

Migration from Norway to America

During the 1800's and early 1900's Norwegians immigrated to North America in great numbers. Early information about America came to Norway in September 1817 when a Dutch ship with about 500 German emigrants aboard entered the harbor of Bergen. The ship was damaged and had docked for repairs. The people on board were leaving for America fleeing religious and political repression in Germany. The emigrants, with the aid of the Norwegian government, eventually crossed the Atlantic.

Because of this ship, the Quakers at Stavanger decided to send someone to America to see what this new land was like. So they collected money to cover the passage of two men to America. The two chosen were Cleng Peerson and Knut Olsen Eide. One of the men, Cleng Peerson was destined to be very important in Norwegian migration. To insure against fraud, the travel money was deposited with a Stavanger merchant, who was to send a remittance from time to time to the two men. The two men started their voyage in the summer of 1821. The merchant with the money went bankrupt shortly thereafter and the two men soon received a letter with that news and no money. Knut died soon after arriving in America which left Cleng Peerson in America with neither money nor friend. He did, however, explore several of the eastern states looking for land for Norwegian immigrants. He did find some land in New York near Lank Ontario. Cleng returned to Norway in 1824 with his good news. After hearing of Cleng's news, the Quakers decided to send a shipload of immigrants to America the next summer. Cleng immediately returned to America with Anders Stangeland and purchased six parcels of land in New York and started to construct buildings.

On July 4, 1825 with 52 people on board, the sloop Restauration left Stavanger for America. The ship was very small, about one-quarter the size of the Puritans' Mayflower. The ship was only fifty-four feet in length and was one of the smallest vessels that ever crossed the Atlantic with emigrants as passengers. The passage was very difficult and for some reason the ship strayed far from course because after a month's time they found themselves in the tropics. There they found a barrel of wine floating in the water, pulled it aboard and proceeded to sample it. The must have sampled a lot of the wine because when they floated in the harbor of Funchal in the Madeira Islands, they were all asleep. Just before the harbor captain was to sink the ship as a pestilence-ridden ship, someone noticed the Norwegian costumes on the people and hailed to them. A woman awoke and raised a flag. After an inspection revealed no infectious pestilence, the passengers were given a friendly welcome. After a rest and more provisions they once again set sail arriving in New York harbor on October 9. They then had problems with the harbor authorities because they had too many passengers on such a small ship. Finally, with Cleng Peerson's help, they were released and continued on their way to their new home on Lake Ontario. The people sailing the ship had planned to sell the ship and have enough money to start a new life in America. However, they only got 400 dollars for the ship.

Cleng Peerson stayed in the Lake Ontario settlement until spring of 1833 when he and two other men left for the west to explore more of the country. Although his companions quit after a short time, Cleng continued until he reached Chicago. The future city of Chicago then consisted of about twenty small cabins. After finding Chicago with its swamps not to his liking, Cleng walked north to Milwaukee. Milwaukee was then smaller than Chicago and had only three

cabins, two of which were occupied. Solomon Juneau lived in one of them and owned a trading business, trading mostly with the Indians. He told Cleng about a small settlement north of there called Green Bay. In order to get there, however, one had to walk through dense woods. Juneau indicated that there was nothing but trackless woods in the end of the world if one went westward.

Cleng returned to Chicago and started west looking for good land. After finding some very good land in western Illinois, he returned to Chicago. From there he retraced his steps to the New York settlement and told those people about his findings. The next year most of the settlement followed Cleng to Illinois. Cleng settled there for a short time, but then returned to his exploring and visited Missouri. He led a group of Norwegians to that area for settlement. On his return northward he found a commune and for a while joined them and married one of the women. He soon became very discouraged with that life and left. He was not allowed to take his wife with him. During the succeeding years, he returned to Norway several times encouraging emigration to America.

Cleng explored several other states during the later years of his life and finally settled in Texas bringing with him many Norwegians. The Texas legislature passed a special resolution whereby Cleng was given a 320 acre farm as a token of appreciation for his services. He died in Texas on December 16, 1865.

As with most of the early settlers in America, the Norwegians first settled in the eastern part of the country and gradually moved westward. The trip from Norway consisted of about two months of sea travel and several months of overland travel. From 1850 to 1900 a great number of Norwegians came to America. Most of them came to the Midwest, first to the Chicago and southern Wisconsin area and later to Iowa, Minnesota and Dakota. This is reflected by the number of people saying that Norwegian was their mother tongue in 1960. Minnesota had the most (155,043) with California a distant second (76,499).

No one factor seems to be the most important one causing the Norwegian people to come to America. Several factors probably led to the Norwegian migration. One of those reasons was the lack of farm land for the children of the farmers in Norway. Due to better food and health care, the infant death rate dropped. This caused more people to attempt to find work in Norway. Without a farm or a job the people looked to the opportunities in America. Another reason some people wanted to leave Norway was because in America anyone could become a land owner and make money.

