



Chris Ankerson

Fisherman – Farmer – Father of a Leelanau/Grand Traverse Clan

His real name was Christen Anchersen Kragelund. He was born on September 14, 1846 at Kragelund, a small farming village in the municipality of Vejle, on Denmark's Jutland Peninsula.¹ He was Christen, son of Ancher Nielsen Rydal of Kragelund; hence the patronymic-byname ('Ancher's son of Kragelund'). He was probably raised at Kragelund for the better part of his youth.

By the time he'd become a man, his homeland, once the seat of bold Viking raiders, then a major north European power and since those early times a usually prosperous place, had become a place of political and economic uncertainty. Denmark had aligned itself with the wrong side during the Napoleonic Wars early in the century, which impaired its ability to handle troubles with Prussia in 1861. The recurring conflicts, which resulted in the loss of a large part of the southern regions, might have been the reason the family moved north to Sahl, near the River Gudenå in Viborg.²

In 1861, Christen would turn fifteen years old at Sahl. In that same place, lived Nielsine Thomasen, the daughter of Thomas Nielsen, who would be eight in November of that year.³ The population in these rural areas of Jutland was sparse, and so it would be unlikely for Christen and "Sine," as she would usually have been called, not to have known each other.

As elsewhere in mid-nineteenth century Europe, Denmark had an abundance of immigration agents from America, Australia and Canada. Their job was to sell the incentives their respective governments offered to immigrants, and make relocating easy by arranging the trip. While things were not actually so bad in Denmark, "American letters" extolled the virtues of that land of milk and honey across the sea, where one was pretty much free to seek his fortune however he pleased, and with the country's phenomenal growth ensuring that one was bound to succeed in just about any endeavor. In 1872, now twenty-five years old, all this evidently became too much for Christen, and he decided to go seek his fortune in America. In March, he said his goodbyes in Sahl, and perhaps also to eighteen-year old Sine, and headed for the port at Stettin, Germany (now Szczecin, Poland.) There, on the first day of April, the young farmer registered aboard the ship *Franklin*, he being officially bound for Chicago, Illinois, gateway to the fastest growing farming area in the USA.⁴

The Franklin arrived in New York with its 768 Danish and German passengers on Saturday, the 4th of May in 1872.⁵ That was an ideal time to arrive. For immigrants like Christen, the usual plan was to continue on up the Hudson river, then via the canals to Buffalo on the eastern end of Lake Erie, and thence via the Great Lakes to Chicago. By that time in May, the canals would be open, and the Great Lakes shipping season would be well underway.

We might never know what happened on the way to Chicago. Perhaps after seeing New York and the immigrant ghettos at Buffalo, or maybe hearing stories of broken dreams during the slow canal voyages, Christen decided to "check his premises." Perhaps he bumped into someone who was able to sell him on a different plan. Maybe he observed the thriving fishing industry on the Great Lakes, and decided that would be an easy way to get started in America. Or perhaps he never intended to go to Chicago in the first place.

One of the most enduring legends on South Manitou Island is the story of the tragedy that befell the Sheridan family on Friday, March 15, of 1878. Aaron Sheridan and his wife Julia were light keepers on the island. The winter of 1877-1878 had been more than unusually warm; to the extent that it is still known as "the winter without a winter." The weather at Chicago that day was clear and pleasant, with light southwesterly winds and afternoon temperatures in the low 60's. March had come in like a lamb. It had been pleasant and warm for at least two weeks across the southern Great Lakes, with temperatures ranging from the mid-40's to the mid-60's.⁶ Presumably, similar conditions prevailed at the Island, because on that day the Sheridans decided to make a crossing to Glen Haven in the keeper's small sailboat. With them was their one-year old son Robert, and Chris Ankerson.

Chris Ankerson, an Island fisherman with boating experience, might have been recruited for the voyage because Aaron was not a sailor. Or perhaps it was because Aaron Sheridan was partially disabled, having lost most of the use of his left arm in the Civil War, while the keeper's boat, probably a Mackinaw boat or Collingwood skiff, needed at least one fully capable sailor, and preferably two. Such boats have been described as 'canoes with a sail and centerboard,' and were rather notorious for easily capsizing.⁷ On the return trip from the mainland that day, it happened about a mile off the island.⁸ Aaron, Julia and Robert Sheridan were lost; only Chris Ankerson survived. Of the incident, he would later report ...

