

Source: History of Norwegian Immigration to The United States From the Earliest Beginning down to the Year 1848 By GEORGE T. FLOM, Ph. D. (Columbia)

The Sloopers of 1825. The First Norwegian Settlement in America. Kleng Peerson.

The story of the Sloopers from Stavanger, Norway, who came to America in 1825, has often been told; I shall therefore be very brief in my account of that expedition. Under causes of emigration I shall have occasion below to note briefly some of the circumstances that seem to have led to their departure for America in that year. The director of the expedition and the chief owner of the boat was Lars Larson i Jeilane; the captain was Lars Olsen. The company consisted of fifty-two persons, all but one being natives of Stavanger and vicinity; the one exception was the mate, Nels Erikson, who came from Bergen. Relative to the leading spirit in this first group of emigrants, Lars Larson, I shall say here: He was born near Stavanger, September twenty-fourth, 1787. He became a sailor, was captured in the Napoleonic wars and kept a prisoner in London for seven years. Being released in 1814, he remained in London, however, till 1815, when he and several other prisoners returned to Norway. In London they had been converted to the Quaker faith by Mrs. Margaret Allen, and upon returning to Stavanger, Lars Larson, Elias Tastad, Thomas Helle and Metta Helle became the founders of the first Quaker society in that city, a society which is still in existence.

In 1821 the Stavanger Quakers began to form plans for emigrating to America. It seems that Kleng Peerson and Knud Eide, whom we have mentioned above, were deputed to go to America for the purpose of learning something of the country with a view to planting there a Quaker colony. Kleng Peerson returned to Stavanger in 1824 with a favorable report and many of the members of the Quaker colony began to make preparations for emigrating to the locality selected by Peerson, namely, Orleans County, New York State. A sloop of only forty-five tons capacity which they called Restaurationen, built in Hardanger, was purchased and loaded with a cargo of iron and made ready for the journey. Larson himself had married in December, 1824, Georgiana Person, who was born October 19, 1803, on Fogn, a small island near Stavanger. Besides him there were five other heads of families. On the fourth of July, 1825, they set sail from Stavanger. The following fifty-two persons made up the party: Lars Larson and wife Martha Georgiana; Lars Olson, who was captain of the boat, Cornelius Nelson Hersdal, wife and four children;[27] Daniel Stenson Rossadal, wife and five children;[28] Thomas Madland, wife and three children,[29] Nels Nelson Hersdal and wife Bertha, Knud Anderson Slogvig, Jacob Anderson Slogvig, Gudmund Haugaas, Johannes Stene, wife and two children, Öien Thorson (Thompson) wife and three children,[30] Simon Lima, wife and three children, Henrik Christopherson Hervig, and wife, Ole Johnson, George Johnson, Thorsten Olson Bjaaland, Nels Thorson, Ole Olson Hetletvedt, Sara Larson (sister of Lars Larson), Halvor Iverson, Andrew Stangeland, the mate, Nels Erikson, and the cook, Endre Dahl.

After a perilous voyage of fourteen weeks they landed in New York, October ninth. An account

of that voyage, which also it seems was a rather adventurous one, was given by the New York papers at the time; it was reproduced in Norwegian translation in *Billed-Magazin* in 1869, whence it has been copied in other works. The arrival of this first party of Norwegian immigrants, and in so small a boat, created nothing less than a sensation at the time, as we may infer from the wide attention the event received in the eastern press. Thus the *New York Daily Advertiser* for October twelfth, 1825, under the head lines, "A Novel Sight," gives an account of the boat, the destination of the immigrants, the country they came from, their appearance, etc. For this citation I may refer the reader to page 39 of my article on "The Coming of the Norwegians to Iowa" in *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 1905, or to R. B. Anderson's *First Chapter of Norwegian Immigration*, 1896, 70–71.

In New York the immigrants met Mr. Joseph Fellows, a Quaker, from whom they purchased land in Orleans County, New York. It seems to have been upon the suggestion of Mr. Fellows that they were induced to settle here, although it is possible that the land had already been selected for them by Kleng Pearson, who was in New York at the time. The price to be paid for the land was five dollars an acre, each head of a family and adult person purchasing forty acres. The immigrants not being able to pay for the land, Mr. Fellows agreed to let them redeem it in ten annual installments. For the further history of the colony, with which we are here not so much concerned, the reader is referred to Knud Langeland's *Nordmaendene i Amerika*, Chicago, 1889, pp. 10–19, or to Anderson's *First Chapter*, pp. 77–90.

We have already mentioned Kleng Pearson, a name familiar to every student of Norwegian pioneer history. Much has been written about this pathfinder in the West, and romance and legend already adorn his memory. It would be interesting to recount what we know of his life in America, but as this has been dealt with at length by Professor R. B. Anderson in his monograph on *Norwegian Immigration*, which is in large part devoted to the sloop's history, I may refer the interested reader to this work. Symra (Decorah, Iowa) for 1906 also contains a brief, somewhat eulogistic account in Norwegian of Pearson's stay in New York and his journey of exploration to Illinois, Missouri, and Texas. The briefest facts I may, however, relate here.

Kleng Pearson was born on the seventeenth of May, 1782, on the estate Hesthammer in Tysvær Parish, Province of Ryfylke. In 1820 we find him in Stavanger, where William Allen, an English Quaker, was then organizing a Quaker society. In 1821 Kleng Pearson and a certain Knud Olson Eide were, as we have seen, commissioned, it appears, by the Quakers to go to America and examine the possibility of organizing a Norwegian colony there. The two explorers secured work in New York City, but Knud Eide fell ill and died not long after, and Pearson went west alone in quest of a suitable location for a colony. Just how far west he may have come on this first journey is not known. After some time he decided upon Orleans County on the shores of the Ontario as the best place to plant his colony, and in 1824 he returned to Norway. We have noted already the results of Pearson's mission. When Lars Larson's party prepared to go to America Kleng Pearson also left, but he did not take passage in *Restaurationen*. It seems that he

embarked by way of Gothenburg and was in New York to receive the sloopers upon their arrival.

