

## Finding Aid to the Otto Simonson Papers

### Simonson, Otto

Otto Simonson Papers, 1930-1964

.6 linear ft.

Collection number: Mss 345

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[Biography](#)

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### OVERVIEW

**Access:** The collection is open under the rules and regulations of the Institute.

**Provenance:** Donated by Bruce Simonson, Oberlin Ohio, 2009 (Acc. 2900)

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**Citation:** [item within collection], Otto Simonson Papers, Ms 345, Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo.

### BIOGRAPHY

Otto Simonson was born May 21, 1875 on a small farm in southeastern Norway within sight of the Swedish border, youngest of the six children of Simon and Anna Marie Moira. A few years later, the family received tickets for passage to America from Andrew Simonson, a son of Simon by an earlier marriage. The parents and three of the children emigrated from Norway in April 1882 eventually reaching Benson, Minnesota after a rough trip. The family was held up in each of Chicago and Minneapolis for several days.

Andrew Simonson met the family in Benson and took them to his farm in Rolling Forks Township, Pope County. At some point, Simon Moira changed his surname. The gravestone in Minnesota recording his death in 1894 gives his name as Simon Anderson. His sons who had come to this country took their father's given name and added "son" to for their surnames. The Moira family had to find other living

quarters when Andrew Simonson sold his farm five years after they arrived. The family moved into the only shelter available, a two room log cabin with a dirt roof. Otto's father died a few years later, but the widow and two of the children stayed in the cabin for two more years.

Otto enrolled in school in his second year in Minnesota. With Norwegian as his only language, he was at a big disadvantage. He attended school irregularly for a while and then dropped out. He went back to school after he noticed that young men who had become teachers were respected more than others. By 1896 he had completed the fourth grade, which was the most advanced available at the time in Rolling Forks Township. To continue farther in school with the hope of becoming a teacher, Otto moved to the farm of an older brother, Gust Simonson, at the edge of Cando, North Dakota in the spring of 1896. Otto had made arrangements to work on his brother's farm during the busy seasons and be free to go to school in Cando during the winter.

Otto's mother and one sister moved from Minnesota to Devils Lake, North Dakota in early 1897. On April 8, 1897, the three of them filed homestead claims on as many quarter sections of land, sight unseen, in Sec. 1 of Pleasant Valley Township, in the southeastern corner of Rolette County, near Agate, North Dakota. During the next five years, the three of them "proved up" their claims and got titles to the quarter sections. Otto did the required work on his mother's claim and inherited it when she died in 1918. By that time, he had bought the two other quarter sections so that the home farm was a full square mile.

Section one became the base of operation for the rest of Otto's life though he did buy more land later. He had a fifth quarter section about four miles northwest of the home farm. He later bought two farms for a pair of daughters and their families and still later gradually acquired three more quarter sections that he farmed himself. Even though he did buy additional land later in his life, Section one held first place for him as long as he lived. The return address that he would use when he would write to his son was labeled "only place" meaning that the farm was the hub of the universe for him.

Because he came from a line that had always been landless, ownership of land meant security to Otto. "Only place" was that security to Otto. Beyond that, "only place" would provide a home for him and his family where they need have no fear of being kicked out. Otto and Johanna Karlsen, another immigrant from Norway, were married May 17, 1904. From that time on, his dreams of building a home included her and any children that they had. Otto Simonson passed away February 9, 1966. –This biographical sketch is taken from *Letters, Letter segments, and Memoirs from a Farm*.

## SCOPE AND CONTENT

The **Otto Simonson Papers** spans from 1930 to 1964. These are letters that Otto wrote to his son, Roy Simonson, over the span of thirty four years. These letters document the different happenings that were going on at the family farm at Agate, N.D. as well as special events. Included in this collection are memoirs that Roy had his father write in the early 1950s. There is also an article that Roy wrote in the early 2000s about the life and income that Otto had during his life. The two series in this collection are: Letters and Topical.

These letters and memoirs were published in to a book called *Letters, Letter Segments, and Memoirs from a Farm*, (Simonson, Roy W. *Letters, Letter Segments, and Memoirs from a Farm*. West Conshohocken: Infinity, 2005.) Most of the letters and memoirs were published into this book. The book is divided into three different parts. The first part is a collection of the letters, the second is segments that give Otto's voice on a variety of topics, and the last part is the memoirs. Roy did edit the letters and memoirs, but it

was “minimal, I have tried to preserve the style and flavor of the prose.” The memoirs were edited more than the letters by Roy Simonson but he made a big effort to keep the style the same.

