

1839 Rock and Jefferson Prairies

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 Earliest White Settlers on Rock and Jefferson Prairies. The Founding of the Rock Prairie Settlement. The Earliest Settlers on Rock Prairie

We have seen that when Ole Nattestad settled at Clinton on July first, 1838, the country was a wilderness, he being the only white man there. He speaks, however, of eight Americans living some distance from him, in similar condition. It was less than three years prior that the first white settlers had located in the county. On the eighteenth day of November, 1835, John Inman, of Lucerne County, Pennsylvania, Thomas Holmes, William Holmes, and Joshua Holmes, of Ohio, Milo Jones and George Follmer, settled on the site of the present city of Janesville, opposite the "big rock." [85] This was the first settlement in Rock County. Inman and William Jones had visited the locality and selected this spot in July of that year. On this occasion they had camped on the bluff on the Racine road. Our authority relates: "From this point they saw Rock Prairie stretching away in the distance to the east and south, till the verdant plain mingled with the blue of the horizon. They saw before them an ocean of waving grass and blooming flowers, and realized the idea of having found the real Canaan—the real paradise of the world." They returned to Milwaukee, having in their ten days' exploration of the Rock River Valley, found but one family, namely, a Mr. McMillan, who resided where Waukesha now stands. [85] Somewhat later in the year came Samuel St. John and his wife, the last being the first white woman in the county. The next year there were several new arrivals. On December seventh, 1836, townships one, two, three, and four north of ranges eleven, twelve, thirteen, and fourteen, of the fourth principal meridian, afterwards the eastern sixteen of the present twenty townships of Rock County, [86] were taken from Milwaukee County and constituted a separate county, called Rock. The county took its name from the "big rock" on the north side of the river, now within the city limits of Janesville, and an ancient landmark among the Indians and the early traders.

All these earliest settlements (1836–1837) were made near and along the Rock River. In 1838 there were four hundred and eighty settled in this region chiefly, the centers of population being already then Janesville and Beloit. Next follow Johnstown, Lima, and Milton, in the northwestern part of the county, and Union. The region west of Beloit, Newark, Avon, Spring Valley, was still wholly unsettled in the summer of 1839. The Town of Bradford, the next north of Clinton, was first settled by Erastus Dean, in 1836; there were very few before 1838. The Town of Clinton, as originally organized (1842), comprised the territory of the present town, the south half of Bradford, and portions of Turtle and La Prairie.

The first actual settlement in the present township was made in May, 1837, on the west side of

Jefferson Prairie, by Stephen E. Downer and Daniel Tasker, and their wives, on the southeast side of the prairie. In July, Oscar H. Pratt and Franklin Mitchell, from Joliet, Illinois, made claims. These were the earliest. On the west side of the prairie settlement was made in October, 1837, by H. L. Warner, Henry Tuttle, Albert Tuttle, and Griswold Weaver. We recall that Ole Nattestad said that when he came to Clinton on July first, 1838, there were eight Americans living isolated at considerable distance from him. Nattestad located on section twenty. Here Christopher Nyhus also settled, while Thore Helgeson settled on section twenty-nine. Who the eight settlers were that Nattestad met, remains somewhat uncertain, but it does not seem unlikely that it was the four last mentioned, and some of the first explorers, who are named as Charles Tuttle, Dennis Mills, Milton S. Warner, and William S. Murrey.

The Town of Turtle, directly west of Clinton, was not organized until 1846. The first settlers were S. G. Colley, who located on section thirty-two, in the spring of 1838, and Daniel D. Egery, who came there about the same time, locating on section thirty-six (to Beloit, however, in 1837). Such were the beginnings of settlement east of Beloit prior to Nattestad's coming, and it was still virtually a wilderness when Ansten Nattestad's party came at the close of September, 1839. West of Beloit, in the Town of Newark, the Norwegians were the first, while in Avon and Spring Valley they were among the earliest groups of settlers. It is the settlement of this region, and especially the Town of Newark, to which we shall now turn.

We observed above that some of Ansten Nattestad's party who came to Jefferson Prairie in September, 1839, did not remain there. These went fourteen miles farther west and established a settlement in the Township of Newark, which had not been settled by white men before, while a few of the members of this latter party went south from there eighteen miles, crossing the Illinois line, and located in the Township of Rock Run, in Stephenson County, Illinois.

