

Fillmore County, Minnesota *p. 79-82*

The first Norwegian settlement in the state of Minnesota was established in Fillmore County and therefore this county is mentioned in connection with the first settlers. But the accounts one sees in newspapers and books have been inaccurate. When, for example, it states that Hans Valder was the first, it is like jumping over two years - and several persons.

Chr. Hellicksen, who has lived among the first settlers and their children in Newburg, Fillmore County for 50 years, and who, thus, knows what he is speaking of when he says that Rven Eilertsen from Kragerø and Halvor Gjællervig from Stavanger came to newburg from Muskego County, Wis., in 1851*. Later in the year came Anders Nepstad from Valdres, Hellick Glaim from Nummedal as well as Mikkell and Anders Lunne from Land parish.

Lars Tollefsen with family from Hallingdal came to Mabel from Wisconsin in 1852. His son Lewis was born the 6th of July 1852, was the first Norwegian child born in Minnesota. The information about the Tollefsen family comes from E. L. Tollefsen who came along when they settled in Mabel in 1852, so it can be relied on. In the same year came O. Vem and settled in the Root River Valley, while Even Knudsen Besteland and the brothers Knud and Aamund Olesen Qvæstad, all from Sætersdalen built their cabins at York. Ole Jørgensen from Sætersdalen and Daniel Steensland also came to Fillmore in 1852.

In 1853, there were many who settled in the county. Hans Valder from the Stavanger area and 6 others with their families came (from La Salle County, Ill.) and settled in Newburg; Ole O. Tuft from Slidre, Valdres and Oliver Goodrich settled in the area of Rushford, Peter Petersen Haslerud from Nummedal settled in the area of the town of Peterson, which gets its name from him. Jens Johnson Nessa from Aardal and Tore Olsen Faae from Finnø went to the Town of Tawney. The last two and their families came from La Salle County, Ill. with 3 pairs of oxen, 2 old wagons, 4 cows and household goods; as neighbours they received about twenty Indians, who had their camp right beside them. They each built a log cabin, 10x12, without a floor and a roof of basswood bark.

Next after them came Jacob Haga, R. C. Spande, Christian Christophersen, Ole Gjermonsen, Bjørn Larsen and Lars Tarvestad from La Salle County, Ill. About the same time came Hans Arnesen, Fillmore County's first blacksmith, from Rock County, Wis.

We see also that the immigrations came partly from Illinois and partly from Wisconsin. Some came in their wagons past McGregor, Ia., others over the Mississippi River at La Crosse, and even others others came by steamboat to Winona, which at that time was Fillmore County's marketplace. To get their Norway letters and other mail, they went to Decorah, Ia. - to there, it was only 20-30 miles!

The first Norwegians in the area of Harmony were Tallak Vrølsen, Arne Kirkeli, Even Kirkeli, Even Evensen Kirkeli and Torger Hofta, all from Sætersdalen,

Herbjørn and Østen Engusland from Tinn, Johannes Sauelien, Ole Kvammen, Johannes Tho, and Anders Olsen, all from Hitterdal, Ole Stabek, Gunder Toe, and Kittil Fjøstuft, all from Seljord, as well as Ole and Asle Flatastøl from Vinje, Telemarken, Torger Feland from Moe parish, Nels Gaasedalen from Valdres, and Erik Solseth with 4 sons from Hallingdal. All these came in 1854. Next after them came Svennung Johansen Bergan, Knut Petersen Husevold, B. J. Bruflot, Helleck Olsen Morheim, Nels Nelson and Østen Nelson Morheim, Halvor Joh. Busness, Gjermund Joh. Kasen, John Johns, Kasen and Tosten Ellefsen Kvammen and more.

Ole Hellicksen, Mathias Hellicksen, Peder O. Hadland and Herbjørn Olsen Øian, all from Tinn, Telemarken, as well as Ole O. Halling from Hallingdal were the first in the area of Ostrander.

