



EAST LUTHER VALLEY CHURCH

This congregation was formed in 1844 when
a Lutheran pastor was called from Norway.

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THE COVER

HISTORICAL MARKER AT MILL BLUFF PARK, three miles west of Camp Douglas, Wisconsin. The marker, which was made and erected by the State Conservation Department, explains the formations of mesas and buttes in the region and how Mill Bluff was named. Photograph by courtesy of Conservation Department. For details on the Wisconsin Historical Markers Committee and its work, read *Chats with the Editor* in this issue.

The Norwegians of Luther Valley

By BLAINE HANSEN

THE NAME "Luther Valley" was given the settlement north and west of Beloit by the Rev. C. L. Clausen, a Dane, who came there to be the first resident pastor of the East Luther Valley Church. Impressed with its singular beauty, not unlike in some respects that to be found in the old country valleys, it is said to have been his first thought to call it "Goshen" because it was for the Norwegians a land of new beginnings like that given to Jacob and his family by Pharaoh when they came out of Canaan into Egypt to escape the famine and be with their son and brother Joseph, whose foresight had made Pharaoh's land a granary for that part of the world.

The story of Gullek Olsen Gravedale¹ is the story of Luther Valley's beginnings. It was here in the fall of 1839 that this man, a member of the "Emilia" party from Numedal, Norway, built the first house in the settlement. History has accorded him this place in the annals of the community.

In the background of this emigration from Norway one finds reasons quite similar to the usual ones for forsaking the well-

BLAINE HANSEN, active in both the Luther Valley and the Beloit Historical societies, is on the Beloit *Daily News* editorial staff. He read this paper before the Third Annual Convention of the STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY at Beloit on August 10, 1944. Gullek O. Gravedale, his great-grandfather, constructed the first log cabin in this timbered southern Wisconsin valley; the building of a prosperous farm community, now known as Luther Valley, by a group of stalwart Norwegian emigrants, is a proud Wisconsin epic.

¹ Since the name of my great-grandfather Gullek Olsen Gravedale is spelled in several ways in historical accounts, my grandmother's explanation may be helpful. Gullek O. Gravedale's father's name was Ole Gulack so, according to Norwegian custom, he took the name of Gullek Olsen, adding to it the farm name, Gravidahl (English equivalent Gravedale). Some years before leaving Norway the family moved to a place named Holt, so he substituted that name. When he started for America, he returned to Gravidahl and went with neighbors, who knew him as Gravidahl rather than Holt. In an old atlas listing Newark township families the name Holt is found, indicating that he used it when entering the first government land in December, 1839. The English equivalent has been used by his son, daughters, and their descendants for the past eighty years. In like manner many of the inconsistencies found in the spellings of Norwegian names can be explained.

established homeland to make a new start in the wilderness. Gravedale pointed out these facts when interviewed many years later. He said

The great majority of those who in 1839 emigrated from Numedal belonged to the Haugeans.² We were not actually persecuted for our beliefs...but the "readers" were nevertheless in bad repute and we had to endure much contempt and scorn from those who were other-minded. I will not say that this intolerance was the cause of our emigration, but it contributed to the ripening of our resolution to leave a country where we were exposed to many annoyances because our conceptions of religious teaching did not entirely conform with the beliefs of the great majority. Still, the motives which were clinching for the most of us were the hope of finding cheap and fertile land in America and the stories about high wages.³

Gullik K. Laugen (Springen), also a member of the 1839 "Emilia" party, confirmed the latter point:

The products of our farm gave us only the barest necessities....I worked at home for my father until my twenty-first year. For my labor I could never hope to get more than food and clothes....I began to think seriously about the future and then the thought of emigration came. My father...encouraged me to try my luck in America. Ansten Natestad [also Natesta], who had made a trip to Norway from America, stayed in our community in the winter and spring and it was his accounts especially that awakened the desire amongst us to emigrate. I borrowed twenty specie dollars and got ready for the journey.⁴

Ole and Ansten Natesta had left Norway and visited America in 1837. The two brothers were so impressed with its possibilities that Ole settled on a farm near Clinton, Wisconsin, while Ansten returned in 1838 to recruit a party for emigration to come the next year. All that winter and spring he worked through Numedal.

