

PIONEER NORWEGIAN SETTLEMENT IN MINNESOTA

“What a glorious new Scandinavia might not Minnesota become! . . . The climate, the situation, the character of the scenery agrees with our people better than that of any other of the American States, and none of them appear to me to have a greater or a more beautiful future before them than Minnesota.”¹ This vision and prophecy of Fredrika Bremer, the Swedish author, as expressed in St. Paul in 1850, were to become a reality within the next twenty-five years. Even at the time when she stood on Minnesota soil, Norwegian pioneers were crossing the Mississippi River. From a mere handful of 9 officially recorded in 1850, the total number of Norwegians in Minnesota rose to 10,811 in 1860; to 49,070 in 1870; and by 1875 to 83,867, or 14.08 per cent of the total population of the state.²

The Norwegians were essentially an agricultural people; consequently in Minnesota they settled in the rural areas, as they had previously done in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa. The rolling woodland and meadowland of southeastern Minnesota first attracted them. Then as the tide of settlement advanced, the Big Woods district and the Park Region of north-central and northwestern Minnesota became dotted with farms worked by Norwegian settlers. The prairies, looked upon at first with disfavor when compared with land having plenty of woods and streams, were found to be surprisingly

¹ Fredrika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World*, 1: 56, 57 (New York, 1853).

² Figures relating to the Norwegian population of Minnesota have been tabulated from the manuscript population schedules of the United States census for 1850, 1860, and 1870, and of the state census for 1875, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. These sources will be cited hereafter merely as the census for a given year.

fertile and excellent farming lands. Consequently the prairie lands of southwestern Minnesota and the Red River Valley were settled. By successive stages, beginning with the first permanent Norwegian settler in 1851, the farms of these immigrants from the North spread westward and northwestward from the southeastern corner of Minnesota, until by 1875 their acres touched the Red River on the opposite border of the state.

Norwegian settlement in Minnesota from 1850 to 1875 can be conveniently studied in two periods, with 1865 as the approximate point of division. The first, from 1850 to about 1865, saw the pioneering of the southern counties of the state. In the second period, from 1866 to the middle seventies, the other large areas of Norwegian settlement in Minnesota were marked out, chiefly in the western and northwestern counties. During the early sixties a comparative lull in the advance of settlement occurred, as a result of the Sioux Outbreak, decreased immigration, and the Civil War. The panic of 1873 and the consequent depression, together with the severe grasshopper plagues of the middle seventies, mark the close of a quarter of a century during which the principal areas of Norwegian settlement in Minnesota were pioneered and developed.

Until the negotiation of the treaties of Traverse des Sioux and of Mendota in 1851, most of the land in Minnesota Territory was not open for settlement. Before this the region was of interest chiefly to fur-traders and lumbermen. The agricultural possibilities of the new region were undoubtedly known to many and some had actually settled on Indian lands west of the Mississippi before they were acquired by treaty. The negotiations with the Indian tribes attracted widespread interest and as soon as the treaties had been concluded the rush of settlers began. Although surveys were not started until 1853 and settlers were squatters until the act of August 4, 1854, granted preëemption rights to those occupying unsurveyed land in Minnesota Territory, by the time that the first

block of government land was placed on sale in 1855 thousands of settlers — including large numbers of Norwegians — had poured into the new region. The Indian treaties of the fifties and sixties were much needed opening wedges for the settlers.³

Up to 1851 the Norwegians who had emigrated to the United States numbered 14,654.⁴ The annual influx was comparatively small until 1849, when immigrants began to arrive in large numbers. The 59,620 Norwegians who emigrated to the United States in the years from 1851 to 1865 flooded the Wisconsin and Iowa settlements and established pioneer settlements in the southeastern part of Minnesota. When the Sioux went on the warpath in 1862, many of the Norwegian pioneers had already penetrated far into north-central Minnesota. Beginning in 1866 a new and unprecedented wave of Norwegian immigrants crossed the Atlantic to the American shore. Norwegian emigration statistics leaped from 4,000 in 1865 to 15,455 in 1866, and the figures continued high until there was a sudden drop from 10,353 in 1873 to 4,601 in 1874, after which the numbers remained low until 1880, when a new wave commenced. Of the 119,545 Norwegians who emigrated to America in the decade following 1865, it can safely be estimated that at least half went to Minnesota.⁵

A large number of the Minnesota pioneers of Norwegian origin had lived for varying lengths of time before crossing into Minnesota in settlements in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa, particularly in the first named state. This was especially true during the years before the railroad expansion of the late

³ William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:266-304 (St. Paul, 1921).

⁴ *Utvandringsstatistikk*, 101 (Departementet for Sociale Saker, *Norges Offisielle Statistikk*, series 7, no. 25 — Kristiania, 1921).