"They went for the purpose of taking over government mail or papers, as I understood, and were drowned by the capsizing of the boat on their return. I was with them when they were drowned; I went with them on the trip to assist in handling the boat: I have always been used to boats, and I consider this boat unsafe and entirely unfit for the station. She has always been considered a dangerous boat and one that would not stand a heavy sea."⁹

From the history of this tragic event, it's clear that Christen Ankerson was on South Manitou Island early in 1878, and his being entrusted with the safety of the Sheridans on that day suggests that he had been around long enough to be known as a trustworthy seaman.

About the same time of year two years later, he left the Island and returned to Denmark. He returned to Sahl to find the girl he'd left behind. Nielsena Thomasen, "Sine," would be the love of his life. After waiting faithfully for eight long years, she was married to Christen Anchersen Kragelund, now the American "Chris Ankerson," in Sahl on the Wednesday, 17th of March.¹⁰ She was 26; her husband was 33. Three weeks later,



the young couple signed on aboard the ship *Thingvalla*, a three-masted propeller, officially headed for Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. Their steamer sailed from Copenhagen three days later, on April 9, 1880.

From Copenhagen she sailed across the North Sea to the port of Shields, at Newcastle, England, taking on coal and departing there on the 14th. When no more than a couple of days out, the ship developed disabling mechanical problems and began to drift northward out of the regular shipping lanes and into a sea dotted with huge icebergs. Day after day, week after week, the *Thingvalla* drifted among the icebergs with storms and squalls buffeting the ship and its helpless passengers and crew. Other ships that had left at the same time later returned to Denmark with the distressing news that the *Thingvalla* had not arrived in America, and there was deep despair among the families of the immigrants who had left Denmark on the ship. After weeks of helpless drifting, the carefully rationed food was gone, and the despairing passengers and crew existed on hardtack. The stricken ship was finally sighted by the English steamer *Samarina* of the Cunard line which, seeing its distress signals, came to the rescue and towed her to Boston for repairs. Her five-hundred passengers were taken from Boston to New York aboard steamers *Main* and *Greece*. Thus was the “honeymoon” voyage of Chris and Sine Ankersen, finally ending at Castle Garden in New York harbor on May 7, 1880.¹¹

By the first week of June, they had arrived on South Manitou Island, with Sine settled into her new home in America.¹² The Island would be her home for the next dozen years, and the birthplace of most of her children. First came Karen Marie in April of 1881, then Martha in August of 1882, and Nelson in September of 1890.¹³

Chris, meanwhile, was a successful fisherman,¹⁴ probably a pond net fisherman, as were most Island-based fishermen at the time, but perhaps also occasionally setting gill nets in the bay. He probably operated mostly around the north point of the Island’s bay, now sometimes called “Gull Point,” since he filed a cash-entry application on the point’s 31-acres in January of 1882, and was granted a patent for that land three years later.¹⁵

The Ankersons were a popular Island family who were engaged socially and civically on the Island until about 1892,¹⁶ when they moved to Dannebrog, in Howard County, Nebraska. Dannebrog, now known as “Nebraska’s Danish Capital,” was originally established as an agricultural colony for Danish immigrants in 1871 by the Danish Land and Homestead Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Having initially all but failed, the town prospered briefly with the coming of the railroad in 1885. Perhaps the Ankersons were sold on the idea of building a new life as farmers in the company of other Danes, with whom they shared a common culture, and with an attractive offer for land by the struggling development company. Perhaps they were enticed by acquaintances or relatives already in Nebraska. Whatever their reason for going there, they didn’t stay long. Dannebrog’s boom was short-lived. Even in its best times, which would

come thirty years later, Dannebrog never had more than 432 residents. Perhaps the only notable thing that happened there for the Ankersons was the birth of their last child in January of 1893, a son whom they named Thomas, in honor of Sine’s father.^{18, 19}

Ultimately deciding to pull up stakes in Nebraska, the Ankersons returned to Michigan, settling on a farm on Long Lake Road not far west of Traverse City. Chris resumed his occupation in commercial fishing, working by himself on and off at South Manitou Island, while the rest of the family and a hired man worked the farm.²⁰

