

Their Way of Life

We are fortunate that a diary and the letters of two lively, well-educated Norwegian women who lived on the Iowa frontier have survived to bring us close to the everyday lives of the settlers a century ago. Only a woman would record the details of Monday washday with its "nasty smell of lye" permeating the cabin or worry about keeping milk sweet in the summer heat. Both of these women, Elisabeth Koren and Gro Svendsen, were brides of twenty-one when they left their upper-class homes in Norway to accompany their husbands to Iowa. The Korens came to Winneshiek County in 1853 where Ulrik Vilhelm Koren had been called to organize Lutheran churches. In 1863 the Svendsens took a homestead near Estherville, in Emmet County.

In the pages of Elisabeth Koren's *Diary* we step into the homes of the settlers on Washington Prairie. For some the first shelter was a dugout in the slope of a hill. After a visit in one of them, Mrs. Koren commented that it "is not as bad as one might think." Actually, they were warmer and dryer in subzero weather and in rainstorms than were the cabins where caulking between the logs was forever falling out and where it was not

uncommon to "catch a glimpse of the sky through the roof," she wrote.

Some cabins were comfortable — curtains at the windows, brightly painted cupboards against whitewashed walls. Homemade benches and tables were the usual furniture, with two beds along the wall. Often the walls were covered with sheets of a Norwegian American newspaper, which offered some protection from drafts.

Mrs. Koren found other places revoltingly dirty. Litter and refuse marked the approach to the cabin, while no doormat kept the barnyard from entering the house. Inside no spittoons caught the flying tobacco juice. The floor and swill pail, also used as a chamber pot, received equal treatment. These smells, mingling with odors of rarely washed bodies and clothing and the eternal fried pork made the stench in these ill-ventilated cabins almost unbearable.

Small though the cabins were they often sheltered parents, children, grandparents, uncles, aunts. To increase sleeping quarters boards were laid across the beams under the rafters. Covered with straw, these crude floors provided bedding for several people. The lack of privacy did not seem to bother the unsophisticated settlers, Mrs. Koren observed. In the narrow confines of these many-peopled cabins birth, death, and copulation were accepted matter-of-factly.

Health conditions were anything but good. In-

fections spread easily, for cups and bowls were shared by ill and well at meals. From human and animal refuse outside, flies swarmed into the cabins to settle on uncovered food. Privies were not common in the early days, and even when they came into use merely concentrated the source of some diseases. Medical care was almost unknown. The settlers turned to Mrs. Koren for advice, and, guided by a medical handbook, she treated their disorders with salves and Spanish fly plaster. Childbirth for most women was frequent and often traumatic. At 37 Gro Svendsen died when her tenth child was born. Many an infant did not survive the deficiencies of its environment.

Women often waited years before any attention was given to enlarging or improving the house, for it was in the nature of the situation that adequate barns and granaries came first. Two years after the Svendsens had settled in Emmet County, Gro informs her parents proudly that their two stables are "among the best" in the neighborhood. Of their house she says tersely, it "is very small and humble, but it's a shelter from the cold winter," and adds eloquently, "I shall say no more about it." Twelve years later, in 1877, she writes, "We are now well housed, both man and beast. This means a great deal to a pioneer because during the first years he is deprived of many comforts previously enjoyed. No-

body must doubt that we are living comfortably."

In Webster County Thor Edwards owned almost 300 acres of good farm land by the late 1880's, had full-blooded Norman stallions and a fine herd of shorthorn cattle. He also had a wife and seven children. A contemporary chronicle reads: "Hitherto Mr. Edwards has been contented to live in a log-cabin, but now he is laying the corner-stone for a fine residence."

In the spring of 1955 I visited the farm home of Alfred H. Bergh near Waukon. He has spent a lifetime on the land his immigrant father bought in 1875, and the place shows the deep pride its owners have in it: a large white house, sweeping lawn, neatly pruned shrubs, a line of tall trees; beds of pulverized soil seeded with flowers that in summer make huge circles of color; barns and sheds, well-cared for and clean. Inside the house, too, the same story. There is no "contemporary" look in the design and furnishings, but the conveniences of modern living are there. Sitting at the kitchen table talking with Mr. and Mrs. Bergh over coffee, *spekekjøtt* (homemade dried beef), and cookies, I found people who, though separated almost a century from the land their parents left, know *gamle Norge* through novels they frequently re-read. Even more, they live with long and accurate memories in the history of the pioneers of northeastern Iowa, and they have preserved it in chronicles of church and community.

Foods

The Norwegian farmer in Iowa has always been well fed. Admittedly, in pioneer years provisions sometimes ran low at the end of the winter, but there were few instances of dire need. The diet, however, consisted monotonously of pork, potatoes, bread, corn or wheat meal mush, and milk. Eggs were precious at first. Sugar cane was grown almost from the start, and molasses became a standard ingredient in cooking, while for the children a spoonful served as candy. Mrs. Koren mentions this often, once recording that the children in the family with whom the Korens first stayed were romping about noisily "with great mustaches of molasses as usual."