⁵ This estimate is based upon a comparison of the average annual increase of the foreign-born Norwegians in Minnesota and the Norwegian emigration statistics, and it is also supported by contemporary estimates.

sixties and seventies, when the immigrants began more and more to go directly to their destinations in north-central and northwestern Minnesota rather than stop for a time with relatives or friends in older settlements. The bulk of the pioneers, however, seem to have paused for a few weeks or months or even years in the Wisconsin or Iowa settlements. If the immigrants arrived late in the summer or in the fall, they often found it desirable to stay over the winter with friends or relatives and to go on again in the spring to their ultimate destinations. Frequently the settlers in Wisconsin and other states who had arrived during the forties and fifties were dissatisfied with their opportunities and, hearing of the boundless expanse of rich lands in Minnesota, also pulled up stakes, sold their holdings, and migrated westward. This process repeated itself over and over again as the frontier advanced. The Norwegian pioneers of southeastern Minnesota migrated from earlier Wisconsin settlements; a large number of those who made homes in north-central, northwestern, and southwestern Minnesota were from the southeastern part of the state. As each new area became filled with settlers, each in turn became the source of pioneers for the region just beyond.

It is difficult to determine with any degree of exactness the number of Norwegians who went from older areas of settlement and those who went directly to Minnesota from Norway. Some clue to the proportions can, however, be gained from the manuscript schedules of the state and federal censuses in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. The following table, compiled from these sources, indicates where the Norwegians living in Minnesota in 1860, 1870, and 1875 were born:

PLACE OF BIRTH	1860	1870	1875
Norway	7,276	33,356	51,268
Minnesota	2,211	12,421	27,153
Wisconsin	1,028	2,451	3,581
Iowa	150	470	1,257
Illinois	112	238	396
New York	11	26	37
Michigan	3	11	38
Canada	7	41	31
Other places	13	56	106
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	10,811	49,070	83,867

In almost all cases the heads of families, both husband and wife, were born in Norway, though this condition was true in a lesser degree in 1875 than earlier, as part of the migrants were second-generation families. The proportion in the above table of the native-born Norwegians to the foreign-born does not vary greatly for the three periods, although there is a slight increase in the number of native-born. In 1860, 32.69 per cent of the total Norwegian population of Minnesota was native-born; in 1870, 35.08 per cent; and in 1875, 38.86 per cent. Most of those born in the United States were minors; their parents and unattached single individuals usually were of foreign origin.

As Norwegian migration was predominantly a family movement and as the native-born Norwegians were largely members of families whose heads were born in Norway, it is possible to determine from the census reports, which indicate family groupings, the number of Norwegian families that migrated to Minnesota from other states. It is, however, impossible to determine the extent of this migration within Minnesota. Of the Norwegian families living in Minnesota in 1870, for example, 1,153 had spent varying lengths of time in Wisconsin, 331 had lived in Iowa, and 149 had spent some time in Illinois. If to these are added the unattached individuals of Norwegian birth and the families that migrated from other states, interstate migration takes on considerable proportions in the total Norwegian immigration to Minnesota.

Perhaps the greatest and most constant attraction in the United States for the Norwegian immigrant was the enormous area of free or cheap land that was gradually being opened to settlement. It has been estimated that 78 per cent of all the Norwegian immigrants to the United States were from rural districts in Norway, while only 22 per cent were from urban areas.⁶ To the small farmer and the cottier, struggling under almost constantly adverse economic conditions that were augmented by unsatisfactory political and social opportunities, the prospect of economic independence and political and social equality in America was alluring. When the Norwegian peasants and cottiers learned of the opportunities offered by the preëemption and homestead laws and by land and railroad companies, they emigrated by the thousands.

The fact that good land in the vicinity of the Norwegian settlements in Wisconsin, was largely taken up by 1850 helped to turn the attention of Norwegian immigrants to Minnesota. As early as 1844 a Norwegian traveler noted in passing through Dane County that there was very little room for newcomers. Ole Munch Ræder, who visited the United States in 1847 and 1848, wrote of the Rock Prairie settlement: "It is said that the whole prairie is bought, except for a few undesirable parts, so that now one must pay considerably more than the government price. The price of wood has likewise increased so that it is far more expensive here than elsewhere to build houses and fences."⁷ The Sioux treaties and the resultant booming of Minnesota Territory by newspapers and land speculators were means of calling the attention of the immigrants to the great new area west of the Mississippi. Without waiting for surveys to be completed, Norwegians as

⁶ Olaf M. Norlie, *History of the Norwegian People in America*, 15 (Minneapolis, 1925).

⁷ Knud Langeland, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 68 (Chicago, 1889); Gunnar J. Malmin, ed., *America in the Forties: The Letters of Ole Munch Ræder*, 137 (Norwegian-American Historical Association, *Travel and Description Series*, vol. 3 — Minneapolis, 1929).

well as others set out for the new country. As the tremendous agricultural potentialities of Minnesota were progressively revealed, it became the destination of an ever-growing number of immigrants and by the middle seventies a considerable share of the desirable farming land of the state had been claimed by Norwegians.

