

# THE PALIMPSEST

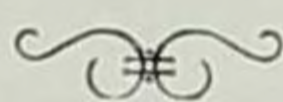
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## They Came to Iowa

Norwegian migration into Iowa stretched over three-quarters of a century from the 1840's until after World War I, but the pattern of settlement was established between 1850 and 1880. Three main areas developed: the first in the northeastern counties of Clayton, Allamakee, Winneshiek, and Fayette, with Winneshiek as the center; the second in the north central counties of Mitchell, Worth, and Winnebago, with Mitchell as the nodal point; the third in central Iowa in Story County, later spreading into Hardin, Polk, Boone, and parts of Wright. As the frontier pushed westward, the Norwegians tended to move in a northwesterly direction from Story County.

The migration originated in Norwegian communities in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois. It was a planned movement directed by leaders who had already investigated land and picked a site. Consequently, most of the first Norwegians in Iowa had experienced life on the American frontier, had some knowledge of Amer-



ican farming methods and money from wages or the sale of their first farms. Once the settlements were established relatives from Norway, as well as the continuing stream from Wisconsin and Illinois, came to Iowa. After the Civil War, the new arrivals were, as a rule, fresh from the Old Country. As immigration mounted, the pattern of movement was re-enacted within the state. From the settlements in the eastern counties families removed to the cheaper lands of the western counties.

Oddly enough, the first known Norwegian-born person to live on Iowa soil was a man bearing a Scotch name, Alexander Cruikshank. His father left Scotland, settled in Norway and married a Norwegian woman. Alexander was born in 1805, went to sea at an early age, then to America. In the spring of 1834 we find him paddling a canoe up the Mississippi as far as the ruins of old Fort Madison. Cruikshank chose land in Lee County and became a prominent figure there.

In the history of Iowa Norwegians, however, Cruikshank is an anomaly, for he seems to have had no ties with the land of his birth and no connection with the later Sugar Creek colony in Lee County, the first *actual* Norwegian settlement. Before we look at the circumstances that led to the founding of this colony, we must backtrack to Norway.



*Background*

The nineteenth century was a period of political, economic, and social change for Norway. At the beginning of the century she was a "poor connection" in the Scandinavian family; at the end she was recognized as a sister nation on equal footing with Denmark and Sweden. On May 17, 1814, after four centuries of Danish rule, she declared her political independence and drew up a constitution whose democratic features carried echoes from America. Intellectual life was stimulated by the break, and Norway enjoyed a renaissance that produced world-honored figures like Ibsen and Grieg. Political and social changes took place. The landowning class, the *bønder*, challenged the long-entrenched power of state and church and succeeded in winning a place in the government.

The agricultural class was by far the largest segment in Norway's population. At the top were the landowners or *bønder* who, though proud and independent, were seldom very prosperous. On their estates lived the *husmaend*, who in return for a few acres and a hut, rendered numerous services to the *bonde*. Below the *husmaend* were laborers and servants, who could never expect to better their condition in life.

Only three to four per cent of Norway's land was tillable. Except for a few large estates, mostly in eastern Norway, the farms were small,



barely supporting a moderate-sized family. As the *bønder* rose to power they forced reforms that made more land available to more people and lightened the tax load on the farmer. In spite of this, conditions improved at a snail's pace, and thousands looked for a way out.

The general dissatisfaction of the lower classes expressed itself in yet another form. The Lutheran state church laid a heavy hand on the everyday lives of the people, who regarded their parish pastors more as government officials than as religious leaders. Early in the century a pietistic lay preacher, Hans Nielsen Hauge, courageously defied officialdom by publicly criticizing the rationalistic spirit within the church. Traveling through the valleys, he preached the living Word, and at the same time worked for the economic betterment of the cottagers and fishermen. What started as a religious awakening became a broad social movement through which the lower classes found an outlet for their grievances. Its effect on Norwegian life was deep, and, as we shall see, it crossed the Atlantic to take root in American soil.

Meanwhile, the population of Norway steadily increased, creating a labor surplus which the country, slow to industrialize, could not utilize. These conditions put people on the move. They joined either the stream that led from farm to city within the country or the stream that took them out of the country — to America.