Some people left Norway for religious freedom in the new world. Some people left home for adventure while others left to avoid the law. Unmarried women with children left rather than face the people back home. So did some of the men responsible for the woman's situation. Many of the emigrants were families with either the father going first and sending money for the rest, or all the family going at the same time. Most of the people were willing to work as soon as they arrived. They did work too, taking almost any job they could find in order to get enough money to buy a farm. Lastly, the Homestead Act in 1862 provided many of the emigrants with more land, more land than many of the larger farms in Norway.

From 1866 to 1915 more than 700,000 Norwegians came to the America. In 1900, eighty percent of the Norwegians in America lived in the six Midwestern states of Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, North Dakota and South Dakota. This area still has a large number of Norwegian families living within their borders. Some of them became rather famous including Ole Evinrude of boat motor fame. Some Norwegians came to America and left discouraged such as the author, Knut Hamsun. Most were, however, common folk looking for a better place to live.

The following stories are about some of the Norwegians who came to American in search of new homes. If it seems that most of the stories take place in the Midwest, it is because most of the Norwegians came to that part of the country.

One of the early Norwegians in this country was Jon Thompson Rue or better known as Snowshoe Thompson. He gained his fame in California. Jon's family came from Tinn in Telemark with some of the first emigrants. They arrived in America in 1837 when Jon was 10 years old. The Rue family first arrived at the Fox River settlement and accompanied Cleng Peerson to Missouri. They were not satisfied there and finally settled in Dane County, Wisconsin. The Rue family was one of the original homestead settlers there in 1846.

When gold was discovered in California in 1848 and word spread throughout the country, many people flocked to California. Jon Thompson Rue and his half-brother Thore Thompson Roysland decided to go to California and find gold. They took some cattle with them and there sold the milk for very high prices. However when winter came, the cows all died so the men had to find work. Thore finally had enough of California and returned to Wisconsin, started a settlement in Green County, Wisconsin, discovered lead ore on his farm and became a wealthy man.

Jon Thompson did not have any great success as a miner either but he liked California and decided to stay. He built a house there in 1851 and probably was the first permanent settler of Norwegian background in California. Because of the large increase of Americans in California, communications with the eastern part of the country became very important. First wagons and coaches were used to carry news, but they were very slow and were routinely attacked by the Indians. They were replaced by riders lightly armed and on fast horses, the Pony Express. During the spring, summer and fall months the Pony Express carried the mail over the mountains.

But in the extreme western part of Nevada, the snow made it impossible for both riders and coaches to cross the mountains. Between Carson Valley, Nevada and Placerville, California there lay a ninety mile wide range of mountains where there was no sign of human habitation. No horse could travel this distance when the snows came in the fall. Most people thought that no human could travel that distance either.

The mail had to get through so an advertisement was published for someone to get the mail through in the winter months. Only one man applied and he was hired. His name was Jon Thompson Rue. No one believed that he could get over the mountains.

He, of course, showed up for work with a pair of skis. These were the first skis seen in California. Thompson was a large strong man and managed the skis with skill.

The day after Thompson left California, a big blizzard hit the area and everyone thought that Thompson for sure had been lost. Some people wanted to organize a search party, but others argued that the snow would have covered the body by then and besides they concluded that any man so stupid to try what he did deserved to die in the snow. Five days later, Thompson returned with mail from the East having covered 180 miles round trip.

During the next 20 years, Thompson carried mail across the mountains. Because he had to go up hill most of the way east that part of the trip took him three days, but the return trip took only two days. His mail pack averaged about 50 pounds. He carried very little survival gear and slept in caves he dug in the snow. He would build a bonfire occasionally to warm himself. He also rescued several people caught in the snowy mountains. He soon became known throughout that part of the country as 'Snowshoe Thompson'.

Due to some irregularities on the part of Thompson's supervisors, he did not receive any of his pay for carrying the mail. For years he wrote to the postal department in Washington but got no money, only promises. He became quite a hero because of his feats. He did, however, admit to one terrifying experience and the following narration describes that experience.

"It was during the winter of 1857. On my way through Hope Valley, I came to a place where six wolves - huge timber wolves - were busy digging some dead animal out of the snow. It seemed to me that the hair on these wolves was at least one-foot long. They were great big, emaciated, rough-looking bruisers, and they were directly in my way. I had to pass them to proceed.

As I neared the beasts, they left their carrion and lined up, one behind the other, and came towards me. When they had approached about seventy-five feet nearer to me, the leader sat down on his haunches. When the second one had come up even with the leader, he did likewise, and all the rest followed this example until they were all lined up in a neat row. In the old country, I had often heard tales of werewolves, man wolves; and these beasts were acting as if they were members of this supernatural breed. My blood felt as if it froze in my veins, and I felt a prickly sensation in the roots of the hairs on my head.