As long as immigrants had to make the long journey from Chicago or Milwaukee overland in oxcarts, immigration to Minnesota necessarily was limited. The construction of the first railroads between Chicago and the Mississippi River inaugurated a new era of development for the upper Mississippi Valley. The spring of 1854 saw the completion of the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad to Rock Island on the east bank of the Mississippi. Successively other roads reached East Dubuque, Prairie du Chien, and finally, in October, 1858, La Crosse, just across the river from Houston County, Minnesota.⁸ From these points immigrants could take steamers up the Mississippi to St. Paul or could cross the river and proceed to their destinations on foot or in wagons drawn by oxen procured at the river towns.

No railroad was operated within Minnesota's borders until 1862, and for the first three or four years following that date expansion was slow. With the final suppression of the Sioux and the close of the Civil War, railroad building began in earnest and by 1867 it was in full swing. It continued until the failure of Jay Cooke and Company in 1873. Norwegian settlement in southeastern Minnesota had reached its maximum by the time when railroads were constructed there. In the northwestern and southwestern areas of the state, however, the railroads were true forces in bringing about settlement. In the former region two lines merit special attention — the St. Paul and Pacific and the Northern Pacific railroads.

⁸ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1: 358; Frederic L. Paxson, "The Railroads of the Old Northwest," in Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, *Transactions*, 17: 243-274 (Madison, Wisconsin, 1914).

The first of these was organized in 1862 as the successor of the defunct Minnesota and Pacific Railroad and by 1867 its line had been constructed from St. Paul along the Mississippi to Sauk Rapids. In that year the company began building its main line westward through Wright, Meeker, Kandiyohi, Swift, Stevens, Grant, and Wilkin counties to Breckenridge on the Red River, which was reached in 1871. The Northern Pacific also tapped the rich Red River country when in 1870-71 its road crossed the state from Duluth to Moorhead and Fargo. This line's advertising and colonization of the Red River Valley give it its chief significance for the study of Norwegian settlement. It was never as important from this point of view as the St. Paul and Pacific, because it did not traverse territory in which the Norwegians settled and because it was inconvenient for immigrants to go to northwestern Minnesota by way of Duluth. Although settlement preceded rail expansion in north-central and northwestern Minnesota, the railroads inevitably played a tremendous rôle in the development of the new areas. In southwestern Minnesota, on the other hand, such lines as the St. Paul and Sioux City, the Winona and St. Peter, and the Southern Minnesota railroads in many cases preceded settlement and were instrumental in establishing colonies on the rolling prairie land there.⁹

While the railroads promoted the development of new areas of settlement, they were also active in attracting settlers to their lands. There is little evidence to indicate that Norwegians settled to any great extent on the lands of the Northern Pacific in Minnesota, but the extensive campaign carried on by the agents of that company in the Scandinavian countries and in other European countries did much to attract the attention of prospective emigrants to Minnesota and the Da-

⁹ Harold F. Peterson, "Railroads and the Settlement of Minnesota, 1862-1880," 59, 65, 86. This is an unpublished master's thesis prepared at the University of Minnesota in 1927. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.

kotas. The railroads coöperated with the state board of immigration in its advertising program and in the transportation of immigrants. The Northern Pacific was perhaps the most active road in this respect, but the St. Paul and Pacific, the Lake Superior and Mississippi, and the St. Paul and Sioux City also attempted to attract settlers.¹⁰

The Minnesota territorial legislature in March, 1855, passed an act providing for an immigration commissioner to be stationed in New York. He was to reside there, to meet immigrants and distribute literature about Minnesota, to try to direct immigrants to Minnesota, and to advertise Minnesota in newspapers and pamphlets in the United States and abroad. The law, which was reenacted in 1856, remained in operation for two years. Most of the efforts of the agent, Eugene Burnand, were directed toward attracting Belgians and Germans to Minnesota, the Scandinavians receiving only incidental attention.¹¹ Although the activities of the territorial government had little effect upon Norwegian immigration to Minnesota, those of the state government in the late sixties and early seventies were influential. On March 14, 1864, the Minnesota legislature passed an "Act to organize a system for the promotion of immigration to the state of Minnesota." The secretary of state was designated commissioner of immigration, a contest for the preparation of advertising pamphlets was arranged, and appropriations of three thousand dollars in 1865 and one thousand dollars in 1866 were made for their publication and distribution. Of a pamphlet in the Norwegian language, the secretary of state in his report to the legislature of 1865 remarks: "The Norwegian pamphlet, though only re-

¹⁰ Peterson, "Railroads and the Settlement of Minnesota," 29-36. This thesis includes an account of the activities of the railroads in encouraging settlement, as does also James B. Hedges, "The Colonization Work of the Northern Pacific Railroad," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 13: 309-342 (December, 1926).

