

This is a letter to Joan Merlene Peyton from her dad, Merton Arlo Bilslend, dated November 6, 1989.

Dear Joan,

It must have been 2 or 3 years ago when you told me you would greatly appreciate it if I would try to give you some of the family history background on a tape. I've thought about this a great deal and wondered how well I would do putting something in a order that would be more or less chronological because the information that I'm going to try to give you will come to me from time to time and probably be inserted pell-mell. This information will also be from my memory only, and not from any written records of any kind that I think of at this time. Walter Lee Bilslend, who lives on a farm with a Wood River, Nebraska address, is probably one who has more specific information about the family than any other one person that I can think of, as far as time and places and that sort of thing are concerned. He has done a great deal of research in the past and will probably will do some more in the future. It was during the Civil War years and after that my grandparents (*Walter Henry Bilslend Sr 1836 • Ireland - 26 Nov 1864*) (*Margaret Devers Bilslend 20 Feb 1837 - 15 Dec 1900*) were moving to the west and my grandfather was reported to have been going west from Fort Kearney (<http://www.legendsofamerica.com/ne-fortkearny.html>) to look for a new location. There is also reported that he and two other men were gone from the party together with some other people, and the two men who returned said that my grandfather had been killed by Indians, according to some reports, there are other reports, but information was rather sketchy and unreliable in those trying times, and for the purpose of this letter probably had just as well be skipped for the time being. I never personally met any of my grandparents, except my mother's father (*Samuel S Johnston Abt 1827 • Knox Co Ohio - 3 Mar 1915 • Iowa, USA*) (mothers mother *Elizabeth Moore Johnston ABT 1832 • Ireland, UK - 3 DEC 1873*) when I was a very small boy, and I can only remember sitting in his lap and seeing a squirrel in a tree, so they are more or less story book characters to me, as opposed to someone who I would ordinarily have known warmly. I presume my grandmother must have had a hard time trying to care for the smaller children of the family, and it is my understanding that she kept the daughter (*Elizabeth J Bilslend 1857 • Pennsylvania*) and a younger son (*Clemon C Bilslend 27 Nov 1864 - 19 Mar 1901*) with her and farmed out my uncle Will and my dad to work for farm people for their board and room. Anyway, they grew up as people have a way of doing, and finally my uncle Will and my dad came out to the Wood River area and, uh, settled down there to some farming. Fact of the matter is, it was a long lost summer, one day when Marie and I were out visiting with Grandma and Ethel (*Ethel Elva Blackman 8 Jan 1897 - 19 Jan 1994, wife of Elmer Lee Bilslend*), and Grandma mentioned that my dad and a gentleman by the name of Joe English ran from Iowa out to Wood River. And I'm not just sure how they got started in farming, whether they might have bought some land or worked for someone, but anyway, they got started. This was in 1882. And after 5 years of this sort of operation, as young men's fancy usually turns to love, my dad went back to Iowa, where my mother was living, and they were married, having known each other previously, and they moved out to Wood River in 1887. I don't know if dad built a little house on what is now days commonly referred to as "the 80", or and then went back to Iowa or whether dad and mother built the house after they were married and came out here, but I believe the house was built before they were married. This is the 80 acres that is presently deeded in my name and one of the focal points of the family history. It was there that their first two children; Leota (*Leota W. 7 May 1888 - 10 Sep 1973*) the oldest and a girl, and Elmer (*Elmer Lee 5 Feb 1894 - 22 Oct 1989*) the second and a boy were born.

They continued farming there, and I can recall my mother telling about how they would get in a sled with 2 horses on the sled and in the winter time bundle up good and go across the ice on the Platte River over to visit their good friends the English's. It was also on this island, which was called Shoemaker Island, where the people lived, and it's where they were living when the blizzard of 1888 came. And it's the story I had is that my dad and my uncle Will were out in the hay meadow bringing in some hay because there was a storm coming, and uh, by the time they got the hay loaded and ready to go back to the house it was so heavy, and the snow was blowing so badly, that they couldn't see where they were going, so they unhooked the horses and each one took a horse, and the horse lead them back to the barn, and they were able to get that far and dad said to uncle Will "Put the horses in the barn and I'll go see about Lucy". Lucy was my mother's name of course, and when he got to the door she was just ready to put on her coat and go out and look for the men, and it's unbelievable how close it was that she might have not been here after that, because the blizzard was such that once you went out in it you were totally lost and it would have taken a short time for anyone to freeze to death.