The founder of the Rock Prairie Settlement was Gullik Olson Gravdal, of Vægli, Numedal; he emigrated from Norway with Ansten Nattestad in 1839. He came directly to Jefferson Prairie, but did not remain there. With Gisle Halland and Goe Bjöno he went west a distance to look over the country, with a view to settling elsewhere. Having arrived at Beloit, they managed here to secure a map and from it got some idea of where government land was to be had. Then they continued their journey along the Madison road seven miles farther west. Finally, he came to a place which suited him, for he found, as he says, "good spring water, as also prairie and woodland in the right proportion." Together with Lars Röste, a single man from the Parish of Land, he then bought forty acres of land.[87] Gisle Halland bought land one mile farther east, while Goe Bjöno took a claim on a piece of land for Mrs. Gunhild Ödegaarden, three miles south of the site selected by Gravdal.

Gunhild Ödegaarden (who emigrated from Nore, annex parish in Numedal) was a widow of considerable means, who had paid the passage of several other persons. Her family, among whom were grown sons and daughters, emigrated with her to America in the Nattestad party

and came directly to Jefferson Prairie. Immediately after Bjöno's purchase of land for her in Newark Township she, with family, moved out there and had a log cabin erected, this being the first dwelling built in that township. This statement is based upon the authority of Gravdal himself, as printed in an interview on page 162 of Billed-Magazin for 1869. The History of Rock County agrees in this statement that Mrs. Ödegaarden's log cabin, built in the fall of 1839, was the first house erected in the Town of Newark. Gunhild Ödegaarden's name appears regularly as Mrs. Gunale (or Gunile). She is there mentioned several times, her family being extensively intermarried with the old pioneer families in the settlement.[88] Gravdal completed the erection of a cabin late in the fall, and his family having been left on Jefferson Prairie, he brought them to Rock Prairie in the latter part of November (Billed-Magazin, 1869, page 162).[89]

That same fall Gisle Halland married Margit Knudsdatter Nösterud from Rallaug Parish, Numedal, being obliged to go as far south as Rockford, Illinois, to get the ceremony performed. Their oldest child, Kristine, born in the fall of 1840, was the first white child born in that township. Gravdal, speaking of those days, says: "When I located in this region, the whole country to the west was a desert. I do not know whether there lived white people anywhere between my home and the Mississippi. The same was also the case toward the north; however, about seven miles west (east?) from my home two Yankees had settled in the wilderness. The Indians were still lords of these regions. They often visited us in our houses, but they were always friendly and courteous. We were never molested by the wild son of the desert. There was at this time an abundance of game; we saw stags in large herds, and prairie chickens literally swarmed." There seem to have been no fresh accessions of settlers until the spring of 1841. Then Lars H. Skavlem arrived and located on section eleven. Gullik Knudson Laugen also came at the same time, and not long after several Americans moved in. Both Skavlem and Knudson had come to America in 1839, having been members of Nattestad's party. Skavlem had, in the interval, lived on Jefferson Prairie. Gullik Knudson had remained in Chicago, as had also Gunnul Stordok, securing work there,[90] as did also two girls from Numedal, to whom they were engaged in Norway. These two couples were married the following winter, and, having saved some money from their small earnings, they decided to buy a home somewhere in the Norwegian settlement in Rock County. Knudson relates: "I walked about several days to find a location for a home, and at last came to a place on the verge of a prairie, where a rushing spring of water poured out of the ground. Here I decided to build and live, and I called the place Springen (the spring). The land about was like a desert; barring the four Norwegians who had come before me, there were no settlers. Toward the west one had to travel twenty-two miles to find white people. It was fortunate that there was an abundance of game, for what we secured by hunting was the sustenance on which we chiefly relied during the winter." He tells how, with the first fall of snow, he and another[91] walked on skis to Beloit to buy flour, and how the tracks left in the snow by the skis had aroused considerable wonder and speculation among the Americans about there, who afterwards discovered the tracks, and that it became

the subject of extensive discussion as to what unknown monster could have left such tracks. Beloit, he says, consisted then of a mill, a hotel, two stores, and a few laborers' cottages.

From the fact of his location near the big spring, "Springen," as Knudson called it, he came to be called Gullik Springen; his sir name, Laugen, he no longer used, but wrote himself Gullik Knudson. Here by this spring, Knudson built a hut of shrubs, thatched with straw, in which they lived for three months while the log cabin was being built.[92] The flat cover of a chest, brought from Norway, served for a table, and the cooking was done on the ground. In December the log cabin was ready. Gunnul Stordok and wife, who did not come to Newark until September, lived with Knudson during the first winter, after which they removed to Illinois.[93]

In the summer of 1841 a considerable number of Knudson's acquaintances from Norway came; these found a temporary home with Knudson, sharing in his genuine pioneer hospitality. Among them were Halvor Skavlem and his wife, Berit, the daughter, Kari, and two sons, Ole and Paul Skavlem, the latter with wife and child, Bessie. Halvor Skavlem died one week after their arrival. The son Paul bought land; Ole first, however, went to Mineral Point, in Dodge County, returning, however, later; he settled near Orfordville. Another of this group was Halvor Nilson Aas, who, with his family, settled near Gravidahl, in Newark Township. Knut Kristensen also came in 1841 and located on section eleven, erecting a log cabin there. Finally, Ole Halvorson Valle, who later moved to Iowa, was among this number.

