

## **The First Norwegian Settlement in Iowa, at Sugar Creek, in Lee County**

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 same year that records the genesis of the Koshkonong Settlement, also registers the founding of the earliest Norwegian colony in Iowa, that of Sugar Creek, in Lee County, in the southeastern part of the state. When Kleng Peerson was on his way to Missouri in 1837 (see above, page 117), it seems that he passed through the southeastern corner of Iowa; he was, therefore, in all probability the first Norwegian to enter the State of Iowa.[158] Iowa had been organized as a territory in 1838. The settlers in Shelby County, Missouri, were dissatisfied, and, having heard of the natural resources of the Territory of Iowa, immediately to the north, and that good land with a near market[159] could be had in the southeastern part of the territory, they decided to move to Iowa. Going north into Lee County, Iowa, they located at a place six miles northwest of Keokuk, known as Sugar Creek. Andrew Simonsen and most of the settlers in Shelby County came at that time; but Peerson remained in Missouri. Here, however, they found a small colony of Norwegians who had, it seems, but recently established themselves. With the exception of one to be mentioned below, it is not known who these earlier settlers were, and I have not been able to ascertain where they came from.

Kleng Peerson has been accredited with being the founder also of the Sugar Creek Settlement, but there is no proof that he previously selected the site or even that he located there in 1840. Indeed the evidence goes rather to show that he never actually settled at Sugar Creek. His home in the following years was probably chiefly in Shelby County, Missouri; in 1847 he sold his land there and joined the Swedish colony in Henry County, Illinois, which had been founded in 1846. Nor does it seem to me that Hans Barlien was a member of the Missouri colony, as Professor Anderson suggests. No mention of Barlien can be found in connection with the Shelby County colony or any other settlement. It seems more probable that he went to the Fox River Settlement when he came from Norway in 1837, but with a few others left in 1840, coming to Lee County somewhat before the party that came with Andrew Simonsen from Shelby County. They may originally have received their knowledge of this locality from Peerson. Barlien himself may have been in La Salle County when Peerson in 1837 returned from his journey to Missouri. It was, then, Barlien and a few immigrants with him whom Andrew Simonsen and others from Shelby County found already settled at Sugar Creek in the spring of 1840. If this is correct then the first Norwegian settler in Iowa and the real founder of the first Norwegian colony in the state is Hans Barlien, who was born at Overhalden in the province of Trondhjem about 1870.

In 1838 Kleng Peerson went to Norway to gather recruits for the Shelby County colony; the following year he brought back with him from Stavanger County the three brothers, Peter,

William, and Hans Tesman, Nils Olson, Ole Reiersen and family, and six or seven women, all of whom came to Missouri; but several of these went to Lee County, Iowa, the following year.

As far as known, the first settlers who came with Andrew Simonsen from Missouri were: Omund Olson, Knud Slogvig,[160] Jacob O. Hetletvedt, Mrs. Thorstein T. Rue and her sons, Thorstein and John, Peter Omundson Gjilje, Erik Öie, Ole Öiesöen, and the three Tesman brothers; some of the rest seem to have followed later. Lars Tallakson settled there about the same time, but he came from Clark County, Missouri, where he had located in 1838. Gjermund Helgeson[161] was also among the earliest settlers, and Jacob Slogvig, who had gone back to La Salle County in 1838, likewise later located at Sugar Creek. Among the subsequent arrivals were Ole Soppeland, Hans William, C. Person, and Nils and Christ Nelson; these located there before 1846.

The leading spirit in the colony was undoubtedly Hans Barlien. He was a man of great natural endowment, and he had a fair education. In Norway he had been a pronounced nationalist of the Wergeland direction and had taken part in the first peasant uprising. He was for a time a member of the Storting (the national parliament). In religion he was a liberal, which aroused the hostility of the clergy, while his radical political views called forth the enmity of the official class. He owned a printing establishment at Overgaarden, and published a paper[162] in which he did not hesitate to give expression to the principles for which he stood. This frequently involved him in litigation; and, feeling himself persecuted, he at last decided to emigrate to America in 1837.[163] Barlien seems to be the second Norwegian emigrant from Trondhjem.[164] Lars Tallakson came from Bergen, while the rest of the colonists were mostly from the region of Stavanger.