Just as I drew nearer and was only eighty or ninety feet away from them, the leader pointed his nose to the sky and let out a prolonged howl. The other imitated him, and all howled together; "Ja-hu-u! Ja-u, vu-u!" In all my life I had never heard a more frightful sound. I thought that this was surely my funeral dirge. Any moment I expected them to fall upon me, all as one body. At that time I should gladly have given everything I owned for a revolver. Meanwhile, I did not hurry my steps, nor did I change the direction of my movement. The vile monsters kept on howling. When they realized that their battle cry had no effect on making me change my direction or altering my pace, they seemed to lose their courage to attack me.

When I had passed, they sat for some time in silence and watched me. After I had put considerable distance between us. I could see them return to their carrion. Had I tried to run

away from them, I am quite certain that the whole pack would have been upon me in a twinkling. My apparent courage frightened them and had a restraining effect upon them."

Snowshoe Thompson undoubtedly had several other episodes of a similar nature to tell. He was a man of courage and well represents the early Norwegians of western America. We can all take pride in his life.

One of the most remarkable Norwegians to come to this country was Nils Otto Tank. He was the son of Carsten Tank who was one of the wealthiest men in Norway. Carsten was a member of the Norwegian Parliament, a successful businessman and a landholder of considerable acreage. His only son Nils Otto Tank was born in 1800. Nils had the best of everything including a very good education and travel throughout Europe. He studied at several universities and was very intelligent.

During the hard times in Norway at the end of the 1820's, Nils father, Carsten lost all of his money and most of his land. Shortly afterward, Nils was injured in an accident while traveling. He stayed with some very religious people in the village of Herrnhut where he was converted to the Congregation of Brothers. It was their duty to spread the word of Christianity throughout the world. Nils accepted the challenge and studied with the people, learning the religion and the ways of missionaries. In 1838 he married one of the teachers, Mariane Fruauf and they left for South America to superintend the mission to the slaves on a large Dutch plantation there.

Nils wife soon died there because of the climate and the terrible conditions that they lived in there. Nils continued to preach, however and within a few years the region has 29 preachers and teachers with more than a hundred assistants and employees. During this time, Nils became convinced that the brutal treatment of slaves should no longer be tolerated so he returned to Europe to Holland to see the King. He did convince the King that the treatment should not be tolerated but because of this, Nils was unable to return to South America. The slave holders there hated him.

During his stay in Holland, he met and wed the daughter of J. R. Vand der Meulin, a pastor from a long and prosperous family. When the pastor died, Nils inherited much of the family wealth. He and his bride returned to Norway and learned of a group of Norwegians living near Milwaukee that was in desperate need of a pastor for their Brotherhood congregation. They also wanted to move away from Milwaukee and its sinful ways and establish a settlement for themselves.

A Bible school student from Stavanger, A. M. Iverson accepted the call as pastor and left for America. Nils decided to use his new wealth and build a settlement in America for the Brotherhood, so he and his wife went to Milwaukee in 1850. Local newspapers reported that he has a million and a half dollars in gold when he arrived.

For six weeks after arriving in Milwaukee, Nils drove about the country in a buggy seeking suitable land for the new settlement. He finally took option on 969 acres in a stretch of land just south of Green Bay. He also bought 9,000 acres south of there on the same side of the river. He then returned to Milwaukee and asked the Brotherhood group to move to the area with him.

Almost all of the people accepted his offer. The first party which included the pastor A. M. Iverson as well as a German pastor, Fett arrived in August of 1850.

Nils staked out a number of lots on two sides of a street that is now State Street of Green Bay. Behind each lot he also staked out a 10 acre plot for agricultural uses. The lots were distributed to the settlers by lottery. Nils also staked a lot for a church and a park.

Nils lived in a mansion there and furnished with many pieces of furniture and art from Europe. Ten freight cars filled with household furnishings came from Holland and he had a private library of more than 6,000 volumes.

The community was run by typical commune rules, everyone working for the good of the commune. An alarm was sounded at 5:00 am for all them to get up, with a religious service at 5:30. After breakfast, each person was assigned a task for the day. Things worked well for over a year with everyone happy and content. The numbers grew and soon this community was an excellent example of the Brotherhood.

The German pastor, Fett, however, was very uncertain about Nils and kept talking about him to others. Why, he asked, did a very wealthy man want to set up a settlement in this wilderness? What did he expect in return? If he really wanted them to have the land they lived on, why didn't he give them title to the land? Soon, enough people were asking the same questions. When the people went to Nils and asked for their titles, he responded that for a true commune to exist, all the land must be owned by everyone, not by individuals. As one might expect, the people did not like this, because they felt the same as slaves, working for someone else. The end result of all this was that the community almost completely left and moved elsewhere. The great experiment in communal living thus died.

Nils Tank later invested in a canal project to construct a canal from Green Bay to Prairie du Chien, a distance of over 300 miles. The coming railroad soon made the canal unnecessary and Nils lost almost all his funds. Shortly thereafter he became ill and died in 1864. His wife died in 1891 and left \$100,000.00 to a children's home in Oberlin, Ohio, which was renamed the Tank Home for Orphan Children.