¹¹ Livia Appel and Theodore C. Blegen, "Official Encouragement of Immigration to Minnesota during the Territorial Period," *ante*, 5: 167-203.

cently in readiness owing to the difficulty of procuring the proper translation, is being rapidly sought for." Later reports by the board of immigration indicate that the demand for the pamphlets far exceeded the supply.

The desirability of more extensive activity in the promotion of immigration led to the passage of an act in 1867 creating a board of immigration composed of three members—the governor, the secretary of state, and one other member to be appointed by the governor.¹² For the work of the board, ten thousand dollars was appropriated. Its report to the legislature in 1867 reveals that five thousand copies of a Norwegian pamphlet had been sent out on demand. In 1871 fifty-seven hundred copies were issued and in 1872, three thousand. In addition to publishing and distributing such materials, the board maintained agents at various ports to meet immigrants and to advertise the state both in America and abroad through newspapers and by other means. According to the report of the board for 1870 it had established immigrant houses in various cities where immigrants could be accommodated for short periods, such as overnight, while on their way to Minnesota. Hans Mattson, the first secretary of the board and later secretary of state, was a prominent Swedish immigrant who did much to stimulate Scandinavian immigration; and in the work of the board he associated with him such men as Johan Schrøder, a Norwegian immigrant journalist, who served as secretary; and K. Hasberg, T. K. Simmons, and D. Wanwig, agents respectively at Milwaukee, Quebec, and Trondhjem, Norway. After 1872 state activity in encouraging immigration lapsed and no new legislation was enacted until 1878.¹³

¹² Minnesota Secretary of State, *Reports*, 1865, p. 115; Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1864, p. 64-67; 1867, p. 52. The board was reorganized by legislative acts in 1860, 1870, and 1871. In 1869 its membership was increased to five.

¹³ Theodore C. Blegen, "Minnesota's Campaign for Immigrants," in Swedish Historical Society of America, *Yearbooks*, 11:24 (St. Paul,

Among the individuals who were highly influential in attracting Norwegians to Minnesota was the pioneer Danish pastor and farmer, the Reverend Claus L. Clausen, one of the most prominent and vigorous characters in the early history of Norwegian settlement. Though not an ordained minister, he became the pastor of the Norwegian-Lutheran congregation at Muskego, where he arrived from Europe in the summer of 1843, and he remained there until the spring of 1846, when he removed to Koshkonong. Soon thereafter he was called as pastor to the Rock Prairie settlement, where he lived for several years, serving congregations in Rock County and the adjoining territory.¹⁴ Through his religious leadership, his journalistic activities, and his long and numerous journeys among the settlements in southern Wisconsin, Clausen achieved a position of great prestige and influence among the Norwegian pioneers. Hundreds of Norwegian immigrants went to him for advice and aid and he helped them earn a temporary livelihood and find land. The increasing number of immigrants and the gradually diminishing supply of good land near the southern Wisconsin settlements made the problem of caring for new immigrants increasingly serious. Clausen's attention was naturally attracted to Minnesota. Early in 1850, when it had just become a territory and steps were being taken to acquire the land from the Indians, he wrote a letter to Governor Alexander Ramsey inquiring about the opportunities offered in Minnesota Territory for immigrants. Ramsey's reply is not preserved, but it must have been satisfactory, for in the summer of the same year Clausen with some

1926). The Minnesota Historical Society has copies of the *Reports* of the Minnesota State Board of Immigration for 1867 and 1871; that for 1870 is published in Norwegian translation in the *Nordisk Folkeblad* (Minneapolis) for January 25, 1871.

¹⁴ Margareth A. Jorgensen, "Claus L. Clausen, Pioneer Pastor and Settlement Promoter," a master's thesis prepared at the University of Minnesota in 1930. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.

companions made a trip up the Mississippi to St. Paul and thence to St. Cloud. Later he traveled up the Minnesota River some forty miles, and through the region east of Lake St. Croix. On August 14, 1852, he set out with two companions for a second journey into the region west of the Mississippi. This time he was personally interested in locating a new home. He traveled as far west as the Albert Lea region in Minnesota and then turned southward into Iowa, until he finally found satisfactory land at the confluence of the Big and Little Cedar rivers. In two letters to the Norwegian newspaper, *Emigranten*, Clausen described the region to which he expected to migrate in the spring of 1853. These letters were an important factor in acquainting the Norwegians of southern Wisconsin and newly arrived immigrants with the lands west of the Mississippi.¹⁵ In May, 1853, Clausen, his family, and about forty other families left Rock Prairie for Mitchell County, Iowa, where they founded the settlement known as St. Ansgar. This became a Norwegian center in northern Iowa and a point of dispersion for Norwegian settlements in southern Minnesota. Clausen's prestige among the Norwegian pioneers made the information and advice he dispensed doubly acceptable, and through his writings and his personal contacts he exercised great influence in pointing Norwegian settlement toward southern Minnesota in the early fifties.¹⁶

Paul Hjelm-Hansen perhaps had more influence than any other individual on Norwegian settlement in Minnesota. It was he who made the Norwegians conscious of the tremendous agricultural possibilities of the Red River Valley and who was

¹⁵ Clausen's letter to Ramsey, which is dated January 22, 1850, is among the Ramsey Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society; those to *Emigranten* (Madison, Wisconsin) appear in the issues of that paper for October 1, 1852, and April 29, 1853. These letters, edited by the present writer, will appear in volume 6 of the Norwegian-American Historical Association's *Studies and Records*.