At this point I guess it would be well for me to tell you that my Uncles name William J. Bilslend (*2 Jun 1859 – 15 Oct 1931*), my father's name was Walter Henry Bilslend Jr (*17 Oct 1861- 16 Oct 1942*), and my mother's maiden name was Lucy Walker Johnston (*5 Nov 1868- 20 Dec 1954*). "J O H N S T O N with a T" apparently she would have some difficulty with people spelling her name without the "t" and as I just did she was always rather emphatic about reminding you that there was a "t" in her name.

The family farming operation continued, and eventually moved up to a place that had a larger house, and closer to the town of Wood River, and this place was commonly known as the Meyer's Place, which was located I believe on the same quarter section of the Wood River Cemetery, and the house and farmland was at the south and west of the cemetery. It was at this place that, Vola (*Vola Jane 20 Jan 1899 - 30 Dec 1973*) the second daughter was born and also Lloyd (*Lloyd C. 8 Aug 1901 – 4 Aug 1967*) the second son, so you see all these things have happened and everything else has happened, and I haven't arrived yet. With that in mind you might understand why I might be a little bit wrong about a few details that I have reported to you at this point.

It was from there that the family moved to Nortonville, Kansas which is the, in the north east area of the state of Kansas, not too far from the city of Atchison. Farming continued there for a while, and on October the 28th 1907, Merton Arlo Bilslend (*28 Oct 1907 - 21 Apr 2000*) showed up on the scene. It was the following April 22nd 1908 when my oldest sister Leota was married. She was married to Cliff Lewton of Valley Falls, Kansas and in a short while they set up their own farming operation and were there for many years until they later moved to Colorado (*1930 United States Federal Census Comanche, Colorado*) near Bennett. It was around 1910 when the rest of the family moved to the McPherson, Kansas area and settled on a farm near Conway which I think is about 7 miles west of McPherson. We were there for 2 or 3 years and then moved to a farm 6 miles south of McPherson, where we stayed until about 1917. It was during this time that conditions in the world deteriorated, and World War I was finally declared. As is well known the German nation was the object of an awful lot of hatred about that time in our area and people of German decent were sometimes unjustly accused of being traitors and slackers. Some houses and barns were painted yellow and some people were caused to move out of the area, to a place probably no better than the one they just left.

During this time, Elmer had met a young lady by the name of Ethyl Blackman (*8 Jan 1897 - 19 Jan 1994*), who lived in McPherson. They were married and moved to Montana to farm, where they stayed for a number of years, but were pooled out (*friends pooled money to help make bank payments*):

<http://www.ushistory.org/us/49c.asp>) 7 years in a row, and finally had to move back to the central part of the state of Kansas again. Sister Vola had met a young man by the name of Leo Shipps (23 May 1893 - 14 Aug 1969) and they were very much in love but *her* marriage was delayed by a little while to fight in the war in Germany where he was classified as a wagoner, which meant that he drove a team of mules and hauled food stuff and ammunition back to the men in the front line who were fighting there. Fortunately he was not injured, and when he came home the two of them were married and lived in the McPherson area in town for a number of years.