As gardens were planted, vegetables and fruits supplemented the starchy diet. Both Elisabeth Koren and Gro Svendsen describe watermelons, unknown to them in Norway. Citrus fruits were a luxury. Occasionally roast quail, chicken, turkey, or a mess of fish provided a welcome change from the everlasting pork, which, however, was served in a variety of ways — roasted, salted and fried, or pickled. Milk puddings like *fløtegraut* and *tykkmelk* had been common in Norway and appeared on the immigrants' tables. Cheeses, such as *primost*, a brown, sweet-tasting cheese, were made by the housewives.

When the Korens visited their parishioners, they were usually served beer and *fattigmanns-*

bakkels, a crisp, curled pastry, still popular in many homes. Later, coffee took the place of beer. Another common food was *lefse*, made from potato dough, rolled thin, and baked on top of the stove. To Americans this limp, heavy pastry may resemble soggy cardboard. To Norwegian Americans *lefse* — buttered, sprinkled with sugar, and rolled up — is uniquely tasty.

Norwegian food customs have been retained in America particularly in cooky and pastry baking, especially during the Christmas season. A feature of Norwegian American communities is the annual *lutefisk* supper, served by the Ladies Aid of the Lutheran church. Norwegians are famous for their love of coffee, and in towns like Story City and Bode neighbors drop in for "afternoon coffee." This was common long before the "coffee break" swept America.

Their Names

The immigrant immediately discovered a major difference between himself and his American neighbor who had one surname which all members and generations in the family used. In rural Norway people had two or even three surnames. A family was known by the farm on which it lived; if the family moved, it adopted the name of the new place. Most people also used their patronymics, i.e., the father's given name plus the suffix *son* or *sen*, or in the case of a woman, *dat-ter*. Thus Sven, the son of Ole Johnson, became

Sven Olson; his son Eric would be Eric Svenson. Sometimes a family was known by the parish or a valley. Some had descriptive names such as Lillehans, meaning "small Hans."

Because Americans could easily pronounce Hanson or Johnson the immigrant often used his patronymic. As settlements became more densely populated it came to pass that more than one Ole Olson or Lars Anderson lived in the same community, inevitably causing confusion. Some then adopted one of their other Norwegian names. The general belief is that all Norwegians are Olsons or Johnsons, but studies of Winneshiek and Winnebago county names show that more immigrants retained either their farm names such as Hede-gaard, a place name such as Birkedal, or a revised form of Norwegian name.

The adoption and revision of names is a fascinating chapter in the study of an immigrant culture. In Winneshiek County Gustav J. Selnes, son of John Thorson, reverted to the family name of Selnes, while his brothers used the name Thorson. Sometimes the farm name changed its looks. This is what lies behind the name of Hans Liquin. His parents, Torsten Nelson Moberg and Guro Knudsdatter Lekven, lived in Norway on the farm known as Lekven. In Iowa, Hans used the variant Liquin. A common change was the shift from Fjelde to Field. The name Hvamstad became Wamstad. In an Estherville newspaper of 1871

the name Tosten O'Berg appears. One can speculate that his name may have been either Berg or Oberg and that settling among Irish he found it appropriate to become O'Berg.

Not only surnames but given names changed. An interesting case is that of Colonel (his given name) Halgrims, a member of the Iowa state legislature from 1911 to 1915. My curiosity about the military flavor of his name was satisfied in the manuscript census of 1880 where the father, Ole Halgrims, listed his eight-year-old son as Kornelie. Twenty years later in a county history his name appears as Cornelius. What probably happened is that in his Norwegian environment he was called "Kornel," which he eventually Americanized to "Colonel."

The immigrants at first named their children Torkel, Arne, Sigrid, but as customs of the new land became theirs the names changed. When Gro Svendsen's sixth son was born, she wrote to her parents in Norway, "I called him Steffen . . . I thought I'd choose one that was a little more in conformity with American so that he would not have to change it himself in later life. . . ." The second generation, which tended to disassociate itself from an immigrant background, favored American names. In the third generation a returning pride in family origins brought again into use a goodly mixture of Norwegian names — Karen, Solveig, and Erik.

Place Names

The Norwegians left few evidences of their settlement on the official map of Iowa, whose place names are largely Anglo-Saxon and Indian. None of Iowa's ninety-nine counties bears a name linking it to Norway. Three townships — in Humboldt, Winnebago, and Wright counties — are named Norway. In Emmet County a township originally named Peterson after the first Norwegian settler, later became part of Estherville township. Only five incorporated towns in the state show the hand of Norwegian settlers. The largest is Norway, with 441 inhabitants, in Benton County. The others are Ottosen and Thor in Humboldt County, St. Olaf in Clayton County, and Sheldahl in Story County, with populations ranging from 100 to 275. Still found on the map, however, are Quandahl (Allamakee County), Gunder (Clayton County), Nordness and Sattre (Winneshek County), and Olaf (Wright County). At one time in Iowa history some twenty other post office sites, now discontinued, bore Norwegian names, most of them named after or by the first postmaster whose house served as a postal point.

