

Rock County, Wisconsin

The first Norwegian settlement in Wisconsin was established at Jefferson Prairie, Rock County by Ole Knudsen Nattestad, who built his cabin at Clinton in 1838.

Ole Nattestad emigrated with his brother Ansten* from Vægli, Nummedal in 1837 and stayed a short time at Beaver Creek, with Ole Rynning and other countrymen. They then moved to Davis in Stephenson County, Illinois, where they also stayed for several months. Ansten returned to Norway to handle personal business and publish a book by Ole Rynning and his brother's diary, the subject of both being America. While Ansten was in Norway, Ole moved to Wisconsin. Ansten returned with a party from his parish in Nummedal. They stayed a short time in Illinois, except for Christopher Nyhus whom Ansten brought to Wisconsin, where they settled her Ole Nattestad in 1839. Later in the year another of the party, Gullick Olsen Gravdal moved to Rock Prairie and founded the Norwegian settlement there.

In short order, Lars Skavlem, Gullick Laugen and many others joined the Rock Prairie settlement, and the Indians disappeared from the area. Wheat became this settlement's main crop, although they also grew a little oats, rye, and other crops that they took by oxen to market in either Chicago or Milwaukee, which were both about 100 miles away. The trip lasted one or two weeks and wheat only brought in 15 cents a bushel, so the settlers could not afford to stay in hotels. They brought food from home and slept under their wagons so that they could spend their money on provisions and make other critical purchases in the city.

The wages for farm labor or timber cutting was 25 cents a day plus board. Mrs. T. G. Myhre, a pioneer woman in Orfordville, Wisconsin reported

My deceased husband, Thor G. Myhre emigrated from Hallingdal on the 16th May 1846, with his brother, Erik Kaalsrud, and Tollef Rakansby, Halvor Næs and Knud Lostuen. From Drammen they sailed to Havre, France, where they had to camp under open skies a whole month to await a sailing ship to take them across the ocean. Their chests were stacked together with hundreds of others and they were not allowed to open them (although this is where they had their food). What they needed to eat and drink, they had to buy in the city. The ship finally arrived and after the voyage to New York they traveled by rail and canal boat to Milwaukee. From Milwaukee they walked all the way to Luther Valley, Rock County, Wisconsin, arriving in mid-September. Cholera broke out and many died, including whole families. They had to bury the victims two to a grave. Typhus and swamp fever also took many.

Swamp fever occurred most often in swampy areas - and during the breaking up of raw land. After the land had been cultivated, this illness rarely returned. Dr. J. S. Johnson, now of St. Paul, Minnesota, wrote about his grandfather's trip to America:

The women spent the whole winter spinning, weaving, and sewing - linsey-woolsey, linen and fine kerchiefs, dresses, jackets and coats without end, as if there were no clothes to be found in America. When there was a full dozen in the family, this was no small undertaking! Then the carpenters began. They measured and sawed and planed and hammered until at least a dozen travel chests of various sizes and shapes were finished. Some were flat, others with an arch, but all had solid homemade iron bands and fittings, and locks with large keys. They were followed by the painter, who painted them bright red with blue edges, and on each chest could be read in large, neat letters, 'Enver Guttormsen, Inmansville, Rock County, Wisconsin, U.S.A.' Besides the rectangular chest for clothes and ordinary use, there was a large round bread box, for flatbread and lefse, and a smaller round one for butter, that could easily hold a

hundred pounds of butter, and not of the poorest quality, either.

When everything was packed and ready, the chests were loaded on carts and on each load you would see children with food in their hands. Everything traveled down to Randsfjorden, then down Randsfjorden in rowboats. From the fjord, the chests were loaded on carts again and they were off to Drammen. The youngest children rode on the carts, but the rest had to walk. This was the usual way of travel in those days, and no one gave it much thought. They were going to America, the Promised Land and they would certainly have to do some walking. Mari Rud once exclaimed, 'To America go I, even if I have to do somersaults all the way!' In Drammen they waited over two weeks to board the ship. At a hotel? No! They stayed mostly on the dock and there they ate cured meat, herring, flatbread and butter, with coffee when they had a chance to cook.

The Norwegian emigrant was not used to much more in the 40's. Was it just because they were poor people? No. Grandfather was one of the leaders of his community and had neither 'gone up or down.' He purchased passage for the twenty people in his company. The emigrants were used to thriftiness and this was particularly helpful in Wisconsin's new settlements at that time. When it was finally time to board the small ship, they stowed their chests 'tween decks and organized their bedding and other travel items. They were sixteen weeks on the Atlantic, without seeing land in those days, with recurring conversations that began 'See how the waves foam against the prow' or 'Listen to the wind whistling through the sails.' - It was a little lesson on the meaning of eternity, but like all other earthly things, the voyage finally came to an end.

