

The Settlement of Norway and Raymond Townships, Racine County. The Founders of the Settlement. Immigration to Racine County in 1841–1842.

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)

We have seen how in the fall of 1839 the Luraas brothers established a colony near Lake Muskego in the present Waukesha (then Milwaukee) County. The locality was illy selected, being low and marshy. It was in the first place unhealthy and the settlers suffered much from malaria. Furthermore it was very heavily covered with timber and the soil which was clay yielded but small returns for their labor. The settlers therefore found it difficult enough to make a living.

As early as the next spring several moved farther south into Racine County, where the conditions were more favorable and where a thriving settlement grew up in a few years. The old settlement ceased to become the objective point of intending emigrants from Telemarken. After the cholera year 1849 most of those who survived moved away.[114] The southern extension of the settlement, which took its root at Wind Lake in Norway Township, later spread out so as to include the townships of Yorkville, Raymond and Waterford all in Racine County. The old name, "Muskego," was retained as the designation of the new as well as the old settlement, although the settlement in Racine County is now often referred to as "Yorkville Prairie." It is the beginnings of this settlement to which I shall now turn.

The founders of the settlement at Wind Lake in the Town of Norway were Sören Backe, son of Tolleff O. Backe a merchant of Drammen, and Johannes Johanneson. The latter was a clerk in the employ of Tollef Backe of Drammen, whom he latter deputed to accompany his son to America. He was a man of about forty years of age, of strong character and moral principles. He had some knowledge of the English language, having once lived for a short time in England. Sören Backe was a young man, evidently of little promise, whom the father sent to America ostensibly that his ambition might be kindled by American opportunities and by being placed upon his own responsibility. In company with them came also a third man, of whom I shall speak again in a later chapter, namely Elling Eielson Sunve from Voss, a lay preacher and the noted founder of the "Ellingian" sect of the Lutheran Church. These three left Drammen in the summer of 1839, and arrived in La Salle County in the fall of that year. The forest land had all been taken and was now occupied by settlers, and Johannesen seems to have been suspicious of the prairie, where land could still be had.

A contributor to the Billed-Magazin for 1869 says that the conditions of distress, the winter storms and the extreme cold on the prairies were the things that influenced them to seek a locality for a settlement elsewhere, and that they did not go north to Racine County until the spring of 1840. He says: "Early the next spring they walked north and came as far as to Wind

Lake, where there was then a single settler, an Irishman. Here in the primeval forest, on the shores of the little lake they had found what their hearts desired; and they bought the piece of ground which the Irishman was cultivating, and Backe chose this place as his home.” It is to be noted, however, that K. Langeland in *Nordmaendene i Amerika* says that they remained in La Salle County only a few weeks and went north to Wisconsin that same fall (page forty-three).[115] Langeland adds further, that they dug a cellar in an Indian mound in which they lived during the winter.

In touching upon these facts in my article on “The Coming of the Norwegians to Iowa”[116] I did not hesitate to accept this as correct, and I must now adhere to this view. My reason is that as early as the middle of the summer of 1840 a small group of emigrants were ready to leave for America with the view of settling at Wind Lake, having received letters from Backe and Johannesen, urging them to come there. Had these not located at Wind Lake before the spring of 1840 the time would have been insufficient for the second party at Drammen to have not only received word from America but also to have made all necessary arrangements preparatory to emigrating. I assume then that it was about December 1839 that Backe and Johannesen located in Norway Township. I am inclined to think, however, that Elling Eielson remained in the Fox River Settlement during the winter, and that he came to Wind Lake in the spring of 1840. During that spring and summer the brothers John, Torger, Halvor, and Knut Luraas, with their families, as also Gjermund Johnson Kaasa, located in Norway Township. Nelson Johnson Kaasa, who had emigrated in the Luraas party in 1839, remained in Milwaukee for three months and moved to the settlement in November, 1840.

Among the immigrants of 1837, who went to the ill-fated Beaver Creek Settlement in Iroquois County, Illinois, was Mons K. Aadland. We have already observed that he was the last one to leave Beaver Creek. He with family also came to Racine County in the summer of 1840. He however selected a locality on the prairie east of the Indian mound, buying a farm of a hundred and sixty acres on section thirty in Raymond Township. This part of the settlement came to be known as North Cape. The nucleus of the later extensive settlement had then assumed considerable proportions by the fall of 1840; but new accessions were soon to come.

Backe and Johannesen decided to write to friends in Norway and their letters were productive of results. In the summer of 1840 a party of about thirty persons stood ready to emigrate to the settlement in Wisconsin. The leader of these was Even Hanson Heg, the keeper of a hotel at Lier in Drammen, who sold out his property and with his wife and four children came with this party. Other members of the party were: Johannes Evenson Skofstad, Syvert Ingebretson Narverud, Helge Thomson, Ole Anderson, all from Drammen and all of whom had families, Ole Hogenson and family from Eggedal, and Knut Aslakson Svaalestuen from Vinje, Telemarken. All these came to Wind Lake and located there in the autumn of 1840.

