

The Story County Colony of 1855

By JACOB HODNEFIELD

It is one hundred years on June 7, 1955, since the immigrant Norwegian colony arrived in southern Story county to become the focal point of the settlement which even before the Civil war grew to noticeable proportions.* Another focal point was fixed the same year south of Roland and grew rapidly to become an even greater gathering area. After the Civil war the two centers eventually merged to form the great Norwegian settlement which covers Story county, large parts of Hamilton county, and which occupies considerable portions of Hardin, Polk, and Boone. It has emanations into Wright county, northern Iowa and southern Minnesota, even with a finger into the Red River valley.

Norwegian group immigration to America began in 1825, the centennial celebration in commemoration of which was held in Saint Paul, Minnesota, in June 1925, with President Coolidge addressing a vast audience. The arrivals of 1825 chose northern New York state as a place of settlement. But the pull of the west was soon felt, and individuals began to drift westward. More immigration followed in the late thirties and grew to considerable proportions in the forties. The principal gathering areas in the middle west were the Fox river country of northern Illinois and eastern Wisconsin west of Milwaukee, with Chicago a third place of stoppage. From these places further immigration flowed west and northwest.

Immigrants of the forties bought up the government land in the Fox river area, leaving no cheap land for the hundreds that continued to come into the region.

* This narrative is based on Oley Nelson's *En kort historie af det første norske settlement i Story og Polk counties, Iowa, 1855-1905*; and on Hjalmar R. Holand's *De norske settlements historie*, Chapter 54, "Stavanger og Hordaland-kolonien i midtre Iowa," pages 458-467, and on other scattered sources. The author of this article is now a resident of Glendale, California.

These later comers were compelled to work for their relatives or acquaintances of earlier immigration or move out of the settlement. As the years passed, there were hundreds that could profit by moving to places of cheaper land. Most of the Illinois settlers came from the southwestern part of Norway and generally were from rural areas, and thus were natural farmers.

Individuals who had traveled in the early Norwegian settlements of northeastern Iowa and southeastern Minnesota indicated Iowa as a favorable region of exploitation. One of those who urged immigrants to go into Iowa was Nils Olson Naess, a colporteur, who had traveled extensively. There was at first much doubt concerning the Iowa country. It was an unknown land. Moreover, it seemed very far away from Illinois. There was fear of Indians and of everything that lurks in the unknown. The urge of escape from crowded conditions, however, made the investigation of Iowa conditions desirable.

HUNDREDS WISHED IOWA LAND

Eventually those in the vicinity of Lisbon and Fox river, Illinois, who could be considered favorable for forming a colony, numbered in the hundreds. After prolonged discussion, one group decided to elect a committee of four to go into Iowa and investigate conditions. The four men selected were Osmund Sheldahl, Ole Fatland, Osmund Johnson, and Ole Apland. They were not only instructed to investigate conditions, they were also given power of attorney to buy government land if they found it well suited for agriculture.

The delegation of four left Lisbon, Illinois, September 25, 1854. They had chosen the best time of the year for getting a good impression of the Iowa prairies. They followed the California trail westward from Davenport and made fast progress with a team and buggy. They found what they were looking for in southern Story county. After having driven over the region, they chose their claims and went to Des Moines where they obtained papers on the land from the Government Land

office, the price being \$1.25 an acre. They were back in Lisbon after the end of the month.

The report of the delegation was hailed with enthusiasm. There were some doubts, but most of those who needed to look elsewhere for land made little objection to going into the wilderness. There was no railroad farther west than Davenport. Markets were far away. They would have to eat and wear what they could raise and make. They would have to procure housing. They probably would not see any money. There would not be any physicians; disease would take whomsoever it chose. Only heaven could protect them.

They decided to organize as a congregation, a Lutheran congregation; and they chose one Ole Anfinson as minister. This congregation, confident of finding a land of plenty, chose the name "Palestine." It is still known as the Palestine congregation. It was late in the fall of 1854, when all vital decisions had been made.

Fall and winter were all too short for making the necessary preparations for the journey. Women made clothes, collected cooking utensils, and arranged for food supplies. Men purchased oxen and wagons, assembled tools and equipment, gathered seed of wheat, barley, corn and oats, and gradually accumulated a herd of cattle. There was much material, and there were many people involved when the month of May, 1855, rolled around.