Lloyd and I were too young of course to be involved in the war, and along about this time he went to Kansas City, Missouri to attend an automobile training school, and since he had no interest whatsoever in farming, he began to look for a place to practice his profession. Dad could see that neither Lloyd nor I were going to be interested in farming, so he decided to get out of the business and we all moved to Hutchinson, Kansas where he worked as a carpenter for many years and Lloyd became a mechanic in one of the automobile repair shops in Hutchinson until his boss decided to move to Ponca City, Oklahoma and took Lloyd along with him. After a few years there, he decided to move to Colorado and look for a location and finally settled at Prospect Valley where he opened a garage and did repair work on automobiles, trucks, and irrigation motors. Sometime during all of this, Lloyd had met and married a young lady by the name of Madge Whitaker (8 Feb 1905 - ?). They had one son born to them whose name is Duane (4 Dec 1923 - 31 Mar 2013). He is presently retired and living in Sacramento, California to the best of my knowledge. He is a survivor of the Pearl Harbor attack, having served on the USS Maryland, and after the war he became Chief of Civilian Police at the McClelland Airforce Base where he served for several years, also doing some security work that I'm not too sure about. Somewhere along in there, Lloyd and Madge were divorced and in due time Lloyd was remarried to a lady at Prospect Valley by the name of Tilly Vogt (6 Jun 1911- 13 May 1984). She was a fine little lady that everybody loves, and so much fun to be around.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot, I wonder what ever happened to that skinny little guy they called Merton, but we must have left off somewhere back about 1917 at the age of 11 in Hutchinson, Kansas. Well, he went on to go through the school system at Hutchinson, and after that worked at Morton Salt Company (\$85 mo) for a short time. He and a school mate by the name of Leona Irene Skinner (21 AUG 1909 - 1 NOV 1960) were married in 1928 (22 Jan 1928) (April 1928 Correspondence course in Mechanical Drawing \$125). Working at the salt plant did not have too much appeal to him, so he looked for other work and went to work for a wholesale grocery firm by the name of Sentney Wholesale Grocery Company (Oct 1928 @\$60 mo 1 Jan 1929 @ \$72 mo) (1 Jul 1929 trade car for \$510). After a year or two of working in the warehouse there, the company saw fit to send him out on the road as a salesman (Spring of 1929 \$50 mo travel expenses plus \$85 drawing account, fall 1929 raise in drawing account to \$90, 1 Jan 1930 raise to \$100 drawing account), (1 Apr 1930 Moved in with father until drawing account reached \$110 and expense check of \$35 per wk), (14 Oct 1930 trade car for \$500), (1 Jun 1931 moved from Hutchinson to Pratt), (Oct 1931 drawing account cut to \$90 and expense to \$30), (Oct 1931 to Wood River, Ne for funeral of William J Bilslend, uncle) (Nov 1931 Charter Member Investment in Wichita Pump Corp. \$500), if you could call him that, he was pretty green. Anyway the salesman stationed at Pratt, Kansas was, uh, retired and he was, Merton was sent out to take his territory which included everything west from Pratt, Kansas, on the Rock Island Railroad and some other territories to the state line next door to, Liberal Kansas. This was about 1929 and things went along pretty well for a year or so, and then the dust bowl days decided to show up, and business was not too good at the very best. The wind would settle down for a day or so and things would fairly well clear up then along would come another, uh, windy draft that would pick up the dust and put it up into the air a thousand feet high and it was so dark in the night that driving along the street you had to be guided by

