even if one only draws pencil sketches) because the constant sunshine strains the eyes.

"In a week we will go to Colorado for fourteen days, from there back here again and toward the end of August to Lindsborg. School [Bethany College classes] begins the first of September."

Charlotte (Mrs. Eric Leksell) writes to her daughter Alfrida Sandzén, November 14, 1920: "Dearly beloved Alfrida! Thank you for the latest letter! It is good that both of you are well--Now after the storm, it's fine again although a little snappy, particularly before the sun has been up for a while--I washed yesterday with rainwater--I'm always glad each time that's done with. The days have become so short that there isn't much time to get anything done.

"Pappa got 446 bushels of wheat and is expecting to get a little more when threshing is finished. He's planning to somehow get the house [a home in Lindsborg]. But it's impossible to say how much we can clear before we have sold everything and that won't be before February or March, But it's not possible that we'll get everything for the [Lindsborg] house. . . .

"I have so much company in reading 'Women's Home Companion' when one can't go outdoors and putter, like during the summer. If I were near you, I could at least help you with a little mending and darning, that always takes up quite a bit of time. Well, now Pappa is sitting here waiting for the letter so I have to hurry. I have a pot of beans and spareribs on the stove for dinner. The Hares slaughtered yesterday, so we got some samples. A thousand dear greetings. May God save and bless you and us. Mamma"

Charlotte writes again to her daughter, January 9, 1920: "We have had a real winter here again, but not nearly as hard as before Christmas. It's now half past eight and the sun has just come up over the hill so brightly and we'll have a fine day. Although it was and still is very cold. I have just finished my kitchen work. Haven't made up the bed. Am now sitting with my feet on the stove and writing on my lap.

"We must get out on March 1st. The renters move in then. Well, we'll see how everything comes out for us until then. Today 'Harvey' has gone to Bogue with wheat for us. It's for taxes. Haven't been able to drive it in before because of road conditions. The chickens are starting to lay a little--if only the weather were milder they would probably start to lay a lot. . . . Don't think that I have anything more to write about today. Hope everything is well with all of you. Devoted greetings from Pappa and your own Mamma. We long so for your letters."

The Leksells rented out their farm to a tenant farmer in the spring of 1920 and moved into a small cottage on North Second Street in Lindsborg about a block north of the Sandzén's home. The two families enjoyed a close relationship throughout their years.

In the 1930s, Myron Vann of Lindsborg, began to drive the car for the Sandzéns. He was a Junior in high school. He first drove their 1928 Buick. Birger never got a driver's license. Alfrida and Margaret got driver's licenses, and usually drove too fast!

Vann noted that once a year in the fall he would drive Eric Leksell to Hill City to the farm near Bogue. Eric always liked to look at it. Vann said, "He was an old man. I say he was old--my age like I am now, but I thought he was ancient [Eric lived to be 94 years of age, died in 1943]. And, I had to sleep with him in this old bed out there on the farm. But it was really something."

The Sandzéns, Leksells, and Margaret and her husband, Pelham Greenough, continued to make regular trips to the farm for many years that followed. Pelham used a nearby rural school house as a marker of where to turn to find the farm--until one time he got lost and discovered that the school house had been moved.

Sandzén especially enjoyed an opportunity to sketch Graham County landscapes. Future articles will review the many fine paintings and prints based on Graham County and Western Kansas and what he said and wrote about the region.

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PART 2

DISCOVERY: BIRGER SANDZÉN, GRAHAM COUNTY AND WESTERN KANSAS

A considerable number of paintings and prints by Swedish-American artist Birger Sandzén are based on sketches made in Graham County and western Kansas. The farm of his wife's parents, Eric and Charlotte Leksell, near Bogue, Kansas, in northwest Kansas, was the source for paintings, beginning with watercolors as early as 1908. The Leksells left McPherson to begin farming in Graham County in 1906. In 1916, when the artist began printmaking, the farm provided sketches for many lithographs and block prints.