Emigration began in 1825 and until the 1840's was spasmodic. But from then on, despite strong opposition from state and church, thousands of farmers and laborers left Norway each year. To relatives back home they wrote of the wonders of the new land, letters that passed from farm to farm, until they were tattered and illegible. These "America letters" were profoundly important in swelling the tide of emigration. Except for Ireland, Norway gave to America a larger proportion of her population than did any other foreign country over the entire period of emigration.

The first Norwegians to make America their home were a band of Quakers from Stavanger. They, like the English colonists of the 17th century, sought religious freedom and greater economic opportunity. In July, 1825, this little group sailed for America on a small sloop, the *Restoration*. A site in western New York had been chosen for them by Cleng Peerson, an eccentric Norwegian traveler, who during the early 1820's had been in America investigating possibilities. The first years of the colony in Kendall County, New York, were extremely hard, but somehow it survived and eventually became a halfway house for new immigrants going west. It is not amiss to note before leaving the Sloopers, as this first boatload is called, that a spinning wheel, which came to America on the *Restoration*, was presented to the Norwegian American Museum in Decorah in 1956.



For a decade after the Stavanger Quakers left Norway no emigration took place. In America, however, Cleng Peerson was laying the ground for the migration into the Middle West. A Daniel Boone type, Peerson was in a very real sense the father of the Norwegian immigration movement. He spent his life exploring, guiding land-seekers to new regions. In 1833 he walked to Illinois, and along the Fox River found a site for his countrymen. In the spring of 1834 several Quaker families, led by Peerson, moved west.

The Fox River settlement is vastly significant in the history of Norwegians in America. It was the mother colony for settlements that developed in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin in the 1840's. The latter then became mother colonies for new settlements in northern Iowa and southern Minnesota in the 1850's and '60's. These in their turn became feeders for the stream into the Dakotas in the 1870's and '80's.

#### *First Settlements in Iowa*

The Sugar Creek colony in southern Lee County was not part of the main stream of Norwegian migration into the state but rather an isolated attempt at colonization. The exact beginnings are somewhat shadowy, but records indicate that settlement came simultaneously from two sources. One seems to be the ubiquitous Peerson, who led a band of settlers from the Fox River colony, go-



ing first to Shelby County, Missouri, then sometime early in 1840 to Sugar Creek.

The other figure connected with the colony's origin was Hans Barlien, an upperclass Norwegian, who devoted himself to the betterment of Norway's underprivileged. Forced to leave Norway in 1837, he came to America, hoping to establish a haven for his countrymen. Landing at New Orleans, he proceeded to St. Louis and from there made exploratory journeys. In 1839 he wrote to friends in Norway describing a tract of land that lay along Sugar Creek between the Mississippi and Des Moines rivers in the Half-breed Tract of the Black Hawk Purchase. Together with another Norwegian, William Testman (or Tesman), he claimed land and settled there sometime before the census of 1840 in which both names were listed. Two years later Hans Barlien died. We do not know if he was responsible for bringing other immigrants to the colony, but we do know from the published account of a Norwegian editor who traveled through the American midwest in 1843 that between thirty and forty Norwegian families lived in the settlement.

Religious dissension marred the unity of the colony. Lutherans who were loyal to the state church in Norway disapproved of the Haugeans. A few of the colonists were Quakers. Others had become Methodists, Baptists, or Adventists. Mormon missionaries from Nauvoo across the Missis-



issippi River also had a measure of success with the Sugar Creek settlers. This hastened the disintegration of the colony, for in 1846 these Norwegians joined the Mormon trek westward. Shortly thereafter, the Quakers moved northward to other Quaker communities.

By 1850 the Norwegian character of the settlement had vanished. Nonetheless, some families remained, for the manuscript census for 1870 lists Norwegian-born residents in this area, and township plats for 1873 show a sprinkling of Scandinavian names along Sugar Creek. It is of some historical interest that a P. Testman and an S. Testman, probably descendents of Barlien's companion, William Testman, owned adjoining lands in the 1870's.