JOURNEY STARTED MAY 17, 1855

Their place of rendezvous on May 16, 1855, was Holde-man's prairie between Lisbon and Fox river, with the next day, May 17th, Norway's day of independence, set as the day of departure. There were many to go; there was a multitude gathered to see them off. May 17th dawned, and the company was set in motion. There were 106 people, a score of wagons drawn by oxen, the wagons being loaded with all manner of supplies, seed, food, tools and equipment, clothes, and whatever the pioneers could collect and pay for and find room for in the wagons; and the caravan was followed by a large herd of cattle. Boys and girls walked behind to drive

the cattle and keep them in line. The procession could not move faster than the cattle could travel, nor faster than the oxen could pull the wagons.

In the company were the following families:

Rev. Ole and Inger Anfinson and daughter Karine

Osmund and Anna Sheldahl and children Carline, Erik, Halvor, Henry, Randy

Erik and Margreta Sheldahl and children Betsy, Randia, Erik, Martha

Ole and Kari Fatland and children John, Eli, Brit, Henry

Knut and Kari Ersland and children Hector, Mads, Anna, Anfin, Martha, Elias, Kari, Engebor, Amos

Knut and Kari Bauge

Ivar and Malende Thveidt and daughter Martha

Barney and Siri Hill and daughter Betsy

Christian and Serina Heggen

Wier and Martha Weeks and children Anfin, Halvor, Torris, Wier, Ingeborg, Martha, Hans

Severt and Alice Gravdahl and children Guri and Andrew Lars and Martha Tesdahl

Aksel and Golla Larson and children Lars, Thom, Charles

Ole and Ragna Hauge and children Severt, Sarah, Lars, Anna Torbjörn and Madela Hauge and children Sarah, Gusta, Ole

and Valbor Hauge and son John

John and Brita Severson and children Mary, John, Severt

Salve and Siri Heggen and children Andrew, Nels, Ole

Ole and Anna Heggen

Engebret and Siri Heggen and daughter Susana

Torger and Gjertrud Olson and children Martha, Ole, George

Guro Shaw (widow) and children Betsy, Thom, Erik

Young men in the company were: Lars Thompson, Ole Apland, Ole Tesdahl, Erik Johnson, and Evin Olson.

The long line crossed the Mississippi river at Davenport and headed along the California trail across the prairies. In the van rode the minister.

They rested on the three Sundays en route, and on those days they conducted divine services in the open. Nothing is said in the accounts about how they prepared their meals, whether they had any difficulties with the cattle, what trouble they had milking the cows and keeping the milk, nor what they did when it rained. After three weeks, on Thursday, June 7, 1855, they came to a halt on the Osmund Sheldahl claim (a mile southeast of Huxley). Here they set their wagons in a circle, un-

loaded stoves and cooking utensils, and set about preparing a meal. After the meal, the men set out in all directions to locate their claims. On Sunday, June 10, the Rev. Ole Anfinson conducted divine services within the same circle of wagons.

FARM BUILDINGS CONTEMPLATED

One can imagine a ring of wagons loaded high with supplies, covered with protective material of all descriptions, cattle grazing about on the lush prairie grass, and a hundred men, women and children wandering about among it all, watching the stock, watching the weather, talking about how they might cut some hay for thatches on sheds, if they could build sheds, how they could get trees from Skunk river, and how they could wield their axes to hew the logs into shape for walls of cabins. There would be the need of poles to lay across the walls for roofs, on top of which would be stacked prairie grass for a suitable apex that would shed water. One can imagine the breaking up of the central camp and the entry into the enterprises that would result in homes and farms on the open prairie.

Before very long someone built a hay shed; it was Ole Flatland; and within that hay shed the Rev. Ole Anfinson read the first divine service under roof. There, too, the pastor enrolled the first confirmation class. In the new center of habitation, Lars Tesdahl, Knut Ersland, and John Severson were the first to have roofs over their heads.

"Be fruitful and multiply" was a command issued long before this colony came into being. The first child born in the settlement was Anna, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Salve Heggen, and, as though to presage the Americanization of the newcomers, she was born on July 4, 1855. Ole, son of Ole and Anna Heggen, was born August 14, 1855, and Halvor, son of Lars and Martha Tesdahl was born September 15, 1855. The first bridal couple was Ole Apland and Anna Ersland. Deaths, too, began to be enumerated: a child of Engebret and Siri Heggen, the wife of Knut Ersland, the wife of Erik Tesdahl.