The Sandzéns were frequent visitors to the farm, and occasionally stayed for some time. Wild Horse Creek located near the farm house became a familiar subject for Sandzén's work. Sandzén described that area in Graham County: "Wild Horse Creek is a wonderfully picturesque creek, with trees, limestone banks and background hills. I have spent several summers there and I have done about 300 studies in and near the creek. To learn landscape painting there is nothing like simple primitive motifs where the artist can study nature in the nude."

Sandzén was a charter member of the Prairie Printmaker Society. The founders of the group met at his Lindsborg studio December 28, 1930. The purpose of the organization was to stimulate printmaking and the collection of prints. Active membership was determined by achievement in making prints, associate members included individuals who had an interest in art, and for an annual membership fee of \$5.00 they received each year a "gift print" by one of the active members.

Birger Sandzén produced the first lithograph "gift print" in 1931: "A Kansas Creek." The print depicts Wild Horse Creek in Graham County. Cottonwood trees, outcroppings of limestone, pasture land, and water reflecting the landscape are the major visual elements in the first of 34 prints received by the members. The last "gift print" was given out in 1965 and thereafter the organization was dissolved. A number of factors contributed to the demise of the organization founded in Sandzén's studio.

During one visit to Graham County, the Leksell and Sandzéns spent a summer afternoon and evening in a Dutch settlement near the farm. They listened to songs of Holland, saw folk dances, and ate Dutch food. Later they entertained their hosts by singing Swedish songs, including the familiar "Du Gamla, Du Fria" (in English). It was a memorable day as representatives of two national cultures of Europe had shared their traditions on the plains of Western Kansas.

Many paintings and prints based on Graham County and western Kansas have rocks in the foreground or along the banks of a stream. Sandzén's love of geology is evident. It began as a child collecting pebbles and even in later years he continued to collect rocks. Today, one can find several bowls of rocks in his Lindsborg studio. The Gallery Archives has a sample of the limestone on the farm, which docents use when they talk about the farm and Wild Horse Creek to school groups. Sandzén painted the limestone of western Kansas, usually with sunlight reflecting glowing colors. Reflections of limestone formations in calm water were painted with quick vertical brushstrokes, a technique he learned while studying painting with Anders Zorn (1860-1920) in Stockholm in 1891.

A Gallery Archives letter dated January 18, 1942, from Birger Sandzén to his daughter, Margaret, who was studying in New York City at the Art Students League School, reveals more about the family and the farm. "Morfar's [grandfather Eric Leksell] affairs are in good shape. He just made mother [Charlotte Leksell] a present of a fine washing machine which costs \$70. He has also paid all his taxes in full.

"Can you imagine what Morfar is doing just now? He is busy drawing pencil maps of Graham County marking all the oil wells. There is a producing well right here, and here is a test well, etc., etc. You can hardly blame little Morfar for being a little excited. The latest well, East of [Andrew] van Oenen's pasture, only six miles East of our place, is the largest oil well in the state of Kansas, a giant well of 15,000 barrels a day. It is an "offset well," if you know what that means. Now darling, the first thing you do when you come home will be to fill the gaps in your technical knowledge of the oil industry so as to be able to carry on an intelligent discussion along these lines."

On January 30, 1920, Alfrida Sandzén's mother, Charlotte Leksell, writes about the farm and plans to move to Lindsborg: "Dear little Alfrida! My hearty thanks for the letter. Hope that Margaret is well again. The same kind of cold is 'going around' here. All the Swanks have been sick but are now better—we are, thanks to God, pretty well. On the night before last, after we had gone to bed, Andrew van Oenen came. He stayed over until the next day—Gertie and the children are well. Jennie is fine and begins to get fat. They have done well at the farm this year—they got 5,000 bushels of corn and now Andrew was going to Kansas City with a 'carful' of good cattle. So it now seems as if they are battling through. Pappa has set Tuesday, February 17th, as the date for his 'sale.' May we get good weather! We are already packing the things we will bring to Lindsborg. Pappa won't leave before the threshing is done and the wheat sold.