While the colony in southern Iowa was struggling to maintain itself, the first step of the larger movement into the northern counties was taking place. Early in 1843 two Norwegians, Ole Valle and Ole Kittilsland, left their jobs in the lead mines at Dodgeville, Wisconsin, and headed westward, reaching Fort Atkinson, where they hoped to secure work. Valle was engaged as a teamster and for the next three years had ample opportunity to observe land conditions in the region. In 1846 he made a claim in the center of Clayton County, thus becoming the first of thousands of Norwegians to settle on Iowa's northeastern hills and valleys. His friend Kittilsland also settled in



the county. Their messages to friends in Wisconsin prompted many families to join them. These first settlers chose hilly, wooded land, leaving the open prairies to the Germans, who were arriving in increasing numbers. Only after the Norwegians saw how speedily their neighbors developed productive farms did they discard their notion that prairie land was worthless. Clayton County did not remain a focal point for Norwegian settlement. The Germans spread over the county, while the Norwegian tide swerved north and west.

In Rock Prairie, Wisconsin, the talk about Clayton County stirred a party of four men to head for that point in the summer of 1849. At Prairie du Chien, however, the operator of the ferry informed them that the most desirable land in Clayton County had been taken and suggested that they try Allamakee County. They did, and the next spring a caravan of "kubberulles," (the canvas-topped wooden-wheeled wagons pulled by oxen), four families, four single men, and several cows and pigs arrived at "Painted Creek," in Allamakee County.

By the end of 1850 the settlement had two dozen cabins. In the next three years several large parties came directly from Norway. Five hundred Norwegians lived in Allamakee County by 1855. The peak was reached in 1885 when over 1,300, not counting the American-born children, made their homes in Allamakee.



In 1849 and 1850 other caravans from Dane and Racine counties in Wisconsin were crawling toward Iowa by different routes. Their destination was Winnishiek County, one jump to the west. The Dane County group, led by 23-year-old Erick Anderson, arrived in June, 1850. Ten days later another caravan came lumbering into the same neighborhood. The leader of this party was Nels Johnson. Throughout that summer both Norwegians and Yankees came to Washington Prairie, as this area near Decorah was called.

Each year thereafter Norwegians arrived in northeastern Iowa, the largest number settling in Winneshiek County. The first state census of 1856 showed almost 1,500 Norwegian-born inhabitants living in the county, more than half the total number for the state.

The jagged line of frontier meanwhile inched westward. Early in the 1850's a Danish-born clergyman, C. L. Clausen, a leader in the Wisconsin settlements, took extensive scouting trips in search of land. In July, 1851, he arrived at Paint Creek, Allamakee County, and, to the joy of the settlers, held religious services. From there he went to other settlements, baptizing, preaching, and looking at land. He went as far west as Mitchell County. The next summer with two companions he explored the Cedar River Valley in north central Iowa. So impressed were Clausen and his friends that they selected land and erected



claim shanties before returning to Wisconsin to plan an expedition.

An article based on Clausen's description of the Iowa colonies appeared in *Emigranten*, then the most influential of the Norwegian American newspapers. A few months later Clausen used the columns of the paper to reply to letters he received about Iowa, setting forth in detail the advantages and disadvantages of the land he examined. The result was that on May 17 (Norway's Independence Day), 1853, a caravan set out for Mitchell County, the Clausen family riding at the head of the train in a carriage.

That autumn part of the 300 acres Clausen had claimed was plotted into blocks and lots for a town, which he named St. Ansgar. Around the energetic, paternalistic person of this unusual clergyman the colony centered. His cabin was parsonage, schoolhouse, general store. He planned a sawmill, gave legal and medical advice. Besides the Norwegians who continued to come to the St. Ansgar region, groups of English, Czechs, and Germans settled there. They, as well as the Norwegians, looked to Clausen as the leader of the community. By 1880, though the Norwegian element was still the strongest, St. Ansgar was a mixture of nationalities.

A direct offshoot of the Mitchell County colony was an extensive settlement in Worth and Winnebago counties. By 1860 over 300 Norwe-



gians lived there, and ten years later 2,500 had spread over the two counties. The towns of Northwood, Lake Mills, and Forest City became business and cultural centers for the settlements.

Norway's Independence Day, the Seventeenth of May, crops up repeatedly in the story of the migration into Iowa. On that date in 1855 the wagon wheels of a unique caravan, which had gathered the day before on the prairie between Lisbon and the Fox River in Illinois, were set in motion. It was unique in that it is the only example of the movement of a Norwegian Lutheran congregation from one state to another. In the party were 106 men, women, and children. They elected one of their members pastor, another precentor (song leader), a third teacher, and chose the name "Palestine" for their congregation. Three Sundays en route they halted to rest and hold divine services inside the wagon ring. In June, 1955, the Palestine congregation held centennial services in Huxley in southern Story County. This occasion celebrated the beginning of one of the most important of all the Iowa settlements.

