

## **The Earliest Norwegian Settlers at Wiota, La Fayette County, and Dodgeville, Iowa County, Wisconsin**

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)

About forty miles directly west of Rock Prairie lies Wiota, about which town stretches in all directions a Norwegian settlement of considerable size. It is separated from Luther Valley by Green County and lies only twenty-five miles distant, northwest, from the old settlement of Rock Run, in Illinois. Here extensive lead mines were being operated in the forties, and they were the means of drawing to that locality a large number of immigrants of different nationalities, many of whom, to be sure, only remained there temporarily, going elsewhere to buy a home as soon as they had accumulated sufficient funds. The mines were at that time called "Hamilton Diggings." As early as 1840 we find two Norwegians working in these mines, namely, the brothers Andreas and John O. Week, both from Eidfjord, in Hardanger. The Week brothers seem to have been two of a party of about forty from Hardanger, who emigrated in 1839.[173] I do not believe, however, that either Andrew or John Week entered a land claim in the vicinity, and they remained there only a few years. In 1844 John Week moved to Dodgeville in Iowa County, where he established a shoe store in company with John Lee, from Numedal, Norway. Andrew Week went to Marathon County some years later; here he built a saw mill, which, however, was bought out by his brother John in 1849, when Andrew joined the California gold-seekers.

In the spring of 1842 Lars Davidson Reque, an immigrant from Voss in the year 1839, came to Wiota. We have already met him as a purchaser of land in Deerfield Township, in Dane County, in December, 1840. Not having the means to begin the improvement of his land, he says, he decided to go to Hamilton Diggings, and he did not take possession of his land until the summer of 1842.[174] Rekve remained at the Diggings only about one year. In 1841 the first permanent settlers arrived; these were Per Unde, from Vik Parish, Sogn, Per Davidson Skjerveim, Sjur Ulven, and Arne Anderson Vinje, from Voss. The first of those was, it seems, the earliest emigrant from Sogn to America. He was a man of considerable means, but a copy of Rynning's Sandfaerdig Beretning om Amerika fell into his hands and he decided to emigrate. He remained in Chicago the first year and a half or over. Ulven and Skjerveim had come from Norway in 1840. Arne Vinje (born 1820) came to Chicago in September, 1840, after having been five months on the journey. He had left Norway April sixteenth with his wife,[175] and a party of twenty other persons from Voss. The following spring Vinje and Skjerveim, having decided to go to the mines in Wisconsin, secured each their yoke of oxen, and drove overland, arriving at Wiota on the seventh of July, after five days of difficult travel; Unde and Ulven came at the same time. Unde immediately entered a claim on a piece of land in the vicinity and built a

house, as did Skjerveim and Vinje a short time after; these located, however, about three miles farther south.

According to Arne Vinje the following twenty-one persons came from Voss that spring: Torstein Saue, his wife and son Gulleik, Lars Saue and wife, Klaus Grimestad and wife, Arne Anderson and wife and infant son Andrew, Knudt Hylle, Ole S. Gilderhus, Knudt Rokne, Mads Sonve, Baar Lawson Bøe (a brother of Iver Lawson), Lars Røthe, Brynnel Ronve, two young ladies from Saue, one from Ronve and one from Gilderhus. In discussing the voyage Vinje says:

The bottom of the ship in which we sailed was declared by Capt. Ankerson to be one hundred and fifty years old and when, in midocean, we encountered a severe storm, the timbers sustaining the upper berths gave way, precipitating them upon the lower ones, and the screams and cries of the frightened passengers added to the fury of the storm, almost created a panic on board. As for myself, I seized a heavy chest which I intended throwing overboard to use as a support in the water in case the ship foundered. Even Hegg, and others from "Östlandet," who came from Drammen with Capt. Ankerson, stopped in Milwaukee, while we from Voss came on to Chicago, where my wife and I were received into the home of Sjur Ulven and family. Mrs. Ulven being my wife's cousin.

Knudt Hylle and myself began our first work in Chicago upon the streets of the (then) westside. My work was handling a heavy plank scraper, drawn by a yoke of oxen and used to scrape the sod from the sides of the road into the center.

At this time occurred the election of General Harrison to the Presidency. The candidate was the "People's choice" and I, from my bed, saw a log cabin, such as he lived in, mounted upon wheels and drawn through the streets to show that he was chosen from the common people. That was effective electioneering!

In the spring of 1841 Peder Skjerveim, who had come from Norway in 1837, having lived in Chicago in the interval, drove from Chicago up to Hamilton Diggings to explore the region. Upon his return he reported that there was government land for sale there, and Vinje and he decided to move thither. Peder Iverson Unde and family and Sjur Ulven went to the "Diggings" at the same time. Of this Vinje writes:

We left Chicago on July 2nd and arrived in Wiota, or Hamilton's Diggings as it was then called, after a tiresome journey of five days. On July 7th we passed Elgin, Illinois, in a grove near which Independence day was being celebrated, on July 4th, but there was then no town, only a few scattered houses. We progressed with some difficulty as our wagon broke down twice during the journey. The second of these accidents occurred as we were nearing Rockford toward evening, when the axle gave way; but Peder Skjerveim, with only an ax and an augur went into the woods nearby, and from a convenient tree cut and made a new axle that night, so that we

proceeded safely on our way the next morning.

There being no bridges, we forded the rivers at Rockford and Freeport. There was then not a house where the thriving city of Rockford now stands and only one small grocery store at Freeport. There were, at that time, no Norwegians in or around Wiota, and the nearest Norwegian settlement was at Rock Run, Illinois. Peder Skjervheim and I, each bought forty acres of government land in the Township of Wiota, upon which we each built a log cabin and began other improvements. Andres Brække also bought forty acres but soon sold it again.

In 1842 there came to our neighborhood three young people from Voss; David Larson Fenne and wife, and his brother, Nils Fenne. In 1843 there came some families from Vik, in Sogn, and settled near by: Ole Iverson Unde and wife Britha, and his brother Erik's family. Erik died before reaching America, but his wife and children settled down here. Likewise, Erik Engebret Hove, Ole Anderson and Sjur Tallakson Bruavold came at the same time.

To those which Mr. Vinje mentions as arriving in 1842 may be added Isak Johnson from Skien,[176] and Christian Hendrickson from Lier, Norway. The latter however moved to Primrose Township in Dane County in 1846. (See below).

Mathias J. Engebretsen of Gratiot, Wisconsin, tells me that Per Fenne and wife Martha came to Wiota in 1842, while Nils Sunve and wife Maline, and Ivar Fenne came in 1843; all these were from Voss. Helge Meland and wife from Telemarken came in 1843, as also Tore Thompson from Tindal and Ashley Gunderson from Numedal.[177] Those mentioned by Arne Vinje at the end of the above account, Ole and Sjur Bruavolden, did not settle at Wiota, it seems, before 1845, and Erik E. Hove not until 1847. These had located first at Long Prairie in Boone County, Illinois, as had also Ingebrigt Fuglegjærdet, who came from Vik, Sogn, in 1844. Of the immigration from Land, Norway, to Wiota, which began with Syver Johnson (Smed or Smedhögen in 1844), I shall speak in the next chapter. The growth of the Jefferson Prairie Settlement will, however, claim our attention briefly first.