At the end was New York, where they suffered another delay waiting for a steamship to take them up the Hudson River to Troy, New York and the Erie Canal. Arriving there, the chests were transferred onto a canal boat pulled by a team of horses, that made its way through the canal at the reckless speed of as much as two and a half miles per hour. Both baggage and passengers were kept on the canal boat's deck, and to break the boredom of sitting on a chest on the slow-moving canal boat, they often would get off the boat and walk ahead along the canal. To re-board the boat, they perched on the first convenient bridge and jumped back onto the boat deck as it passed below. Once when the bridge was taller than usual, they hung from the deck of the bridge and let go as the boat passed below. This went well except for a large, heavy woman. When the "moment of truth" came and it was time for her to let go, she lost her courage and remained hanging after the boat had passed by. Her cries brought the crew on the boat to its feet. They moored the boat and a contingent returned to the bridge where they worked mightily to pull her back up again.

When they arrived in Buffalo, they spent a couple of days resting and then caught a steamboat for a much speedier journey through the Great Lakes to Milwaukee. From Milwaukee there was no public transportation available, so they had to obtain a horse or ox wagon. Grandfather injured himself when he fell through a deck hatch on the steamboat, so he took a room in a so-called hotel, but the rest of the company was on its own. They could not afford to purchase meals at the hotel, and the hotel workers would not let them use their kitchen, so it was a difficult situation. One day it looked like they would not be able to make coffee, but eldest son

There's new wife was a creative problem solver. Since they wouldn't allow her to make coffee on the hotel stove, she went down the street and found a blacksmith. He was amused by her request, so he stoked the fire with charcoal, blew in the bellows and cooked her coffee well; she came back victorious, pot of good coffee in hand. Eventually, they found an American with a pair of horses and a wagon who was willing to bring them the last 70 miles to their destination. On the evening of the second day they reached Janesville, Wisconsin. The driver went into a tavern, while his passengers sat out on the wagon and dipped flatbread into butter that had melted in the warm weather. The next evening, weary of the long trip, they arrived at the Luther Valley parsonage and were greeted warmly by Pastor C. L. Clausen. After a couple of days, they found a vacant, unfinished log cabin. It had no windows or door, the roof leaked and it had a dirt floor, but it was a place to stay while Grandfather searched for land. Fall was upon them and the mornings and evenings were quite brisk. Since there was no stove and no fireplace, Grandmother put the covered breadbox in the middle of the floor and lit a fire on top. Grandfather came home one day with a cow he had bought, and later with a pig he had obtained during his daily search for land. He finally found and bought some land about twenty miles to the northwest, and so we were off again. The chests and equipment were loaded onto a wagon with oxen; the people went on foot, one leading the cow, another managing the pig with a rope attached to a hind leg. So the parade began, and in high style we arrived at Albany, Wisconsin in the late fall. This was the place of our future home and where my grandparents lived the rest of their days. Little by little, our living conditions improved. The children purchased land around their parents and grandchildren grew up. They were blessed with comfort and prosperity, and the difficult immigrant days became an old dream at which one could laugh. The old pioneers deserve honor and respect, and it is important for us to remember them.

Luther Valley congregation was founded at Inmanville (now Orfordville) in 1844, with Pastor C. L. Clausen as its pastor. It was the first Norwegian congregation in Rock County and erected the first Norwegian church building in the county in 1847-48. Rock County is of great church historical significance since 3 church societies were formed there: Elling Eielsen's Society in 1846, The Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (The Norwegian Synod) in 1851 and the Augustana Synod (now part of The United Church) in 1860. In Rock County there is a post office with a good Norwegian name - Bergen. This is the only Norwegian place name the author has found in the county.

*Translated from Nordmændene i Amerika, pages 19-21
By Martin Ulvestad, 1907, published by History Forlag, Minneapolis MN*

*Ole and Ansten Nattestad were the first Norwegian settlers in Wisconsin and the first to emigrate from Nummedal. Before 1838, emigration was for the most part limited to the coastal areas from Bergen to Kristiansand. They actually started the emigration from Norway's uplands, and the books by Ole Running and Ole Nattestad encouraged emigration from other areas of Norway.