A few days later another party left Lisbon, taking the same route. But they branched north when they reached Story County, preferring to separate themselves from the first party. Their reason for doing so was singularly "Norwegian," for it pointed up the religious cleavage that was



to become a phenomenon of Norwegian American life. Both groups were Lutheran, but the Palestine congregation was high church, while the other party was low church, or Haugean. Land was selected around what became Roland and Story City, and in the spring of 1856 a large contingent settled there. From these two colonies the Norwegians spread into adjoining counties. They, together with numerous Swedes, gave this central region of the state a Scandinavian tang.

These three areas, the northeastern counties, the north central counties, and the central counties have formed the Norwegian bloc in Iowa. Other spots developed as the larger migration into the Dakotas took place.

Emmet County was such an instance. When *The Northern Vindicator* was started in Estherville in 1868, an American reader in Decorah wrote to the editor, observing that there were twenty families of American origin in Emmet County from Winneshiek County and "probably as many more Norwegians." Two years later the newspaper had so many Norwegian subscribers that from time to time the editor published Norwegian articles by O. O. Sando, one of the leading Norwegians in the area. In June, 1870, Sando reported that immigrant caravans were coming in crowds and that among them were many Norwegians who were settling in Emmet and nearby counties. He also reported that two Norwegians



from America had been visiting their homeland and had roused in many the desire to emigrate. Some were said to be coming to Emmet County. "They will be welcome," concluded Sando; "we will be happy to have as many of our countrymen as possible come and live with us."

From Sioux City, out on the western rim of the state, came reports that no city west of the Mississippi saw such streams of Norwegian caravans. Some of these landseekers were Dakota-bound. Others, attracted by the opportunities in the booming town, went no farther. Quite a few who took land in Dakota later returned to enter a trade or business in Sioux City. Many were bricklayers, carpenters, and stonemasons from Trondhjem, Norway. The colony increased decade by decade, getting fresh immigrants long after immigration into the older eastern areas had ceased. By 1920 Woodbury County ranked first in number of Norwegian-born.

Thus far we have paid more attention to the counties, the earliest geographical identification tag of the immigrant. As settlement increased certain townships within the county became "Norwegian," while others were less so or not at all. The rise of town life brought into being many centers which were principally Norwegian, usually towns of a few hundred inhabitants. In 1900 there were about 106,000 people of Norwegian descent in the state. Significant clusters were



found in and around the following towns and postal centers.

<i>Allamakee</i>	Swan Lake	<i>Mitchell</i>	Thompson
Quandahl	Wallingford	Osage	Vinje
Waterville	<i>Fayette</i>	St. Ansgar	<i>Winneshiek</i>
Waukon	Clermont	<i>Palo Alto</i>	Calmar
<i>Benton</i>	<i>Hamilton</i>	Ruthven	Decorah
Norway	Ellsworth	<i>Story</i>	Highlandville
<i>Buena Vista</i>	Jewell	Cambridge	Nordness
Sioux Rapids	Randall	Huxley	Ossian
	Stanhope	Roland	Ridgeway
<i>Cerro Gordo</i>	<i>Hardin</i>	Slater	Washington Prairie
Clear Lake	Radcliffe	Story City	<i>Worth</i>
<i>Chickasaw</i>	<i>Howard</i>	<i>Webster</i>	Fertile
Sande	Cresco	Badger	Kensett
		Callender	Northwood
<i>Clayton</i>	<i>Humboldt</i>	<i>Winnebago</i>	Silver Lake
Elkader	Bode	Buffalo Center	Tenold
Gunder	Humboldt	Forest City	<i>Wright</i>
St. Olaf	Ottosen	Lake Mills	Bellmond
<i>Emmet</i>	Thor	Leland	
Estherville	<i>Lyon</i>	Mt. Valley	<i>Woodbury</i>
Ringsted	Inwood	Norman	Sioux City

Time abandoned some of the postoffices, but the areas they served are still "Norwegian" spots on Iowa's nationality map. In 1950 there were 36,476 first- and second-generation Norwegians in Iowa. One can, then, estimate that between 75,000 and 90,000 Iowans are of Norwegian stock.

LEOLA NELSON BERGMANN