Daughter Martha was the first to marry, in April of 1903. The groom was Leander Muncy of Traverse City.²¹ She was 20, Leander was 28. That marriage ended with divorce a few years later. In the years to come, Leander Muncy would never remarry. In his old age and in poor health he would make the nationally syndicated news by calling upon the Traverse City Police for assistance, then asking the responding officer for his handgun, with which he proposed to end his life by suicide. His request was refused, of course, with the officer attempting to offer some consolation and encouragement. But within a few hours Leander Muncy shot himself dead anyway, with a 32-calibre pistol of his own.²²

Daughter Karen married Swedish-born Oscar Lyon of Traverse City in April of 1906.²³ Martha married again in April of 1912, this time more enduringly to Arthur M. Laird of Traverse City.²⁴ Thomas married Nellie Smith, also of Traverse, in January of 1917, with whom he would produce eleven children.²⁵ Son Nelson never married.²⁶

Christin passed away on the farm at the age of 75, on March 15, 1922. Sine died nine years later, on the 11th of August in 1931. She was 77.²⁷ They had been Americans for over a half-century. During the next few generations, the Ankerson clan would grow into a broadly extended family of Ankersons, Lyons and Lairds, many of whom would remain in the Grand Traverse area, and are still represented there in significant numbers today, over a century since Chris and Sine’s arduous honeymoon voyage to America.

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Editors Note: This essay is a compilation of information from a variety of historic texts and Internet resources. While information from these sources is not always in agreement, the information contained in this work represents an earnest attempt to remain faithful to the facts, or what was probable given the times and the circumstances of the events.

References

- ¹ Birth and baptismal record – Christen Anchersen Kraglund, born September 14, 1846
Note: Conflicting record indicates a birth date of September 14, 1848, however subsequent records showing age indicate the correct date was 1846.
- ² “Butler Family Tree,” www.ancestry.com, note about travels for Christin Ankersen



³ Danish census and genealogy records for the Thomas Nielsen family and Nielsine Thomassen

⁴ 1872 Danish immigration record for "Chr. Ancher" and 1872 passenger manifest for steamer *Franklin*

⁵ New York passenger arrival record – "Christen Anker" aboard the *Franklin*, May 4, 1872

⁶ *Chicago Daily Commercial Report*, No.6702, March 15, 1878, pg. 1, "Weather Report"

⁷ *A Good Boat Speaks For Itself: Isle Royale Fishermen and Their Boats*, Timothy Cochrane, Hawk Tolson, Chapter 3, "Island Boats," pg 67

Excerpt: "Commercial fisherman Stanley Sivertson recalled hazards associated with sailing in the Mackinaws. 'I heard the stories through my dad telling about them, and they were kind of, Oh ... treacherous ... in the summertime when you got a sudden squall, they couldn't get the sails down in time. In the early period there, why there were a few fishermen drowned because those boats capsized before they got the sails down.' Mackinaws required both sailing expertise and active coordination among the crew. With two or sometimes three sails and numerous lines to handle and adjust, they took expert hands to get storm-ready or make most efficient use of light winds. Poor seamanship, surprisingly sudden squalls, and the general hazards of working on Lake Superior could result in tragic mishaps."

⁸ "Captain McCauley and His Daughter Clementine", July 6, 2010, Kathy Warnes, www.suite101.com

Excerpt: "A story in the *Lighthouse Digest* in 1977 recounts another such incident.

On December 14, 1900, William H. Shields, keeper of the Squaw Island Lighthouse, northwest of Beaver Island, decided it was time to shut down for the winter. Keeper Shields turned off the light in the lighthouse and he and the other four members of his party climbed into the Mackinaw sailboat that served the lighthouse for the nine mile trip to Big Beaver Island. Shields, his wife, her niece, Lucy Davis of Richmond, Indiana, first assistant keeper Captain McCauley and second assistant, Lucien Morden of Montague, had no reason to think that the trip would be anything but routine.

Then the calm lake suddenly turned stormy. Assistant keeper McCauley saw a "puff of wind" from the north bearing down on them. He yelled a warning to Shields at the helm, but the squall smashed into them before he could slacken the sails or turn into the wind. Unbalanced to one side, the Mackinaw boat heeled over until the sails lay flat on the water. Shields and his wife, Lucian Morden and Mrs. Davis landed in the lake, while Captain McCauley managed to scramble over the gunwale as the boat tipped. The men hauled the women up to the centerboard trunk and then to a prone position on the side of the hull. For the time being they were chilled to the bone, but safe.