The **Letters Series** is a collection of letters that Otto wrote to his son over the course of thirty-four years, starting when Roy was in school at NDAC. These letters were handwritten to Roy from Otto. In later years, Roy transcribed these letters to type. Both the handwritten and typed are in this collection. These letters cover a variety of topics that went on in Otto’s life. In the early years he talks about the different stories that he has about his youth in Minnesota and his early life in North Dakota. Most of the letters cover the different farming practices that Otto used in his time that he farmed. This ranged from farm prices to the different machinery that he used to plow and harvested his crops with. He covers the prices that were paid for his crops and what the government loan prices were on crops as well. Otto bought a lot of land in his life and he often shared what he paid for it and where in North Dakota he bought the land. During the 1930s and 1940s he wrote often of the different government programs that were in place to help farmers.

Otto would tell his son about the different activities that his family was doing. Otto lived close to his daughters and he would share how they are doing. We would tell Roy how much he enjoyed hunting and fishing. He would share stories of him going out and shooting ducks or catching fish in Canada. He would talk often of weather conditions in North Dakota. Spring was his favorite time of year because of the beautiful scenery. It also meant that he could start to plow up the field and he could get back to work. Otto loved Christmas, and he would always write a letter around Christmas to tell Roy about all the things that went on at his house.

Otto wrote about politics and world affairs often. In the beginning of these letters, Bill Langer was a very powerful political figure in North Dakota politics, and Otto was not a supporter of Langer. He wrote to Roy about the different things that he didn’t think was right about Langer and what he thought about politics. He would explain who he would want to win in presidential elections and why he thought they should win and what kind of job they would do as president. He criticized Roosevelt when he was president because he didn’t like some of the programs that he was putting in place. World War II came up in the letters a couple of times. Otto once told Roy in the late 1930s, before Germany invaded Poland, that he needs to start buying farm equipment before the metal becomes rationed. He would also reference World War I as well during his letters.

The **Topical Series** includes the memoirs, both handwritten and transcribed, and a study of production on a North Dakota farm. Otto wrote these memoirs because Roy encouraged him to get his experience of homesteading in North Dakota on paper. The first memoir, “From Flair to Combine”, describes the development of technology in harvesting and threshing small grains during Otto’s lifetime. It shows from all hand work to machines taking over most of the responsible. The second memoir, “the Farmers Club”, describes the Agate, N.D. informal farmers club for the entertainment and education of farm people. It was only active when the fields were not.

The third memoir, “The Agate Farmers Cooperative Elevator Company”, covers some of the activity but is centered on the establishment of a company followed by the purchase and operation of a grain elevator in Agate. The fourth memoir, “School Days”, records the experiences of Otto both as a pupil and as a teacher. He recalls in his letters that these school days are some of the fondest memories of his life. The fifth memoir, “Newspaper Lesson”, recounts when Otto was involved with a local paper. It was a failed venture and he thought it was more headache than it was worth. The final memoir, “Carl Nelson”, recalls Otto’s memory of Carl Nelson. Nelson was a friend of Otto’s. Otto thought that Carl was a good guy and he talked and they wrote back and forth often.

The study “Variable Production and Income on a North Dakota Farm” is a study that Roy did about Otto’s farm. Roy took all of the data that Otto told him and compiled it to form this study. He also took the income of the farm and the crop prices and included it in this study. Roy tried to get this study published in *Agricultural Monthly*, which at the time was published by NDSU. Letters are included in this file that indicates that this study never was published due that it needed more work done.

Portions of this Scope and Content taken from *Letters, Letter Segments, and Memoirs from a Farm*.

## BOX AND FOLDER LIST

Box/Folder	Contents
1/1	Finding aid, and Biographical information
	<b>Letters Series</b>
1/2	Transcribed 1930-1932
1/3	Transcribed 1933-1934
1/4	Transcribed 1935-1936
1/5	Transcribed 1938-1941
1/6	Transcribed 1942-1944
1/7	Transcribed 1945-1948
1/8	Transcribed 1949-1951
1/9	Transcribed 1952
1/10	Transcribed 1953-1954
1/11	Transcribed 1955-1956
1/12	Transcribed 1957-1958
1/12	Transcribed 1959-1960
1/13	Transcribed 1961-1964
1/14	Original 1930-1932
1/15	Original 1933-1934
1/16	Original 1935-1936
1/17	Original 1938-1941
1/18	Original 1942-1944
1/19	Original 1945-1948
1/20	Original 1949-1951
1/21	Original 1952
2/1	Original 1953-1954
2/2	Original 1955-1956
2/3	Original 1957-1958
2/4	Original 1959-1960
2/5	Original 1961-1964
	<b>Topical Series</b>
2/6	Memoirs (Transcribed)
2/7	Memoirs (Original)
2/8	“Variable Production and Income on a North Dakota Farm”

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