Sören Backe seems to have been a man whose generosity was as remarkable as his lack of

business ability. His father, a man of considerable wealth, had supplied his son generously with funds upon his departure for America. Sören Backe evidently loaned money very liberally to those of his countrymen who were in need, and there were many of these here as in all pioneer communities. It is said that when his funds were used up he made a journey to Norway for more money. With this he purchased land, which he let out on easy terms to new comers from Norway. It was Johannesen who had charge of these transactions in which it seems Even Heg was a partner with Backe. Johannesen is described as a devout christian, a zealous adherent of the Haugian tendency, and in every way a noble character. As we have seen, the settlement developed rapidly, and it continued to grow for many years. Backe and Johannesen then joined partnership and started a store; for this purpose an Indian mound was excavated, the walls were sided with boards, and this structure, which was partly underground, served as store, living room and kitchen combined. Their stock of goods was shipped from Milwaukee, itself then only a village of one or two stores, a hotel and half a dozen pioneer cabins. Backe and Johannesen continued their business together for about three years when Johannesen fell ill and died (in 1845). That same year Backe returned to Norway and settled on his father's farm Valle, in Lier, near Drammen.

Even Heg was a leading spirit in the settlement in Norway and surrounding townships during his life-time. Much has been written about him and I shall not here repeat the eulogies elsewhere voiced in his honor. After Johannesen's death it was Heg upon whom the settlers in the early days of the colony leaned for advice and it was Even Heg to whom every new arrival from Norway to the colony came for help and counsel. His hospitality and his resourcefulness in the aid of his compatriots was boundless. Heg's barn, where large parties of immigrants were received every summer, and in which they were permitted freely to make their home during the first weeks after the long and arduous journey, is famed throughout many an early settlement in Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota. The log cabins of the settlers were too small to afford the necessary quarters for the numbers that continuously flocked in, and the large barn was a boon for which they were truly grateful. For a time Racine County became the objective point of most of the immigrants from Norway, a distinction which however it was soon to share with the still more famous Koshkonong Prairie in Dane County, Wisconsin.

Of Elling Eielson I shall speak below, as also of Hans C. Heg, son of Even Heg, and of some of the other Racine County pioneers. I wish to add here a few words of Mons Aadland, who as we recall, came to America in 1837, and located at North Cape in 1840. Aadland was born near Bergen, Norway, in April, 1793, being thus forty-four years old when he emigrated. He was one of the few survivors of the Beaver Creek Colony in Illinois. As we have seen, he is the founder of the North Cape branch of the settlement. There he lived till his death in 1869, his wife having died two years before. A settlers' history says of him: "He was a man of generous spirit, as is shown by his liberal gifts, and one who took a commendable interest in public affairs." Ten years before his death he owned between five and six hundred acres of land which he then divided among his children. Thomas Adland and Knud Adland both of Raymond Township are

his sons, while a daughter, Martha, lives in Norway; the other children are dead.[117] Mons Aadland was a nephew of Nils P. Langeland whom we have spoken of above page 100.

The immigration of 1841 was not extensive. Backe and Johannesen do not seem to have continued their propaganda of immigration; but the party who came with Even Heg wrote home letters full of praise of the New World. But even in the face of such tempting exhortations the old world resident requires time for thought before he decides to bid farewell to the home of his fathers and seek his fortune in a strange and distant land. I am not aware that anyone came from Drammen or Telemarken to Racine County in 1841.[118] Knut Roe and wife located in Racine County, however, in 1841, but they came from La Salle County, where they had settled in 1839. In 1842 there were several arrivals. Thus Hermund Nilson Tufte with wife Kari and three daughters came from Aal Parish in Hallingdal. This was the first family to emigrate to America from that province.[119] In that year came also Aanund Halvorson Bjoin, wife and family from Tin, Telemarken, and John Jacobson; further, Halvor Larson Lysenstøen (Modum) from Hadeland, Norway, the first immigrant from that region, and Helge Sigurdson and wife Bergit Olsdatter, who however, removed to Dane County in 1844.[120] John J. Dale from Norway, who had come to America in 1837 and settled in La Salle County, Illinois, came to Racine in 1842; his wife Anna had died in Illinois in 1839. Another of the immigrants of 1839 came to Muskego in 1842, namely John Evenson Molee. He had lived in Milwaukee the preceding three years; I shall speak of him below. There were individual accessions to other settlements in 1841–42, but they are few in number. With 1843 the immigration movement receives a new impulse, but the discussion of that year will better be postponed until we have recorded the founding of some other important settlements in 1840–42.