Language

Norwegian was, naturally, the language spoken in the settlements. Adults were loathe to learn English, particularly the elderly. Younger men learned enough English to transact business with

Yankees. The American historian, Laurence M. Larson, relates that his father and uncles attended public school for two or three winters after their arrival in Winnebago County in the early 1870's and learned to read English fairly well and to write "after a fashion." The women used only their native tongue. Learning to read English was an occupation far beyond the scope of their work-filled days. Even as educated and intellectually curious a person as Gro Svendsen, after half a dozen years in the new land, wrote that they did not subscribe to the Estherville newspaper because it "is printed in English, which we read with some difficulty." What English crept into the homes came through the children, who had instruction each winter at a public school. Norwegian was the playground idiom, however. We have a glimpse of these language problems in the reminiscences of Erick Berdahl, who attended school in Winneshiek County in 1859:

This being the only School House in the Settlement for Miles around we had as Meny as 60 Schollars in attendance and . . . a large part of the Schollars were full grown men and women who had Just come over from Norway and was trying to learn the language of the country they had adopted. The Teacher was from Norwegian parentage which was of great help in cases of emergency but we were not allowed to talk Norwegian within his hearing but as soon as we got out of the School House you would never hear a word of English because every schollar was genuine Norsk.

In the home parental authority was maintained through the use of Norwegian. Commands had to be issued and scoldings administered in Norwegian if they were to be effective. Affection, likewise, could only be expressed in the tongue of the heart. When the children began to use English more freely, parents felt their authority was being undermined; if a child answered in English when spoken to, it was an ominous sign of rebellion. As the children grew older, they spoke Norwegian only to their grandparents, forcing their parents to recognize their status as Americans.

The Norwegian that was spoken did not remain pure. American words were adopted liberally and given a Norwegian pronunciation and spelling, thus becoming "Norwegian" words for the immigrant. The following italicized phrases and words, taken from the Norwegian journal of Ole Bryngelson of Marshall County, who recorded a line each day for the sixty-year period, 1880 to 1940, are examples of American words dressed in Norwegian spelling: "*Diget* op alle Poteterne (dug up all the potatoes)"; "*Klint* ud i *Steble* (cleaned out in the stable)"; "*fixit* *fense* (fixed the fence)"; "*hasket* alle 10 Acre *Filen* (husked all of the 10 acre field)."

Norwegian was used exclusively in the church. The pastor consciously tried to preserve the language in its purest form through his sermons, in

catechism classes, and in parochial school. It is somewhat strange to find the Reverend Halvard Hande, the Lutheran pastor who had recently arrived in Estherville from Norway, writing a long article in English for *The Northern Vindicator* of May 24, 1873, chiding Norwegians in the area for not observing the Seventeenth of May. In previous years celebrations had been held, and reports of them, written by O. O. Sando, had been published in Norwegian. The Hande article is, perhaps, an indication that the settlers read well enough to heed the scolding.

As the years passed, English made inroads among the rank and file, but the pastors continued to conduct services in Norwegian. Nevertheless, they, too, felt the pressure to change. By the turn of the century the language issue was widely discussed both in clerical and lay circles. When America entered World War I, Governor William Harding issued a proclamation forbidding the public use of any foreign language in Iowa, much to the dismay of pastors whose English was hardly pulpit level. This event marked the beginning of the end, even though quite a few of them resumed Norwegian at the war's end.

English had gained a foothold, however, and throughout the 1920's it spread. During the period of transition the minister had to prepare two groups of catechumens for confirmation, one in English, the other in Norwegian. I have often

heard men and women of the second generation remark, "We didn't speak Norwegian in our home and I scarcely understood it, but I was confirmed in Norwegian because my mother insisted on it."

By the 1930's English was the prevailing language. The parish at Inwood, Lyon County, for example, decided in 1936 "to leave to the discretion of the pastor the proportionate use of Norwegian or English in the service." A few years later Norwegian was discontinued. In Clayton County in one of the oldest congregations in the state, Norwegian services ceased in 1943 after the pastor preached a sermon one Sunday morning to three people: the organist, the minister's wife, and the janitor!

A recent survey of thirty-three congregations affiliated with the synod known until 1946 as the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America shows that the use of Norwegian lingered on in the rural churches established by the pioneers in the 1850's and '60's. Three of these congregations still have occasional services. Congregations organized in the past two decades have never had Norwegian services. Most of the rest discontinued Norwegian during the 1930's and 1940's.

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