Thirty-two more immigrants came out from Lisbon,

Illinois, the same year, arriving September 30th. There had been 33 in the group; Gunder Madskaar died en route. They were six weeks on the road, six weeks of bad weather. The families that arrived were:

Benjamin and Inger Thompson and children Thomas, Knut, Seselia, Siri

Mari Madskaar (widow) and children Ingeborg, Erik Wier and Kari Johnson and children John, Siri, Guri, Anna, Eli and Simo

Nels and Kari Christofferson and children John, Emelie Erik and Barbro Tesdahl and children Anna, Sivert, Amon, Sarah, Brita

Thomas Bertow (unmarried)

The discrepancy in figures is not explained.

Thus was set going the community in the southern part of Story county which came to be known as the southern settlement. At the same time a northern settlement got under way on the prairie where later was located the town of Roland.

ROLAND OBJECTIVE OF SECOND GROUP

A second group of immigrants in the Fox river country of Illinois, hearing of the good fortune of the first colony, organized and sent out eight men to inspect the Iowa prairie country in the spring of 1855. These men were Jonas Duea, Mons Grove, Jacob E. Aske, John N. Tarvestad, Paul Thompson, Lars Sheldahl, Ole Eino, and John Mehuus. They started out in the spring soon after the large party under the leadership of Osmund Sheldahl. Arriving in Story county, they turned north instead of south, and they found excellent land in the Roland vicinity and contracted for its purchase. Two men in the group moved out the same autumn, namely Lars Sheldahl and Thor Hegland, and thus became the first settlers in this part of the county. The others followed the next spring. Following are the heads of families in the group that came out in 1856: Jacob E. Aske, Jonas Duea, A. B. Jacobson, Lars Næss, Mikkel E. Aske, Sjur Bricton, Lars Hegland, Jacob Meling, Bertha Næss, Hans Pederson, Erik Sheldahl, Torkel Opstveit, Hans Tveidt, John N. Tarvestad, Ole Rasmusson, Rasmus Sheldahl, Erik Sökten, Hover Thompson, Rasmus Tungesvig, Ras-

mus E. Aske. These likewise formed a large caravan with a score of wagons or more and a couple of hundred cattle.

There was no need of crowding colonial settlements in 1855. But there were other reasons, valid for a time, why this second group did not select land adjoining the first group in the southern part of the county. There were church differences between the two groups. In general, those of the southern settlement were high-church people copying the state church of Norway in practice. Those of the northern settlement, at least many of those who first made the pilgrimage, were low-church in practice, known as Haugians, noted for their advocacy of simplicity in form and who were of pietistic tendencies with emphasis on personal religion. The name, Haugians, derives from the name of Hans Nilsen Hauge, leader of the movement in Norway. Both groups were Lutheran, and there were no doctrinal differences.

TWO GROUPS INTERMINGLED

While the two centers of occupation at first represented two different religious groups, they soon expanded and mingled to become one community containing all the varieties of Norwegian Lutherans fairly evenly distributed throughout the settlement. There were high-church, low-church, and intermediate groups throughout the agricultural area and in the towns that grew up. In the southern settlement, the members of the first congregation, the Palestine congregation, decided to take a vote on a minister in 1858, only three years after arrival. There were two candidates: the Reverend Ole Anfinson, who had been chosen in Illinois before departure, and Mr. Osmund Sheldahl, leader in the colony. It was decided to choose a man by the drawing of lots. The lots favored Mr. Osmund Sheldahl. Mr. Sheldahl was ordained, and he served the Palestine congregation from 1859 to 1876, and three congregations at Sheldahl from 1877 to 1896. Ole Anfinson, who thus was deprived of his ministerial duties, continued as a farmer and in 1861 joined the 10th Iowa Infantry in the Civil war.

Twenty-one men from the southern settlement joined

the armies in 1861. They were: 10th Iowa Infantry: Ivar Thveidt, Ole Anfinen, Torris Scott, Erik Eglan, J. O. Johnson, J. W. Johnson, Soren Olson, Henry Eglan, Haldor Johnson; 91st Illinois Infantry: Lars Bauge, Anfin Ersland, Torris Weeks, Wier Weeks; 23rd Iowa Infantry: Elias Ersland, Halvor Weeks, Sivert Tesdahl, Andrew Gravdahl; 47th Iowa Infantry: Thor Halland, Thom Shaw; 36th Illinois Infantry: Lars Olson. More joined the armed forces during the following years, not only from the southern settlement, but also from the northern, as witness the many veterans in the community after the conflict.