¹⁶ Jorgensen, "Claus L. Clausen," 80-87.

to a considerable extent responsible for the peopling of the Red River country with thousands of Norwegian farmers. Hansen left Norway for the United States in 1867 with a successful career as a publicist and editor behind him. He was then fifty-seven years of age. For a time he was a member of the staff of a Norwegian newspaper, *Fædrelandet og Emigranten* ("The Fatherland and the Emigrant"), published at La Crosse, Wisconsin, and his writings and activities soon brought him into prominence among the Norwegians in the Northwest. On June 5, 1869, he was appointed by Governor William R. Marshall to act as a special agent of the Minnesota state board of immigration. He was to travel about in the state, particularly in unsettled areas, and was to report upon possibilities there for immigrant settlement. Hansen went immediately by river and stage to Alexandria in Douglas County. From this point he set out on July 12, 1869, with two companions in an ox-drawn wagon for a trip of three weeks into the Red River country. The party traveled in a northwesterly direction through Douglas, Otter Tail, Wilkin, and Clay counties to the Red River at Breckenridge, where it turned northward to Fort Abercrombie. It went fifty miles farther to Georgetown before turning back. Immediately upon his return to Alexandria, Hansen wrote a detailed account of his journey, which was published in several Scandinavian papers of the Northwest.¹⁷ This article, entitled "From the Red River Country," describes in glowing terms the advantages of the new territory for farming and urges Norwegians to claim these lands before speculators seize them. He wrote several additional letters to newspapers, particularly to the *Nordisk Folkeblad* and *Fædrelandet og Emigranten*, describing the region of the Red River and the counties to the south and east, such as Douglas, Otter Tail, Grant, Pope, and

¹⁷ *Nordisk Folkeblad*, August 11, 1869; *Fædrelandet og Emigranten* (La Crosse, Wisconsin), August 12, 1869; *Amerika* (Winona), September 23, 1869; *Minnesota Tidning* (St. Paul), January 14, 1870.

Kandiyohi. Hansen also visited the Minnesota River settlements and those in Goodhue County, but his work there was not especially significant. In all, sixteen articles from his hand appeared in the *Nordisk Folkeblad*, giving accounts of his travels and all manner of information about unsettled areas that would be useful to the prospective settler. Hansen continued to be active in the field of journalism until his death in 1881, but he is especially remembered for familiarizing Norwegians both in Norway and in America with the advantages of the Red River Valley and northwestern Minnesota. The publication of his letters was followed within a year by a tremendous influx of Norwegian settlers. Immigrants from Norway and Norwegians from older settled areas flocked to the "New Canaan" in northwestern Minnesota, of which Hansen wrote so enthusiastically.¹⁸

The influence exerted by the Norwegian-American press and by the so-called "America letters" is important. Although the pre-Civil War Norwegian newspapers, largely published in Wisconsin, had relatively little influence on Norwegian settlement in Minnesota, those established in the later period made every effort to attract Scandinavians to that state. In the America letters Norwegian immigrants described for the benefit of relatives and friends who had remained in Norway their experiences and the state and community in which they had settled. In view of the thousands of Norwegians who went to Minnesota, it is natural that these letters should contain a store of information about this rich new state. Al-

¹⁸ *Nordisk Folkeblad*, April 16, 30, 1868; July 14, 1869, to February 2, 1870; Axel Tollefson, "Historical Notes on the Norwegians in the Red River Valley," in *North Dakota Historical Collections*, 7: 133-147 (1925). For contemporary evidence of Hansen's influence, see a letter written by P. O. Ingebriksen on August 20, 1875, and published in *Budstikken* (Minneapolis) for August 24, 1875. A translation of part of this letter is included in the present writer's article entitled "Pioneer Norwegian Settlement in North Dakota," in the *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, 5: 20 (October, 1930).

though some of the letters were pessimistic in tone, the large majority were very optimistic, emphasizing the fact that for the man who was willing to work there were opportunities in America that would never appear in Norway.¹⁹

In contrast to the aids to settlement described above, there were a number of obstacles to the advance of the pioneers, the most serious of which was the Sioux Outbreak. Along the frontier of western Minnesota, which included the most western of the Norwegian settlements in Jackson, Brown, Renville, Chippewa, and Kandiyohi counties, the pioneers were terrified by the swift and terrible outburst that began on August 18, 1862, and they fled eastward by the hundreds.²⁰ The panic spread into the older areas of settlement and for a time the state was an armed camp. It was not until late in the fall that the strength of the Sioux was effectively broken. In the succeeding three years there were recurrent raids and further outbreaks, chiefly in the Dakotas, but there was constant fear that the Indians would again attack in Minnesota. It took many years to overcome the widespread fear of the Indians, and, although the settlers, especially in southwestern Minnesota, began to enter again soon after 1865, no really extensive

