

The Scandinavians

The Norwegians were the first of the Scandinavians to migrate to Iowa in large numbers. In 1840 Kleng Pearson led a settlement at Sugar Creek, twelve miles northwest of Keokuk. This settlement grew and gradually extended into Henry, Mahaska and Marshall counties. Strangely enough, the Norwegians never became the largest nationality group in any county in this section of the state but were to be found more in north central Iowa. From 1860 to 1880 more Norwegians than Swedes came to Iowa, but from that time on the situation was reversed as Swedish immigrants forged ahead.

As early as 1844 a Norwegian ballad was telling of the appeal of the midwest:

When pointed icicles cling to eaves
And snow goes whirling above the leaves
When through my kitchen the cold winds blow
To the Mississippi I fain would go.

The appeal to emigrate had to be strong to overcome many of the hardships. During the mid-nineteenth century most Norwegians emigrated to the United States by way of Quebec. Passage on most ships took from eight to ten weeks. Unfortunately, most emigrants usually

provided themselves with provisions for only about six weeks.

One ship from Skien, Norway, was without fuel and water and nearly without provisions of any kind for seven days. On another ship there were thirty-three deaths during the passage, and a third ship from Arendal had forty-seven deaths and sixty sick passengers. In June, 1862, there were about four hundred, mostly Norwegians, in the quarantine hospital at Quebec who were destined for the United States. As a result "great prejudices" began to arise in Norway against emigration to America.

A quite different account was told of a crossing made eight years earlier:

When the weather was pleasant, we often had a good time, for all kinds of games and amusement were allowed. We frequently danced. Even the Captain, himself, was often with us, entertaining us with adventure and hunting stories and the like. On the evening of the day after Pentecost we had a ball. We each gave twelve cents and the Captain contributed the rest. We had three musicians, and then we danced and drank till late in the night. We each contributed a little money and bought a gold watch chain for our captain. It cost fifteen dollars.

Two things often went hand-in-hand in increasing emigration. Better times and good wages in America was the first requisite. The second was a noticeable depression in trade, commerce, wages, and the general standard of living in the emigrant's home land.

Most Norwegians in 1867 were leaving because of the "melancholy state" of the poor farmers "who cannot gain so much from the unfertile soil as is sufficient for their livelihood." In 1883 it was the same story. Small farmers and country laborers in Norway were faced with "narrow prospects here," and they were "wanting in the new world to improve, and come better forward than they can expect here."

Three years later the number of Norwegians emigrating had increased even more. Cade, the American Consul at Kristiansand, reported to the State Department:

The harvests in Norway have been very light during the last years and the increasing drain by emigration to America shows the distrust with which our rural population regards their future prospects here. . . . In the mountainous districts, where the crops have repeatedly frozen and the consequent distress has been great, the population seems to have lost an interest for their fatherland and hasten to leave it, as soon as they receive sufficient assistance from friends or relatives in America.

Frequently, people sought assistance from the United States government to aid in payment of passage. A group of 185 persons in Tromsø, Norway, petitioned for such help in June, 1864. Since it was illegal for the government to give this assistance, it was suggested that private companies advance the money and make contracts by which the emigrants would repay the loan by their labors.

As the number of any nationality group grew and prospered in the United States, it became possible for them to send money home for the passage of relatives and friends. For example, there were 8,162 emigrants, mostly agricultural laborers, from Norway in 1887, the greater part of whose passages were paid with money from the United States. The next year it was reported that "the Norwegians do no longer seem particularly attached to their mountains and America does not appear to them to be very far off." Almost every family in the rural districts had some near relatives or friends in America sending home money or tickets.

The reactions to Iowa of one Norwegian, Ole Nielsen of Estherville, are revealed in letters to his family in Norway. In 1866 he wrote:

I still believe that if God will allow me to keep the same good health I have now, and if you, my dear parents, were here, I should be able to support you more decently than I was able to do at home. In Norway you have to quarrel with your neighbors for a square foot of barren hills with no vegetation whatsoever. All kinds of laws and regulations force pedestrians to follow certain roads. . . . And yet a man is supposed to be free, and supposed to be living in a free country!

The land here is so beautiful and fertile that it would be difficult to find any that is better. From the land you can get anything you need, even things like broomtwigs, spoons and various kinds of toys for the children.

In 1868 Nielsen wrote:

Since I live so close to the river I suppose that I ought to tell you a little about its inhabitants, too. There are neither crocodiles nor alligators in it, which may be a disappointment to those at home who believe that these creatures are found in all rivers here. . . . We have several kinds of frogs, and they keep up a peculiar music during the spring and summer nights, while the blackbird entertains us every morning with his melodious notes.