"Climdberg has now been paid 'so one bear is knocked down.' The wheat price is going down and the milk price up. For the last sack of flour here we paid \$3.75 and 20 cents for a pound of sugar, etc., so it comes out even. If one could only sell and wouldn't have to buy anything, there would be some profit, but now it's no better than when one got paid less for what one had to sell and paid less for what one bought.

"The weather was wonderful yesterday and promises to be the same today. - Yesterday 'our school' had a free day and the teacher and the children had their dinner here by our creek. The girls sat on the bench and munched their lunch and the boys stood or sat on the ground around them. What fun they had! They ran like hares everywhere and sometimes came in to take a look and then they played again. It was refreshing to see this light-hearted group of children.

"I am baking today. Having nothing further of interest to write about the finish with dearest greetings to the three of you from Pappa and your own Mamma"

In mid-1942 the ownership of the farm was deeded over to Mrs. Sandzén, Alfrida. In the years that followed stripper wells were drilled on the farm which brought in added income during the war years and beyond. At the death of Alfrida in 1961, ownership of the farm was transferred to Margaret. At Margaret's death in 1993, the Birger Sandzén Memorial Foundation became the owner of the farm.

The sale of the farm in November 1999 by the Sandzén Foundation raised funds to be invested to help with the ongoing programs and the preservation of the art in Gallery collections. Bill Spires of Kiowa, Colorado, was the highest bidder. Bidders attended the auction from Louisiana, Texas, Colorado, Nebraska, and Kansas. Spires bought the 480 acres for about \$197,000, offering \$410 an acre. When Spires went to look at the property about two weeks before the sale, he saw at least 30 white-tailed deer and other wildlife.

Members of the Foundation board and the Gallery director visited the farm on April 5, 1999, to document the buildings, creek, and the land with VCR camera and written notes and sketches. Local Lindsborg photographer, Tom Jaderborg, accompanied the group to take photographs. Many trees had grown up since the years of the Leksells. The native grassland was much the same with outcroppings of limestone.

In a Gallery Archives letter dated October 26, 1942, Sandzén's daughter Margaret writes to Swedish sculptor Carl Milles and his wife Olga, "Yesterday, mother and father announced my engagement to a boy I've know for twelve years, but not before I had enough sense to realize that he is it!" The engagement announcement read: "Mr. and Mrs. Birger Sandzén of Lindsborg, Kansas, announce the engagement of their daughter Margaret to Mr. Charles Pelham Greenough, 3rd, son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Pelham Greenough, 2nd.," and that the wedding would be on November 28. Sandzén noted, "We became four comrades, when my dear Margaret married Charles Pelham Greenough in my studio."

Pelham, Sandzén's son-in-law, as he preferred to be called, shared the family's interest in art, especially print collecting. In a 1942 letter by Sandzén, "Shares my thoughts about a small gallery or museum of art in Lindsborg."

Visits to the Graham County farm by the Sandzéns and Greenoughs continued. Pelham enjoyed family visits to the farm. He noted that the tenant's wife usually served fried chicken. However he said he felt somewhat guilty, when as he ate fried chicken, he saw chickens strolling outside the farm house door.

Good memories and many Gallery archival letters about the Graham County farm reveal the joy and appreciation the Sandzén family had for the land and especially Wild Horse Creek. The final Graham County farm article, will focus on art of Graham County and Western Kansas by Birger Sandzén. His remarkable interest in the western Kansas landscape began in 1908 and continued throughout the rest of his life.

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PART 3

GRAHAM COUNTY AND WESTERN KANSAS, BIRGER SANDZÉN'S SKETCHING GROUND

A considerable number of paintings and prints by Swedish-American artist Birger Sandzén (1871-1954) are based on sketches made in Graham County and western Kansas. This final article about Sandzén begins in 1908 with Birger's first trip to visit the farm of his wife's parents, Eric and Charlotte Leksell, near Bogue, Kansas.

The Leksells moved to the farm in the spring of 1906. It was a difficult adjustment for the Leksells, who had to leave McPherson where Eric had been in partnership in a dry goods store.