Lee County was but little settled at that time;[165] land was bought of the Indians for a nominal price, but it often became expensive enough in the end, since it proved very difficult for many of the settlers to obtain a clear title from the United States. This is one reason why the settlement did not grow, though probably not the chief cause. In 1843 there were between thirty and forty families, writes John Reiersen,[166] but in 1856 there were, according to the census of that year, only sixty-eight Norwegians in the county. This number had in 1885 decreased to thirty-one. In the fifties many of the settlers moved to other localities, but throughout the forties there was a prosperous colony that contributed not a little to the development of the community and the county in that early period. The settlement is of special interest in that it was the first Norwegian settlement in Iowa. Its founding inaugurated Norwegian colonization in the state which, particularly in the fifties, resulted in the establishment of a score of extensive settlements in the central and the northern counties.

There are many reasons why the Sugar Creek Settlement did not grow as did the later settlements north and west. First of all, land was not of the best in Lee County. And then, the locality was rather too far south, Norwegians have everywhere in America thriven best in the

more northerly localities. Again, the tide of emigration from the vicinity of Stavanger was not sufficiently heavy to recruit the various settlements already established by immigrants from that region. The majority of those who came went direct to the Fox River Settlement in Northern Illinois, which offered unsurpassed natural advantages. To be sure, the Shelby County (Missouri) and the Lee County settlements might have been recruited from other districts in Norway. But it must be remembered that such other districts as had begun to take part in the emigration movement had their attention directed just at this time in another direction. The other provinces in question are Voss, Telemarken, and Numedal. It was representatives of these that founded the Wisconsin settlements in 1839–40, and in them the great majority of immigrants from those provinces located in the following decade. This is also true of those who came from Hardanger, Sogn,[167] and from Western Norway in general.

There is still another reason why the colony did not grow. Beyond the common desire of material betterment, there was too little of community of interest. It is enough to mention that several different religious sects were represented in the little settlement, chief among which were the Quakers and the Latter Day Saints. Just across the Mississippi was the town of Nauvoo,[168] which was a Mormon center at the time. When the Mormons who did not believe in polygamy established themselves at Lamoni some years later, many Norwegians of that belief went with them.[169] And not a few of the Quakers joined American Quaker settlements farther north, as in Salem, Henry County.[170] In the later fifties a prosperous colony was founded at and south of Legrand in Marshall County. A few of the early pioneers, however, remained and their descendants live in Lee County to-day. Finally, the difficulty of securing a title to the land upon which many Norwegians had settled, to which reference has been made above, undoubtedly drove many to seek homes elsewhere.[171]

Of these first Norwegian pioneers in Iowa I shall here add a brief final note, as we shall not meet with them again. We have met the brothers Knud and Jacob Anderson Slogvig four times as the founders of settlements—in Orleans County, New York, in La Salle County, Illinois, in Shelby County, Missouri, and in Lee County, Iowa. Jacob Slogvig went to California about 1850; there he became wealthy and died in 1864. Knud Slogvig moved to Lee County early in the fifties, I believe, and died there. Hans Barlien died in the Sugar Creek Settlement in 1842. Mrs. Thorstein Rue and her son, Thorstein, lived in Sugar Creek till 1846, when they went to Wisconsin, and took part in the founding of the Blue Mounds Settlement in western Dane County. Lars Tallakson settled about a decade later in La Salle County, Illinois, where he lived to a good old age.[172] Jacob Olson Hetletvedt (brother of the sloop, Ole O. Hetletvedt) continued to live in Lee County till his death in August, 1857. His widow married Sven Kjylaa, with whom she then moved to the Fox River Settlement. Per Omundson Gjilje was one of the last to leave the settlement; in 1864 he removed to New Sharon, Mahaska County, Iowa, where he died in 1895. His wife (born Karina Bornevik, from Nærstrand, Norway) died in 1902, aged eighty-six.