Swedes

The third largest group in Iowa were the Swedes. In 1860 there were only 1,465 Swedes in Iowa, due to the lateness of the start of Swedish migration to the United States. Within twenty years there were twelve times as many — enough to rank Iowa third in the nation in number of Swedes. From 1880 to 1890 there was a seventy-two percent increase in their numbers, bringing the total to 30,276. They were predominant in a number of central and southern Iowa counties. In 1950 they were still the third largest nationality element in the state.

Religious persecution was one cause of emigration from Sweden. Dissenters from the established church in Sweden were planning to form a colony in the Midwest in 1846. The "strong hand of religious tyranny" was credited with being responsible for driving them out.

From Sweden it was reported in 1865 that emigration would be greater now that the Civil War was over. It was accelerated by the conviction that the rebellion in the states had been subdued

and that there would be a great demand for labor in all branches of industry. In addition to the ordinary inducements, there was the problem of repairing the waste and destruction of the war.

Shortly after this, Sweden was faced with crop failure and famine. J. C. Savery, General Agent of the American Emigrant Co., wrote that thousands in Sweden were asking for assistance. Therefore, the Company proposed to bring any family of four to Des Moines upon payment of half of the \$288.25 required.

It has been thought that upon this proposition of the Company to give their credit for half their fare and feed them gratis during their journey, others might be interested in their behalf. . . . It is rarely the case that a Christian community is called upon to aid a more worthy object than the one herein proposed.

The Des Moines *State Register* of April 23, 1868, had an editorial on the same subject. The Swedes had been found to be quiet, law abiding, industrious, frugal, generally intelligent and always loyal. The editor asked:

In this age of steamship and civilization, can an intelligent nation stand with doless arms and nerveless hearts and see thousands starving to death while a few dollars, and a generally preconcerted movement, would rescue them all, and bring them to this land of plenty, upon which Heaven never imposes plagues nor famine?

The United States once before took a famished nation up in its arms — Ireland in 1846 — and blessed it with food and life: and should it not avail itself of the noble

opportunity now offered to parallel its own greatness of charity?

One of the more successful efforts to establish a Swedish settlement was that of Reverend Bengt Magnus Halland. In 1869 he inspected railroad land between the West Nodaway and East Nishnabotna rivers in Montgomery and Page counties. He advertised that it was only for non-drinking, God-fearing Swedes. From 1870 to 1873 many Swedes flocked to the area, paying \$6 to \$11 an acre. Swedish communities were formed in the vicinity of Red Oak, Creston and Nybum with Stanton as the hub.

Danes

The third Scandinavian group, the Danes, did not arrive in Iowa nearly as soon as the Swedes and Norwegians. There were early Danish settlers such as Nils C. Boge who arrived at Muscatine in 1837, moving on to Lisbon in Linn County and finally settling down in Iowa City as a merchant in 1842.

Rev. Claus L. Clausen was one of the early religious leaders among Danes and Norwegians in Iowa. Planning to become a missionary to Africa, he was persuaded to go to America where there was a great need for missionaries and teachers among the Norwegians in southern Wisconsin. In 1852 he founded St. Ansgar, the westernmost white settlement in northern Iowa at that time. He served in the Iowa legislature in 1856-1857.

Meanwhile the first permanent colony of sixteen Danes was started near Luzerne in Benton County in 1854-1855. A year later small settlements were started in Center Township, Clinton County, Iowa Township, Jackson County, and in Burlington.

In 1869 Clausen visited Denmark and spoke fervently for a Danish Lutheran mission among his emigrated countrymen. A. S. Nielsen was one who answered the call, serving as a lay preacher to the Danish congregation Clausen founded in Cedar Falls in 1871.

A permanent settlement was started in 1865 at Elk Horn, Shelby County. Gradually the group spread into Audubon County, reaching a total of 2,672 in 1900, the largest Danish settlement in Iowa. In 1867 other settlements were started in Cerro Gordo and Cass counties. The movement of Danes into the northern and western parts of the state came later. It was not until 1920 that a peak of 18,000 was reached, forty years after the top year of Danish immigration to the United States.

The great majority of the immigrants were farmers, farm laborers, and artisans. Their chief resource was a desire to succeed. They were widely known as men of industry, perseverance, honesty, and integrity. As might be expected, they have been most interested in establishing dairy farms, often cooperative in nature.