Immigration from Illinois and directly from Norway increased during the fifties, to expand considerably the two centers of Norwegian occupation. The Civil war put a halt to immigration and expansion. Times were hard, with markets almost non-existent. Marengo, a distance of a hundred miles, was for a long time the head of rails. On July 4, 1864, the first train on the Chicago and North Western came into Nevada, which then became a place of disembarkation for immigrants from Norway and from the Fox river country of Illinois.

Immigration increased rapidly after the war. Within a few years the two Story county centers of colonization spread to make contact and to merge into one large settlement of Norwegians, most of them people from the rural districts of Norway to become farmers in the new land. However, the little towns that grew up in the settlement soon were peopled by young Norwegians who went into business. These became suppliers of all the material that an agricultural community wants and needs.

Because of the distance of markets in early days and the absence of railroads, the towns in the community were established but slowly. Cambridge had a semi-existence before the pioneers arrived. The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul railroad came through to make it a shopping center in 1882. The town of Sheldahl was founded in 1874. It took its name from Osmund Sheldahl, who gave twenty acres to the town. When in 1882,

the railroad was built through the southern settlement, Sheldahl was scorned and the track laid one and one-half mile north of the town and a station set up which was given the name Sheldahl Crossing. Business people moved to the Crossing, and the name was later changed to Slater. Huxley was also founded in 1882. A narrow gauge railroad was built up from Des Moines to Ames in 1874. Thus was the settlement provided with railroads and towns; and, as the decades passed, it was filled with farmers to make it one of the great Norwegian settlements in the middle west and a substantial part of the corn belt of great importance to the state and to the nation.

INDIVIDUALS ENTITLED TO HONOR

It would be difficult to pick out individuals for rightful honor in this migratory movement and in the early upbuilding of the settlement. One could not omit the Sheldahl brothers: Lars, Rasmus, Erik, Haldor, and Osmund. Osmund spearheaded the westward movement into Iowa. There was Nils Olson Næss, who told the colonists to go west. There were the other members of the first committee of inspection: Ole Fatland, Ole Ap-land, and Osmund Johnson. Pioneers in their own right were the eight members of the delegation from the second group, with perhaps Jonas Duea and Mons Grove as leaders. Held in especial high esteem was Torkel Henryson of the Story City community.

Outstanding among clergymen was Osmund Sheldahl, who was chosen by his fellow pioneers and who continued as minister to his fellow immigrants from 1859 to 1896. There came into the early community the Reverend Nils Amlund, pastor in and about Story City from 1860 to 1883 and from 1888 to 1893. He also served the Fjeldberg congregation in the southern settlement from 1865 to 1869 and from 1872 to 1874. A prominent pioneer minister was Ingvald Eisteinsen, minister in the Roland neighborhood from 1874 to 1884.

The heroes of the battlefield no one knows. Their story is obscured by the dust of time. There was Oley Nelson, soldier, business man in Sheldahl and Slater,

member of the Iowa legislature from 1886 to 1889, National Commander of the G.A.R., author of *En kort historie af det første norske settlement i Story og Polk counties, Iowa, 1855-1905*. One recalls the national encampments of the G.A.R., with the long lines of march, with the Iowa and Illinois banners, with the well known faces, Story county faces!

The names of business men in the growing community include some of the pioneers themselves, who had to make and sell what the community needed—horse shoes, tools, plows, wagons. There was an increasing number of business men of the second generation. Members of the community became school directors, township trustees, county officers, members of the legislature, school teachers. During the early years only Norwegians could understand the language that was spoken on the farms and in the little towns. The first generation could not have guessed how soon it would be until not a Norwegian word would be heard from one end of the settlement to the other, for immigration practically stopped at the end of the century, and Americanization proceeded at a fast rate. Norwegian characteristics remained; Norwegian food had a place in the diet; and Norwegian religion had been translated into English and retained. There is a ramification of that which is a heritage from Norwegian parents, but these central Iowa counties are now American.

Eighty-third Anniversary

On April 11, 1955, at Mount Pleasant the Eighty-third anniversary of the foundation of the Ladies Library association was observed in the Carnegie library. It is the cultural outgrowth of the pioneer society which organized the Ladies Lecture society in 1872 and in 1875 was incorporated as the Ladies Library association. The present structure housing the association was dedicated in 1905. In addition to books, magazines and daily papers, memorial tributes are on display. A social room has been given over to the use of the Girl Scouts.

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