¹⁹ Among the Norwegian-American newspapers that did much to encourage immigration are the *Nordisk Folkeblad*, *Emigranten*, *Fædrelandet og Emigranten*, *Skandinaven* (Chicago), *Minnesota* (Minneapolis), *Budstikken*, *Amerika*, *Skandinaviske Demokrat* (La Crosse, Wisconsin), *Decorah* [Iowa] *Posten*, *Nordvesten* (Madison, Wisconsin), and *Norden* (Chicago). With the exception of the *Nordisk Folkeblad* and *Budstikken*, files of which are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, files of all the Norwegian newspapers used in the preparation of this article are in the library of the Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul. While Dr. Theodore C. Blegen was in Norway in 1928-29, he secured photostatic copies and transcripts of large numbers of America letters. These are now in the possession of the Norwegian-American Historical Association at Northfield, Minnesota.

²⁰ An incident of the Sioux Outbreak in this region that has received considerable attention is connected with the heroism of Guri Endresen of the Norway Lake settlement. A letter in which she tells the story of her experiences appears *ante*, 10: 425-430.

settlements were established in western and northwestern Minnesota until the late sixties and seventies.

There is no evidence that Norwegian immigration to Minnesota decreased because of the Civil War; in fact, the stream of Norwegian immigrants, most of whom entered by way of Quebec and the St. Lawrence, increased constantly. The Civil War, however, as has been noted, did retard the advance of settlement into Minnesota because, during its progress, all energies were directed toward its success. This was particularly true of capital, and it was not until the close of the war that money was available for investment in railroads to open up the frontier.

Two conditions of the early seventies retarded the advance of settlement. They were the panic of 1873 and the grasshopper plagues. The panic and its resultant period of depression are reflected in the volume of immigrants departing from Norway, for there was a drop from 10,352 in 1873 to 4,601 in 1874 and the numbers did not increase again in any considerable degree until 1880. Financial depression in the United States combined with improved economic conditions in Norway in the late seventies served to slow up emigration for about six years. The panic also cut short railroad building and thus further hampered the advance of the frontier. It is significant that while 349.5 miles of railroad were built within Minnesota's borders in 1872, only 7.5 miles were constructed in 1873, 40 in 1874, 10 in 1875, and 29.5 in 1876. By 1877 construction was resumed on the earlier scale.²¹ As a result of unfavorable financial conditions freight rates were raised, and this caused a storm of protest. Numerous letters complaining of the capitalists who were said to be forcing the poor farmers to pay for their financial distress appeared in the Norwegian-American newspapers.

Even more effective than the financial depression in retarding settlement were the grasshopper plagues. In the early

²¹ Peterson, "Railroads and the Settlement of Minnesota," 9.

part of July, 1873, swarms of Rocky Mountain locusts alighted on large tracts of land in thirteen counties of southwestern Minnesota, destroying crops and making hundreds of families destitute. The crop yield of the counties affected averaged only six bushels per acre. In 1874 similar depredations spread over twenty-eight counties in western Minnesota, extending as far north as Polk County in the Red River Valley. It was estimated that from twelve to fifteen hundred settlers were impoverished by the grasshopper visitations. The plagues continued in 1875 and 1876, but in 1877 the locusts left the state and a good crop in that year helped conditions materially. A large number of Norwegian settlers lived in the counties affected by the grasshoppers, and a stream of letters poured in upon the Norwegian newspapers telling of the plagues and asking aid.²² Many of these settlers had lived in western Minnesota only a few years, and for them the ravages were disastrous. While the locusts were there, no more settlers would care to risk capital in the region. Many of the settlers were forced to give up their holdings to their creditors and to move back into the older settlements. Western Minnesota was in the middle seventies a veritable plague spot and the advance of settlement into that area was appreciably retarded.

According to the census of 1850, there were nine Norwegians in Minnesota in that year. Two of these were soldiers stationed at Fort Snelling. One was a seventeen-year-old girl living somewhere in Wabasha County — evidently a servant girl. The other six were living at Long Prairie in what is now Todd County, where a reservation for the Winnebago Indians was established in 1848. This group of six was composed of Ole Tollefsen, his wife, two children, Søren Olson, and Isabelle Nelson. They had accompanied the Winnebago

²² The *Nordisk Folkeblad* and other Norwegian newspapers printed large numbers of these letters, which acquainted immigrants with the situation in Minnesota. For a general account of the grasshopper plagues, see Folwell, *Minnesota*, 3: 93-111 (St. Paul, 1926).