the dimness of the street lights which you could barely see up on either side and, uh, not too far down the line. On the territory, you drove with your windows up in your car no matter how hot it was, the dust would come sifting through the window and pile up on the door frame in a little bank, and finally vibration in the car would shake some of it off and it would fall down to the floor, and you felt as though you were not exactly clean. I think the worst of this was occurring around about 1933, 34, and 35, (http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Dust_Bowl.aspx) but in the meantime something else had happened worthy of note. During all this time of traveling the southwest corner of Kansas, even only before the dust bowl shown up, a friend of mine and I used to trade automobiles each week, he would drive his one week and I would drive mine the other, over about a 3 day period, because we could save gasoline that way. He was selling fresh fruits, vegetables, and that sort of produce, and it had no conflict with my line of canned goods and all the things that go along with the wholesale house. We both liked to hunt ducks, and he met a man who had a little lake out on a pasture area south of Mead, Kansas where we stayed all night each week. And, uh, for \$5 a piece or \$10 we were able to lease the rights to hunt ducks on this little pond. So after completing the territory on this particular Friday we decided we would go out and stay overnight in Mead and head out the next morning and hunt ducks. It was a nice bright morning and not too much duck hunting was going on, but a friend of ours drove up and said I had an urgent telephone call at the hotel and we should go up and answer it. The result of that was, that the duck hunting stopped when I found out, from Irene's mother, that she was about to deliver a baby to us. This is happening on November the 5th 1932. My friend was driving his car so we took off and he floor boarded the thing all the way to Pratt, Kansas which was nearly 100 miles, and, uh, the longest 100 I can remember riding any time in my life. Anyway Joan Merlene Bilsend (5 NOV 1932 - 21 JUL 2015) arrived in good condition about 2 o'clock in the afternoon shortly after I had gotten to the hospital. We looked her all over and decided we'd keep her. The next year President Franklin Delano Roosevelt closed all the banks in the United States (1 Jan 1932 total savings \$312, 14 Feb 1932 Citizens Bank closed and lost \$145). And if you had all of your assets in one pile, you wouldn't have a very big one. The only thing that I could scrape up for money was a little gold wedding coffee can. It had been my habit when I got home from a weekly trip, to take all the change that I had in my pocket and put it in this little can. I got that out and counted it and there were 27 dollars sum two cents in it. And that is what I travelled on the next week, on gasoline, hotel bills, and food for about 4 days. Wouldn't last too long now, would it? Well we stayed with this situation for a total of about 6 years, and in about 1935 decided that we weren't going to get very wealthy where we were, and with what we were doing, and maybe not anywhere else, but we felt like, there must be a better place than that so we decided to leave the territory and head for Nebraska where the rest of the family was pretty well congregated at this time. When we hit Grand Island in a few days I went down to see Abe Hallway who was in charge of the Ulry-Talbert Grocery Company (Ulry-Talbert Wholesale Grocers <http://www.trademarkia.com/feast-utco-71199728.html>) here in Grand Island, and after some conversation with him, he and I decided that there was a pretty good opportunity to open up a small grocery store in Palmer, Nebraska, which with what I could put together and borrowing \$1,000 from my dad, we opened up this little store up there, and things were going along pretty well. However, one of the things that had caused us to believe this would be a good possibility was based on the fact that one of the company stores there was operated by an elderly man who was about to close it up, so instead of trying to make a deal with him, which probably would have been better, we opened up our own store, thinking he would probably just continue with his little meat market there. Anyway, business went along fairly well for a while but began to slow up later on when the new wore off, and the competition was pretty tough with some of the people who had been there for many years. We were buying our flour from Nebraska Consolidated

Mills Company (<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/sites/mnh/neb-made/milling.htm>) (<http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.ind.016>) and the salesman was a gentleman by the name of George Spangler. One day he came to me and he said would you be interested in going to work for the company? I was talking to our manager and they need someone in their office down there and I think you'd probably fill the bill, why don't you go down and see Frank Ross, the manager. I did this and as a result, I went to work on January the 13th, 1936 at a little office in the old mill, which had formerly been the Glade Mills, which was one of mills that was consolidated into the Nebraska Consolidated Mills Company. The company was in the process of building a new mill here in Grand Island, and, uh, in August of that year, we moved over into the new place, and as the years went by going from one thing to another such as an office clerk, and a warehouse foreman, and a salesman, finally an opportunity opened up at the plant in Hasting, Nebraska, where I was transferred, with some apprehensions on my part, as the manager of that plant and was there for 6 ½ years. In 1952, the company decided that plant was too small to fit into the modern competition so they sold it out as a feed mill, and I was transferred to Omaha, where I was associated with the Duncan Hines division, which was developed by the efforts of a lot of sales work and one outstanding chemist with a taste bud described as different and very good. The story of Duncan Hines cake mixes is a matter of record, and an outstanding one, and probably the success of the present company.

The five little mills that started this organization, which is now called Conagra, is one of the largest food manufacturing, distributing, and researching companies in the world, as well as being outstanding flour producing milling operation in this country.

In the meantime, your mother passed away, as you well know. In 1960, and in 1962 Marie Katherine Christensen (25 MAY 1917 - 11 APR 2002) and I were married. She had been associated with our company for 17 years when retirement showed up, and I for 44 years, so the two of us total up 51 (actual total is 61) years service for this outstanding company that we know as Conagra of which we're very proud. And speaking of proud, was nothing of which I am more proud, than my family. Marie is a very fine and lovable wife and you are all great kids, and I know that she loves you all, and you all love her, and justly so. May it ever be thus.

This has been a pretty fast trip over a period of 82 years, so you must know that I not only cannot remember all the things that did happen but not enough space tell about some of those that I do remember happening, but never the less it'll give you a sketch of some of the things that had gone on in this time, and if you think of some specific things that you'd like to know more about, perhaps I can fill you in on some of those, but at this time, I'm going to close this letter and both Marie and I send you our love.