Having let out too much credit, the store was sold, and Eric and Charlotte began farming at the age of 57 and 52.

Countless letters in the Gallery Archives from Charlotte to her daughter Alfrida, Mrs. Sandzén, tell about life on the farm. Many times she highlights their hopes for a good harvest, preparations for planting, and most of all weather conditions. Letters tell of prairie fires, hailstorms, dust and sand storms, as well as torrential rains which tore out fences. More pleasant notes praise Birger as artist and teacher—a February 2, 1916, letter relates a Sandzén exhibition at Hill City sponsored by a Mrs. Holland.

Oil paintings, prints, and watercolors of Graham County motifs by Sandzén span a wide-range of years. Birger's daughter Margaret's favorite Graham County print was the 1931 linoleum block print titled "Sunshine Creek." The print depicts outcroppings of limestone and Cottonwood trees that line the banks of Wild Horse Creek, which flowed across one corner of the Leksell farm.

Earlier in 1921 Sandzén's lithograph, "Creek at Moonrise," another motif of Wild Horse Creek, is a strong vibrant image of the landscape. The sketch used for this print was also used for a large oil by the same title, which is in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum. The painting was a gift to the museum from well-known New York art critic Henry Godard Leach. This painting is reproduced (color plate number 21 of 49) in Emory Lindquist's biography, *Birger Sandzén: An Illustrated Biography*. The lithograph and oil represent fine examples of Sandzén's strength of line, understanding of color, and his noted strong brushstrokes.

Sandzén also discovered Stevensons Lake in Graham County and painted a 1943 oil of the lake with masterly handling of water and trees, outcroppings of limestone, and a large colorful line of thunderhead clouds rolling across the entire horizon. This painting was a wedding gift for his daughter Margaret and son-in-law Pelham Greenough. "Stevensons Lake," for many years, was mounted above the Greenough's living room fireplace.

When I visited Margaret and Pelham's home, I usually made some excuse to enter the living room for a moment to study the painting. This oil is a fine Kansas landscape. The joyful marriage of Birger's daughter and his special appreciation for Graham County are evident in this work which is color plate number 47 in the Lindquist biography.

Sandzén's daughter Margaret had a fondness for the Leksell farm and Graham County. From early childhood she wrote to her grandparents Eric and Charlotte Leksell about her love of the farm and her enjoyment of trips to stay with them and play with nearby farm children. Margaret enjoyed talking to visitors at the Gallery about Graham County and the western landscape her father appreciated. When she died in 1993 the painting of the lake was removed from the home and framed for Gallery exhibitions.

The most recognized Graham County oil, however, with all of the elements Sandzén associated with a Graham County landscape, was painted in 1921. Measuring 60 by 80 inches, "Creek at Moonrise" has been on exhibit in the Thorsen Room of the Sandzén Gallery for many years (color plate number 23 in the Lindquist biography).

The painting is on permanent loan from Lindsborg's Unified School District collection. Truly it is one of Sandzén's best of Kansas. It is larger with the bold impasto or thick paint brushstrokes and vibrant colors associated with Sandzén's work from about 1917 to 1929. It represents a time when Sandzén's oil painting was of singular quality and very expressive.

A Kansas spring time motif, "Creek at Moonrise" depicts water from heavy rains overflowing the banks of Wild Horse Creek. The rich lush colors of a landscape after a rain storm are evident and one finds an early moon in the eastern sky rising above outcroppings of limestone lining the banks of the creek. The entire painting is a symphony of artistic harmony and natural visual elements.

Sandzén's notable place as an American painter and printmaker was also assured by his travels to western Kansas and his love of Graham County. In 1908, at the age of 37, he began a Graham County artistic journey of more than 45 years. Today, we share his joy and appreciation of western Kansas.

You are cordially invited to visit the Gallery and discover the indescribable colors of Sandzén's paintings. Gallery hours are from 1 to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday. You also need to know that the Gallery is planning renovations to its interior and courtyard in the near future. We will most likely close in July of 2011 and open again in March of 2012. Fifty-three years have brought about the need for renovation and greater energy efficiency.