The groundwork for Ansten Natesta's campaign for new settlers had been prepared by two pamphlets, Ole Rynning's *A Truthful Account of America for the Instruction and Help of the Peasant and Commoner Written by a Norwegian Who Came There in the Month of June, 1837*, and Ole Natesta's *Description*

² These were followers of Hans Nielsen Hauge, the great leader of a religious revival within the state church whose relations with the state church and the government were at that time strained. Many of this sect became Norwegian Quakers. The Quakers went farther in their opposition to the state church than did the Haugeans although the psychology of the two groups is said to have been quite similar.

³ Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America, 1825-1860* (Northfield, Minnesota, 1931), 123. Blegen quotes from *Billed-Magazin*, 1:161-62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, from *Billed-Magazin*, 1:171.

of a Journey to North America. The first one of probably greater historical significance contained general information; the second, while primarily a personal journal, described the sort of land available, a comparison of high American wages with the low wage in Norway, and the excellent opportunities for the young, energetic man or woman desirous of advancement. It advised how to prepare for the overseas trip and what equipment to take along, including guns with which to shoot the abundant wild game.

Gullek Gravedale in a later interview commented:

Hardly any other Norwegian publication has been purchased and read with such avidity as this Rynning's *Account of America*. People traveled long distances to hear "news" from the land of wonders, and many who were scarcely able to read began in earnest to practice in the "American-book," making such progress that they were soon able to spell their way forward and acquire most of the contents. The sensation created by Ansten's return was much the same as that which one might imagine a dead man would create, were he to return to tell of the life beyond the grave. Throughout the winter he was continually surrounded by groups who listened attentively to his stories. Since many came long distances in order to talk with him, the reports of the far west were soon spread over a large part of the country. Ministers and bailiffs... tried to frighten us with terrible tales about the dreadful sea monsters, and about man-eating wild animals in the new world; but when Ansten Nattestad had said "Yes and Amen" to Rynning's *Account*, all fears and doubts were removed.⁵

True, there was opposition. Natesta was threatened by the government with imprisonment if he continued, and the clergy tried to dissuade their flocks, but the people smiled, answering they had received firsthand reports from returned emigrants who did not lie.

Ansten Natesta's party, 100 in number, sailed on June 12, 1839, from Drammen on the "Emilia," Captain Thomas Anchersen in charge. A Drammen newspaper, commenting on the sailing, stated that most of the emigrants owned as much as several thousand specie dollars. There were no old people, few children, and 16 unmarried young women.

The ship carried its passengers to New York at a cost of 33½ specie dollars each, but they furnished their own food and cooked on board. They had prayer and religious songs each evening. At Albany, New York, on September 1, two representatives drew

⁵ *Ibid.*, 103, from *Billed-Magazin*, 1:154.

up a letter of thanks to Anchersen, who is said to have been a model sea captain. He took leave of them at Schenectady, and they left for the interior, after a sea voyage of almost eleven weeks, including a stopover at Göteborg, Sweden, where they took on a cargo of iron.⁶

Three days later the travelers were on a Hudson River packet, stopping at Rochester, New York, to see Lars Larsen, a member of the sloop party in 1825, and arrived at Milwaukee by way of the Great Lakes. Natesta resisted attempts of Norwegians and Americans to divert the group to the Muskego settlement, for he was determined to bring them to the location where his brother Ole had already taken land on Jefferson Prairie, near Clinton.⁷ Here many of them stopped at the home of an American, Dwight Egery, who helped them find homes or employment.

Deciding to found a new home on the then unsettled land west of Rock River, Gullek Gravedale and Gisle S. Hallan, first of the Gesly family—some of whom still reside in Luther Valley as do the Gravedales—left for the three-year-old village of Beloit to obtain a map showing available lands. Since there was no bridge at Beloit, the two went south to Rockton where a man named Brown took them across the river by ferry. This was in November, 1839.

At the end of the first day's travel, by following a well-worn Indian trail, Gravedale found what he determined would be his farm. It was in the timber, with running water (a branch of Bass Creek), and had a limestone ridge where building materials might be obtained. The tract was seven miles northwest of Beloit. Of this Anderson wrote:

... they found the location which became the nucleus of the Rock Prairie [Luther Valley] settlement. At the end of the first day's travel they found a place that suited them. They lay down to sleep for the night. Their bed was the cold ground and their covering was the star-spangled canopy of heaven. A large spreading oak stood sentinel and watched over those men who were to be the first to fell the giants of the forest and to begin the work of civilizing the wilderness.⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*, 121 and n. 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁸ Rasmus B. Anderson, *The First Chapter of Norwegian Immigration, 1821-1840*, (Madison, 1895), 258-59.