The first in the area of Whalan were John Johnson Rodebakken from Strand at Stavanger. Right after him came Gilbert Holt (Holt Township is named after him), John Ellefsen, M. S. Andersen, Knut O. Vaagaard, John Anderson, Halvor Kittilsen, Ole M. Rekaness and Ole K. Kaasa.

In the area of Pilot Mound Christian Bratrud was the first.

Wheat, rye and oats was the pioneer's main source of income. Day pay at that time varied between 0.50 to \$1.50.

I have already given particular place to Fillmore County, because it is the first - and one of the most Norwegian counties in the State of Minnesota, which overall has the most Norwegians than any other state in the union. But I must also include some bits that give a closer understanding of the pioneer's travels, life and hardships.

Old Gjermund Kasen writes the following, "I emigrated with my parents from Vestfjorddalen, Tinn, Telemarken in 1843. About the 20th of May we set off on an old half-rotten ship. And when we got out on the North Sea, there was a terrible storm that drove us back to land. Even the captain had little hope for our rescue. We had to go into Lindesnæs for repairs. Finally we got to Havre in France, but here we had to wait for two weeks for an American sailship that was to conduct us further.

While we lay in Havre I and three comrades took a tour in the city – and went unfortunately so far and twisted that we could not find our way back. After a whole day's desperate wandering, we reached the ship, that was ready to sail, and both we and our parents wept at our reunion.

Arriving at Milwaukee, Wis., we were met by Halvor Thompson (better known under the name 'Wind Lake'), who took us to Muskego (by Wind Lake) with oxen and log-wheeled wagon. We reached there in September - after a 4 month trip. That fall nearly all the settlers became sick of swamp fever, from which many died, they were buried at a place known today as 'Indianerhaugen' (Indian mound). I was one of the very first confirmed in the Muskego Church, the first Norwegian church in America.

In 1856, we came here to Fillmore County, where we also experienced the pioneer difficulties - always in hope of better times, that finally came.

After a stay of over 60 years in this country, there are many things to look back on, but it is heavy that most of the old, familiar faces are gone."

Fillmore County's most traveled Norwegian is John Johnson. He was born in Sollien, Gudbrandsdalen in 1835 and went to sea in his 20s. His second trip was to Archangel on the White Sea. Here they had a ship wreck, but were finally rescued in an exhausted situation. Later - after having visited most of Europe's ports - he joined the navy - for a time under the command of Baron Vedel Jarlsberg. After that he made a couple of trips to Brazil, South America, where once they had to stay in their oilskins for several days in a row during a desperate battle with the elements. After that he made a trip around the world. Finally he emigrated to America (naturally, he went as a seaman) and on this last trip, they collided with an American sailship which went to the bottom with 14 of its crew. The collision took place on the Newfoundland banks in a thick fog. Now, John lives on solid land in Pilot Mound and is surrounded by old acquaintances and friends.

Gullick Johnson from Tinn, Telemarken, was one of those that (1854) emigrated by sailship to Havre, and several months on the sea, 2 weeks from New York to Milwaukee and then by ox team, first to Muskego, Wis., then to Decorah, Ia., and finally to Canton, Minn., where he now lives.

H. A. Steensland, one of the pioneers at Tawney, was married to a girl who was of an even poorer background than himself. Her parents were a Norwegian pioneer couple and she was born the stable of Charley Luraas in Norway, Ill., 1858. "But," says Steensland, "if the house room was not big for pioneers, the heart room was certainly bigger", and this has made him happy the whole time.

Our well known countryman, G. A. Hjelle of Whalan is responsible for the following pioneer tale: "Their house stood not far from a large river. The husband was away at work to earn something to maintain the family. However, a severe rainstorm caused the river to overflow its banks. Suddenly, while the mother and children were inside, the house was surrounded by water, which poured in through the door and other openings, and after a few minutes, everything that was loose floated. Unfortunately, they could not get to the steps up to the loft, so she broke off some boards in the ceiling and lifted the children up through it. She could not get up herself as she had nothing to climb on and did not have the strength to haul herself up. She had to stand on the edge of the bed, holding onto the opening until the next day, when her husband came home, got hold of a canoe and rescued them from their dangerous and unpleasant situation. Do not forget the old ones and what they have suffered."