The five stranded people didn't have the strength to right the tipped Mackinaw boat and it stayed on its side. Captain McCauley threw all of their belongings out of the boat to make it as buoyant as possible. The men used lines from the rigging to securely tie the women, but their feet and lower legs remained in the water. Shivering violently with cold, the group huddled together and searched the horizon for a ship or point of land. The stranded group saw several fishing tugs throughout the day, but the distance was too great for the fishing tug crews to see them in the water. The Mackinaw boat continued to drift south.

That night, the stranded five saw the lights of the returning fishing tugs, but the tug crews didn't hear their shouts. After about eight hours adrift in the lake, the two women froze to death and Lucian Morden, numb from the cold, lost his hold on the boat and slipped under the waves. Light keeper Shields and Captain McCauley clung to the side of the hull through the bitterly cold night. After several more hours, Captain McCauley saw smoke on the horizon. He urged Shields to keep up his courage because he was certain that a steamer lay just to the north.

Finally, a large ship, the steamer *Manhattan*, a Gilchrist line steamer which was bound for Manitowoc with a cargo of coal, moved broadside to the wrecked boat, blew four short blasts, hove to and lowered a boat. Captain McCauley thought he might be hallucinating as he watched four oarsmen bring the life boat

alongside. He boarded the life boat himself, but Shields had to be lifted, because he couldn't walk in his half-frozen state. The crew removed the ice covered bodies of the women and rowed the lifeboat back to the Manhattan.

Both of the survivors were badly frozen, especially keeper Shields, and the next morning when the *Manhattan* arrived in Manitowoc, they were taken to the Hospital of the Holy Family. Keeper Shields had badly frozen hands and feet, and remained in the hospital for six months. The doctors had to remove one of his legs at the knee. After he left the hospital, the United States Lighthouse service appointed Shields keeper at the newly built lighthouse at Charlevoix and he served there until he retired in April 1924. He died in September 1925.

Captain McCauley was in better condition. He was discharged from the hospital and arrived home at Beaver Island December 26th. Because of poor communications between Beaver Island and the mainland, Mary McCauley didn't learn that her husband was alive until weeks after the Captain had been rescued and hospitalized. After the near fatal accident in the Mackinaw Boat and his recovery, the government promoted Captain McCauley to principal keeper of Squaw Island Light. He kept the Squaw Island Light until it closed in 1928 and then the Lighthouse Service transferred him to the St. Joseph Light. He kept the St. Joseph Light until he retired in 1936."

⁹ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 46th Congress, 2nd Session, Report No. 1669, "Heirs of Aaron A. Sheridan"

¹⁰ 1880 Immigration Record – Christen and Sine Ankersen

¹¹ Norway Heritage Community Notes on the voyage of the *Thingvalla*, April/May 1880

¹² 1880 U.S. Census – South Manitou Island, Michigan, pg 1

¹³ Birth records for Island-born Ankerson children

¹⁴ Excerpts from the *Traverse City Herald*, July 1886

¹⁵ Land Patent No.22817, January 17, 1885 – Chris Ankerson

¹⁶ Excerpts from the *Traverse City Herald*, April 1885

¹⁷ *Journal of the Senate of the State of Michigan*, 189, pg 84

¹⁸ Draft Registration Card – Thomas Ankerson

¹⁹ *Traverse City Record-Eagle*, July 10, 1851, pg 2, "World War I Veteran Dies" (Death Notice for Thomas Ankerson)

²⁰ 1900 U.S. Census for Glen Arbor Twp, pg 6 and Long Lake Twp, pg 9

²¹ 1903 Marriage Record – Martha Ankerson & Leander Muncy

²² *Holland Evening Sentinel*, April 7, 1958 – Leander Muncy Suicide

²³ 1906 Marriage Record – Carrie Ankerson & Oscar Lyon

²⁴ 1912 Marriage Record – Martha Ankerson Muncy & Arthur Laird

²⁵ 1917 Marriage Record – Thomas Ankerson & Nellie Smith

²⁶ *Traverse City Record-Eagle*, June 4, 1960, pg 2, "Death Claims N. Ankerson"

²⁷ Death records for Christopher (1922) and Sine (1931) Ankerson