The following day they returned to Jefferson Prairie to get the necessary tools and provisions and then began cutting trees for the house. It was cold, so they made a shelter of brush, covered with long grass, in which they slept through the cold nights until the middle of November. Then the Gravedale home was completed, and the family moved in, together with others of the "Emilia" party, who planned to settle in the valley. Thus Gullek Gravedale became the first settler in that region. There was not another house between his dwelling and Beloit.

Not long thereafter the remainder took land and began the erection of homes, among whom was the widow Gunnil Odegaarden, who brought with her considerable means and four unmarried daughters.⁹ Her home, the second one built in the valley, became a rallying place for new arrivals. The assistance and vigorous leadership of this capable woman is said to have gone a long way toward helping make Luther Valley a permanent settlement.

The ways of the new country were strange to these foreigners who could not speak its language, but they soon adapted themselves to the situation, meanwhile cutting tillable fields out of the timber, caring for the sick, and storing enough food and wood to carry them through the winter. Game was plentiful at this time, and the Norwegians were good hunters.

In the days preceding Dietrichson and Clausen we must not forget the great Haugean evangelist, Elling Eielsen, who lived in Jefferson Prairie but who was a regular visitor to Luther Valley where he had a large following. Eielsen came to America with the "Emilia" party in 1839 and, though classified by orthodox clergy as a layman, he preached many a sermon and performed many religious services while traveling the circuit. Later after his arrival he was ordained as a regular minister.

It was in 1844 that a committee headed by Gullek Gravedale called a minister from Norway to organize the East Luther Valley Church. The Rev. J. W. Dietrichson was sent over, who served the church at Muskego as well as the Luther Valley and the Jeffer-

⁹H. L. Skavlem, *Skavlem and Odegaarden Families* (Madison, 1915), 194 ff.

son Prairie groups. The Rev. C. L. Clausen was the first resident pastor of the settlement, taking over after Dietrichson returned to Norway. The first meetings of the church were held in the Paul Skavlem home and then in the Clausen parsonage, until the stone church was erected, followed by the present building.

Clausen was an aggressive individual, combining his clerical duties with a decided aptitude for promotion. He was the founder of Boernitz, a village that flourished briefly in the fifties around East Luther Valley Church. It comprised a blacksmith shop, post-office and newspaper printing plant, the church and parsonage. Here was published the *Emigranten*, the first successful Norwegian newspaper in the United States, with Clausen as its first editor. According to Blegen it was begun with the organization of the Scandinavian Press Association at Koshkonong in September, 1851, which was authorized to sell shares at \$10 each. By mid-November seventy shares had been disposed of. While the clergy was well represented, laymen held a majority of the association's stock. The constitution was drafted by a committee of four—three of these were clergymen—Clausen, A. C. Preus and G. F. Dietrichson. Clausen was employed as the editor at a second meeting held in November of the same year. His yearly pay was to be \$300 plus 5 per cent of the income from the press.¹⁰

The paper began publication on January 23, 1852, in a limestone building still standing at a crossroad cutting through the road passing the East Luther Valley Church. The incorporators of the *Emigranten* were G. F. Dietrichson, A. C. and H. A. Preus, Iver Ingebretson (a Norwegian schoolteacher and community leader of those times), and James D. Reymert, a former editor of two Norwegian papers which had run briefly some time previous. Capitalized for \$2,000 with 200 shares bought on subscription, it had to borrow money to erect a building.¹¹

Adopting the motto "Unity, Courage, and Perseverance" Clausen announced in the *Emigranten's* first issue that its policy would be "independent Democratic" explaining "although we

¹⁰ Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America: The American Transition* (Northfield, Minnesota, 1940), 305-6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 306.

in general join and make common cause with the Democratic party, we by no means pledge ourselves to follow it through 'thick and thin.'"¹² To further the work of Americanizing the emigrants Clausen started the publication of a translated general history of the United States from Colonial times to Jackson, in serial form; he also printed a history of Wisconsin. He reviewed for his readers the prospects of the 1852 presidential election, and when the campaign was going full tilt Clausen resigned on August 27, 1852.¹³

His successor was Carl M. Riise, a layman, who accepted the independent Democratic policy of the *Emigranten*, although he said he considered himself more in accord with the so-called Free Soil or Anti-Slavery Party. He printed a biography of General Winfield Scott, in Norwegian, published one in his paper of Franklin Pierce, and issued a Norwegian translation of Horace Greeley's *Why I Am a Whig*. In the summer of 1853 it announced the suspension of a rival paper which made it the only political newspaper in the United States printed in the Norwegian language, with 500-600 subscribers.