With respect to clerical things, pioneer priest A. G. Vonum, Rushford, Minn., writes, "I came here to Fillmore County in the fall of 1856 and live in the first period, partly in the Town of Arendahl and partly in the Town of Rushford. While I was here, we had a visit by Elling Eielsen, who held several edification meetings and conducted necessary ministerial activities. There was no church here at the time. Nor a priest in the area. I heard, however, talk of a Pastor B. Koren, from Iowa, who had travelled across the prairie to various places in the summer before I came in 1856; it was likely the southern part of their county he visited. I was sent as a missionary by Elling Eielsen's Friends to hold meetings among the people in the southern part of Minnesota and the northern part of Iowa until the end of January 1857. The next winter there was so much snow and no roads, so

I obtained a pair of skis that I continued to use, first to a Stavanger settlement, 20 miles south of Decorah and from there eastward to McGregor on the Mississippi River and further to Norway Grove, Dane Co., Wis., where my parents and other relatives lived. I got there when it was approaching spring. And in June we left with ox wagon here to Fillmore County, where as mentioned, I had been earlier, and where we now settled. There was established then a rather large Norwegian Lutheran congregation and they called me as priest as soon as I was ordained (1858). The next year we took the first steps to get a meeting house, that, at a size of 18x34, we had sufficiently finished in the summer of 1860 that we could hold our Synod meeting there. This log house, according to recollections as well as research I can state that it was the first Norwegian house of God in Fillmore County (and the first in Minnesota). It stood in the Town of Arendahl, 6 miles west of Rushford. The congregation that built it belonged to Elling Eielsen's Society."

As mentioned above, Elling Eielsen's congregation in the Town of Arendahl was established in 1857. The following year, there were established the 'Bloomfield Norwegian Lutheran Congregation' by Pastor B. Koren of the Norwegian Synod and 'The First Norwegian Lutheran Congregation at Highland Prairie' by Pastor A. A. Scheie, who belonged to The Augustana Synod. This was thus the beginning. And the number of congregations and churches has grown.

According to the information I have collected in 1900, there were 30 Norwegian congregations and 24 churches in the county, 16 belonging to The United Church, 7 to The Norwegian Synod, 5 to Hauge's Synod and 2 to the Methodist Church.

For information on the political area, see the section 'Norwegians in public positions in America'.

And for more about 'Vesterheimen', 'Det Udflyttede Norge' and 'The Christian Youth', that were published in their time here, see the section, 'Norwegian newspapers and periodicals'.

Place with Norwegian names: Holt and Norway Townships, Rud, Peterson, Soland, Hurdal and Bratsberg post offices; Arendahl is called both a Township and post office. (N.B. The description post office means also a small town – usually.)

*While these who settled in Fillmore Co. in 1851 were truly the first Norwegian settlers in the State, I will point the fact, that a Norwegian girl got lost in Minnesota the year before (thus, in 1850); see Hennepin Co.

Footnote: Fillmore County was settled first in 1851, then along that part of the Mississippi 1851-1853; Dakota County, '53; Goodhue, Dodge, Steele, Mower, Olmstead and Nicollet, '54; Faribault, Rice, Sibley, Freeborn and Waseca '55; Watonwan, McLeod, Scott, Meeker and Swift, '56; Brown, Blue Earth and Chippewa, '57; Wright and Kandiyohi, '58; Pope and Jackson, '60; Douglas, Grant, Renville and Stearns, '65; Yellow Medicine and Todd, '66; Benson and Otter Tail, '67; Cottonwood, Redwood and Murray, '68; Big Stone, Clay, Lac qui Parle, and Wilkin, '69; Becker, Lincoln, Lyon, Morrison, Rock and St. Louis, '70; Norman, Polk, Sherburne, and Stevens, '71; Nobles and Pipestone '72; Marshall '78; Kittson. '79 and so on.

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