Several of those who had come to Jefferson Prairie in 1839 removed to Rock Prairie in the summer of 1841. Thus, Hellik Glaim, Lars Skavlem, and the latter's three brothers, Gullik, Gjermund, and Herbrand; these all moved there upon their father Halvor's arrival from Norway that summer. Hellik N. Brække and Nils Olson Vægli came directly from Norway in 1841. The last mentioned was from Vægli Annex to Rollaug Parish in Numedal. He was born at Vægli Parsonage and was therefore often called Nils Prestegaard. He lived at Gravidal's the first winter; the following summer he, with two others, Paul Skavlem and Hellik Brække, bought a quarter section of land together in section thirty-two in Plymouth Township. Nils Vægli was married in 1844 to Kari Skavlem, daughter of Halvor Skavlem; they went to Koshkonong, in Dane County, to be married by Reverend J. W. C. Dietrichson, who had just come there from Norway. They were one of the first couples to be married by him. Hellik Brække sold out his share in the land, and in 1852 moved to Mitchell County, Iowa. Lars Skavlem bought land and settled near Halvor Aas, whose daughter (Groe Nelson) he married in 1844; hence, he was also called Lars Aas. He later bought his father-in-law's farm, the place being called "the Skavlen farm" (Skavlenfarmen). Gullik Skavlem bought land three miles east of Gisle Halland in Beloit Township, about three miles from Beloit; he, however, moved to Mitchell County, Iowa, in the fifties.[94] Hellik Glaim had stopped in Chicago till 1840, when he came to Rock Prairie. Ten years later he sold out and moved to Fillmore County, Minnesota.[95]

The above is a brief record of the beginnings of the Rock Prairie Settlement. Of some of the

founders of this settlement, which, in a few years, became one of the most prosperous in the state, I may here add:

Gullik Gravdal, the nestor of the settlement, was born in Vægli, Numedal, in 1802; he died in 1873, leaving widow, a daughter, Sarah, and two sons, Ole and Tolle. Ole Gravdal was born in Norway in 1830; he married Jöri Ödegaarden in 1855, after which he lived for thirteen years in Beloit, then removed to Newark Township. He is at present living in Beloit, Wisconsin. Ole Gravdal dropped the latter name and used the patronymic Gulack. Tolle Gulack Gravdal was born in 1833. He married Bessie Skavlem, daughter of Paul H. Skavlem, in 1857. They lived on the farm in Newark until 1894 (Tolle having lived there fifty-five years), in which year they moved to Beloit. He died in September, 1903, leaving a widow and two children, a son, Gilbert Gravdal, in Newark Township, and a daughter, Mrs. C. E. Inman, in Beloit. A son, Henry, died in 1902, and a daughter, Nellie (Mrs. W. O. Hanson), died in the summer of 1903. Amerika for September twenty-fifth, 1903, prints an obituary notice of Tolle Gravdal, according to which his death was sudden, being stricken as he was at work. The notice says, "he was one of those who had tried the privations and the trials of pioneer life, and he was always ready to extend a helping hand to all who needed it. He enjoyed universal respect and love for his sincerity and his integrity and his lovable nature." Sarah Gravdal, daughter of Gullik Gravdal, married Halvor Halvorson (son of Cleophas Halvorson), of Newark Township, in 1869.

Hellik Nilson Brække married a sister of Reverend C. F. Clausen's wife; in 1852 he joined the latter's colony of settlers in Mitchell County, Iowa. Lars Skavlem was born in 1819. He married Groe Nilson Aas in 1844; their children are Halvor, Bessie, Helen and Carolina. The son, Halvor L. Skavlem, born 1848, is a farmer in Newark Township; he married Cornelia Olmstead, in Plymouth, a granddaughter of Mrs. Gunild Ödegaarden.[96] Gunnul Stordok moved to Rock Run (see below). It seems that he had retained some of his land in Newark, for when Gunder Knudson Springen (brother of Gullik Springen) came there in 1843, he bought land then owned by Gunnul Stordok.