Riise failed to acquire the ownership of the newspaper from the press association, and resigned January 27, 1854. A committee was given editorial control and Knud J. Fleischer, newly arrived from Norway, was made acting editor from 1854 to 1857. In 1857 he was replaced by Carl F. Solberg, who had come from Norway in 1853. He had been associated first with Ole Bull in his Pennsylvania colonization project, and upon its failure went west and worked as a printer for the *Emigranten*. The plant and the editor's headquarters were moved to Madison in 1857.¹⁴

A tragic year for Luther Valley came with the summer of 1854 when the settlement was stricken with cholera. Among the first to be taken was the widow, Gunnil Odegarden, best known woman among the pioneers, and called by many "the mother of the settlement." She had then sold her farm to a son-in-law, Har-

¹² *Ibid.*, 307-8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 307, 310-11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 311-13, 317.

brand Skavlem Halvorson, but was making her home with him and her daughter. The family had taken in some newcomers, lately arrived from ship board, who were ill at the time. Six died in the house, the last being the beloved pioneer herself.

One can trace the ravages of the epidemic by the rows of markers in the East Luther Valley Church cemetery, all bearing dates for the summer of 1854. But that is not all! One can see today rather a large section of the older part of the cemetery apparently unused. This section was actually filled completely with graves, the occupants are unidentified, for there was no time to mark the individual interments and exact locations were lost. Volunteer gravediggers made openings in advance of actual need, and in one instance a man attending church dug a grave as his share of the afternoon work and the next day was buried in the same grave.

Neighbors helped one another as best they could although they knew the disease was highly contagious and generally fatal. When the Gullik Springen family was stricken, their neighbors, Lars Strand and wife, went to their assistance, even though they were advised not to. They contracted the disease and passed away at the Springen home within six hours of each other, and were hurriedly buried in the near-by East Luther Valley cemetery. Gullik Springen wrote, "One can well understand the conditions when 18 corpses were carried from our house that summer, my parents and one brother included."

Through all the American wars, beginning with the Civil War and down through the present conflict, Luther Valley has sent its quota of folk into the service. A treasured possession of the East Luther Valley Congregation is an American flag hung regularly at the church door on national holidays, a custom inaugurated during the Civil War.

Many eminent persons have been natives of Luther Valley. Among them is Halvor L. Skavlem, nationally known authority on Indian life.¹⁵ Born in the Valley he has rightly been called its historian. Many of his writings are to be found in the archives

¹⁵ He was the man who mastered the lost art of making arrowheads as the Indians made them, something the modern-day Indians never knew.

of the WISCONSIN STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY; his collection of Indian relics and other mementoes are treasured in the Society's museum. When he passed away in 1938 at the age of ninety-two, tributes were paid him by the press throughout the state.

Congressman Gilbert Haugen, long an outstanding figure in Washington official life and co-author of the well-known McNary-Haugen Law, was born and raised in Luther Valley, later becoming a resident of Iowa.

Including these families already mentioned we might place among the Norwegians of Luther Valley such family names as Saberson, Gulack, Stordock, Wagley, Halvorson, Haugan, Bruns-vold, Crispenson, Turkel-Olsen, Roen, Laugen, Olmstead, Cleophas, Husemon, Gaarder, Lunn, Engen, Thorson, Everson, Gunderson, Lee, Rime, Thoen, Kaalsrud, Joranlien, Leaver, Eggen, Ovestrud, Sommerhougan, Heyerdahl, Hansen, Risum, Erstad, Tollefsrud, Midtbon, Fossum, Rustan, Ingebretson, Hesgard, and Lofthus.

Its story is not finished. As one passes through Luther Valley in these days of war, it has a look of peace, prosperity, and contentment, but its people have been sending their sons and daughters to war with every contingent. They have subscribed, yes over-subscribed, their bond quotas. Its farmers have produced crops and stock in abundance despite the same shortage of labor that handicaps other communities. Many of them have friends or relatives in far away Norway who are now held under the grip of Hitler. They worry about them and long for the day of their liberation but they mourn not now as citizens of a common country but rather as full-fledged Americans, with a background of several generations in the United States, whose Norwegian forefathers were fortunately farsighted enough to leave the old country for a land where freedom from want and oppression may be had in perpetuity.