It would be natural to suppose that Peerson did not go alone from Stavanger when he returned to America via Gothenburg in 1825. After much inquiry I have also succeeded in discovering the name of one man, who, with his family, accompanied Peerson that year. This man was Björn Björnson from Stavanger, a cousin of Kleng Peerson; he brought his wife and several children with him, but left two girl twins, born in May of that year, with a relative who then lived in Tjensvold, near Stavanger. Further facts about this family will be given in the chapter on Chicago.

As Peerson seems to play no role in the founding of the Orleans County settlement, I shall leave him here. There will be occasion to speak briefly of him again later in connection with the second Norwegian settlement. I wish to add a few words here about Lars Larson, however. He and his family located in Rochester, where he became a builder of canal boats, prospered; and kept in close touch with immigrant Norwegians during the two decades of his life there. His home became a kind of Mecca for hosts of intending settlers in the New World. Larson died by accident on a canal boat in November, 1845, but his widow lived till October, 1887. They had eight children, of whom the first one, Margaret Allen, was born on the Atlantic Ocean, September second, 1825. Of her and others of Lars Larson's descendants I shall speak briefly below. We shall now return to the settlers in Orleans County, New York.

The colony was in many respects unfortunate; it cannot be said to have prospered and has never played any important part as a colony in Norwegian-American history. But it is important as being the first, and also as being the parent of a very large and progressive Norwegian settlement founded in 1834–35 in La Salle County, Illinois, of which more below. And yet the economic conditions of the Quaker immigrants gradually became better and the future looked more promising. They felt now that America offered many advantages to the able and the capable, and they began writing encouraging letters to relatives and friends in the old country, urging them to seek their fortune here. As a result there was, if not a large, at any rate a fairly constant emigration of individuals and families from Stavanger and adjacent region during the following eight or nine years, although few seem to have come before 1829. In this year, e. g., came Gudmund Sandsberg (b. 1787) from Hjelmeland, in Ryfylke, Norway, and his wife Marie and three children, Bertha, Anna, and Torbjör.

Passage was secured in the beginning for the most part with American sailships carrying Swedish iron from Gothenburg. But as this was attended by much uncertainty, often necessitating several weeks of waiting, the intending emigrants began to go to Hamburg, where German emigration by means of regular going American packet ships had already begun. Here, however, another difficulty met them. The already somewhat heavy emigration at this port

made it necessary to order passage several weeks ahead in order to insure accommodations, and failing in this, the emigrant was forced to wait there until the next packet boat should sail. And so it came about that many of the early Norwegian immigrants to America came by way of Havre, France, where passage was always certain, emigration from this point being as yet very limited.

Among those who came via Gothenburg was Gjert Hovland, a farmer from Hardanger, who left Norway with his family on the twenty-fourth of June, 1831, sailed from Gothenburg June thirtieth and arrived in New York September eighteenth. He does not seem to have gone directly to Kendall, for we find him soon after the owner of fifty acres of forest land in Morris County, New Jersey.

Gjert Hovland seems to be the first one from the province of Hardanger to emigrate to America. Other emigrants during these years are: Christian Olson, who came in 1829, settling in Kendall; Knut Evenson, wife and daughter Katherine, who emigrated in 1831 in the same ship by which Hovland came; and Ingebret Larson Narvig from Tysvær Parish, Ryfylke, who came in 1831 and two years later located in Michigan. It seems probable that also Johan Nordboe and wife from Ringebo, in Gudbrandsdalen, Norway, came to Orleans County in 1832. Nordboe was the first to emigrate from Gudbrandsdalen, a province from which actual immigration did not begin until sixteen years later.

Norwegian immigrants who came during these years generally located in Orleans County, but rarely remained there permanently. The northwestern states were just then beginning to be opened up to settlers. At this time migration from the eastern states was directed particularly to Illinois. Good government land could be had here for \$1.25 an acre. The very heavily wooded land that the Norwegian immigrants in Orleans County had purchased proved very difficult of improvement, and many began to think of moving to a more favorable locality.

In 1833 Kleng Peerson, who seems to have lived in Kendall at this time, made a journey to the West, evidently for the purpose of finding a suitable site for a new settlement. He was accompanied by Ingebret Larson Narvig as far as Erie, Monroe County, Michigan, where the latter remained, Peerson continuing the journey farther west. After several months of wandering across Michigan, and down into Ohio and Indiana, he at last arrived at Chicago, then a village of about twenty huts. The marshes of Chicago did not appeal to Peerson and he went to Milwaukee, but the reports he received of the endless forests of Wisconsin soon drove him back again into Illinois. After several days' journey on foot again west of Chicago he at last found a spot which seemed to him as if providentially designated as the proper locality for his western colony. The place was immediately south of the present village of Norway in La Salle County. His choice made, Peerson returned to Orleans County, having covered over 2,000 miles on foot since he left.

Peerson's selection was universally approved and a considerable number of the Kendall settlers

decided to move west. Among those of the sloopers who remained in New York I shall here name: Ole Johnson, Henrik C. Hervig and Andrew Stangeland, who, however, some years later bought a tract of land in Noble County, Indiana; Lars Olson located in New York City, and, as we have seen, Lars Larson settled in Rochester; Nels Erikson went back to Norway, while Öien Thompson and Thomas Madland died in Kendall in 1826, and Cornelius Hersdal died there in 1833.