northward from Fort Atkinson, Iowa, where they had been employed. By going with the Indians to Long Prairie they became the first Norwegians on record to take up residence in Minnesota. They were, however, an isolated group, and no further settlement was made in their vicinity until after 1870. Among others who were forerunners of the main stream of Norwegian immigration to Minnesota was Clausen, whose reports carried information about the state to large numbers of Norwegians. A man named Nils Nilsen was an early settler who went to St. Paul in 1849, after a previous residence in Illinois and Iowa, and who eventually made his home in Stillwater, where he lived until 1882. A young woman went to St. Paul in 1850, was employed for a time in the household of Governor Ramsey, and later removed to the village of Fridley, north of St. Anthony.²³ In the fall of 1850 two Norwegians from Rock Prairie, Wisconsin, settled on the site of what later became the city of Red Wing. These men were employed by an Indian trader to aid him in establishing a trading post. One of the men went to St. Paul the following year, but the other, Osten Burtness, remained at Red Wing and with the trader started a lime kiln. In 1851 Burtness visited Rock Prairie and upon his return to Red Wing was accompanied by his father and five other men. All worked in the lime kiln until it failed later in the same year, and all but one, Matthias Peterson Ringdahl, returned to Rock Prairie. He took land near the site of Zumbrota in 1854 and he probably was the first Norwegian farmer in Goodhue County.²⁴ The year 1851 thus saw the beginning of Norwegian settlement in the southeastern corner of the state and the following year the influx began in earnest.

²³ Hjalmar R. Holand, *De Norske Settlementers Historie*, 322, 326 (Ephraim, Wisconsin, 1908).

²⁴ Theodore L. Nydahl, "The Early Norwegian Settlement of Goodhue County, Minnesota," 25. This is a master's thesis submitted at the University of Minnesota in 1930. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.

In the earlier period of settlement, from 1850 to about 1865, two large areas of Norwegian settlement were marked out in southeastern Minnesota and a number of small, scattered settlements were established in the north-central counties. The largest of these areas extended through the two southern tiers of counties from the Mississippi River westward for about a hundred miles, or to western Faribault and eastern Brown County. The other centered in Goodhue County and extended into the adjoining counties of Rice and Dakota. In the southern area certain counties received the bulk of the early pioneers — notably eastern Fillmore, western Houston, Mower and Freeborn, southeastern Dodge, and southwestern Olmsted County. The western half of Goodhue and the eastern townships of Rice County likewise constituted an area of concentrated settlement. Of the north-central counties, Nicollet, Meeker, and Monongalia — later combined with Kandiyohi County — contained the principal pioneer settlements. Up to 1865 settlement had not advanced far beyond the Minnesota River. Most of the Norwegian settlements were to be found in the triangular area of southeastern Minnesota partly inclosed by the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers.

In the period after 1865 the great areas of Norwegian settlement in northwestern Minnesota were quite definitely marked out. With the gradual subsiding of the Sioux scare people again began to flock into this region. The Homestead Act of 1862 had made this rich farming region doubly desirable. Norwegians by the thousands poured into the Park Region and into the rich Red River country. With the advent of railroads into southwestern Minnesota, Norwegian settlers penetrated into that region as well. Even before this development, however, the upper Minnesota Valley had become extensively settled by Norwegians. In general, the pioneers held to those areas where there was plenty of woodland and a convenient water supply. In north-central Minnesota such lands were plentiful. Few Norwegians settled in the section

of Minnesota east of the Mississippi, as the lands farther west were found to be more desirable agriculturally. A glance at the accompanying map will reveal the direction that the advance of settlement took after 1865. There came a pause in the northwestward movement in the middle seventies. Then the advance began again and the northern counties of the Red River Valley were settled. The late seventies and the eighties also saw the pioneering of the Dakotas. By the middle eighties the Dakotas had become rivals of Minnesota as a Mecca for Norwegian immigrants and migrants in the United States.²⁵

The accompanying map indicates perhaps better than words could relate the location of the pioneer Norwegian settlements in Minnesota and their extent and degree of concentration. In all the southeastern counties these settlements were founded during the fifties. There was some filling in of unoccupied areas later, but there were no new areas of settlement of any consequence. The southeastern counties appealed to the Norwegians. The rolling meadowland and woodland of the region reminded them of Norway, and the climate was similar. This was peculiarly true of Houston and Fillmore counties and of the Goodhue County region. The similarities are mentioned in the propaganda that appeared in Norwegian-American newspapers and they are given due attention in the America letters. All things considered it was natural that the Norwegians should have seized upon this desirable farming region.

The area of greatest concentration of Norwegian settlement in southeastern Minnesota, and possibly in the entire state, was in western Houston and eastern Fillmore counties. The pioneers of that district were largely from the older Wisconsin settlements, and some were from Illinois and Iowa. Many of them went into Minnesota before the land was surveyed and thrown open to settlers. The earliest Norwegian set-

²⁵ For an account of the Norwegian settlements of North Dakota, see the writer's article in the *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, 5: 14-37.



THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE NORWEGIAN ELEMENT IN
MINNESOTA IN 1875

Each dot represents a hundred Norwegian-born and native-born people of
Norwegian parentage or a major fraction thereof.

tlers in this area, and perhaps the earliest permanent agricultural settlers of Norwegian birth in the state, took land in the present township of Newburg in Fillmore County in 1851. The following year Norwegians began to arrive in considerable numbers, their first Houston County settlement being established in that year in what later became the townships of Spring Grove and Black Hammer.²⁶ The influx grew and continued through the fifties. The townships of Spring Grove, Wilmington, Black Hammer, Money Creek, Houston, and Sheldon in Houston County, and of Newburg, Norway, Preble, Rushford, Arendahl, Holt, Amherst, Pilot Mound, Carrollton, and Preston in Fillmore County were fairly well settled during this decade. By 1875 a considerable number of Norwegian families were living in every township of Fillmore County, especially the eastern tiers. In Houston County the great majority were in the western townships. The eastern part of the county was settled largely by Germans and Irish. In October, 1874, F. A. Husher, the editor of *Budstikken*, visited this area, stopping at all the centers of settlement. He was especially impressed by the density of the Norwegian population and by the fact that everyone in the whole region spoke the Norwegian language.²⁷ This district became the mother area for a large number of Norwegian settlements in western Minnesota and the Dakotas. It was and still is a center for

²⁶ Martin Ulvestad, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 1:79 (Minneapolis, 1907); Ole S. Johnson, *Nybyggerhistorie fra Spring Grove og Omegn*, 6 (Minneapolis, 1920).

²⁷ *Budstikken*, October 13, 20, 1874. The population schedules of the manuscript census reports show that in Houston County the Norwegians composed 26.86 per cent of the total population in 1860, 27.80 in 1870, and 29.40 in 1875. In Fillmore County they formed 19.80 per cent of the total population in 1860, 36.20 in 1870, and 36.70 in 1875. It is interesting to note that in Houston County the greatest growth was in the fifties, while in Fillmore County there was an increase of almost a hundred per cent in the sixties. The Norwegian population of neither county increased greatly after 1870.

the Norwegians of the Northwest. A number of Norwegian farmers also took land in the southern townships of Winona County, adjoining Fillmore and Houston counties to the north.²⁸

Although the Norwegian settlements in Mower, Freeborn, and Faribault counties do not constitute a single compact area of settlement such as those in Houston and Fillmore counties, they do form part of a great group of settlements extending westward on both sides of the Iowa boundary. Norwegian pioneers migrated from Dane County, Wisconsin, in 1854 and settled in the northeastern part of Mower County. There they established the so-called Bear Creek or Norwegian Grove colony, consisting of the townships of Grand Meadow, Racine, and Frankford. In the following year Norwegian settlers moved into the southern townships of the county, especially Adams and Nevada. In Freeborn County Norwegians occupied part of a settlement area extending from Worth County, Iowa, northward to the Le Sueur River Valley in Steele and Waseca counties. The first Norwegians in Freeborn County went to Shell Rock Township in 1853, and they were followed by large numbers, chiefly from Wisconsin, who arrived in 1855 and after. By 1875 the Norwegians formed 39.3 per cent of the total population of Freeborn County.²⁹ The centers of settlement were in the belt of townships crossing the county from south to north — Freeman, Nunda, Albert Lea, Rice-land, Bancroft, Manchester, Hartland, and Bath. New Rich-land and Otisco townships in the southeastern corner of Waseca County and Lemond and Berlin townships in south-

²⁸ In 1875 the Norwegians formed only 4.4 per cent of the population of Winona County. There were 436 of these people in the city of Winona and groups near Lamoille in Homer Township and in the southern townships of the county. Census, 1875.

²⁹ Holand, *Norske Settlementers Historie*, 387-389; Ulvestad, *Nord-mændene i Amerika*, 1: 109; *Norden*, February 10, 1876; Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, ed., *History of Freeborn County*, 49-67 (Chicago, 1911).

western Steele County were a part of this same belt of Norwegian settlement. They were occupied in 1854 and the years following.³⁰

Faribault County was near the territory ravaged by the Indians in 1862 and large numbers of settlers who had gone there prior to 1862 fled in fear. Settlers began pouring into this section in the middle sixties, however, and by 1875 there were eighteen hundred Norwegians there, about sixteen per cent of the county population. Most of the pioneers settled in five townships: Emerald, Brush Creek, Rome, and Seely in the southern part of the county, and Delavan on the northern border adjoining the Blue Earth County settlements. The southern settlements formed the western end of a long series extending toward the northwest from St. Ansgar, Iowa. One writer regards it as part of the general area known as the St. Ansgar settlement, of which Clausen was the founder.³¹

A group of settlements composed of the townships of Vernon and Canisteo in southeastern Dodge County and of Salem and Rock Dell in southwestern Olmsted County took their names from the Lutheran church congregations organized there. The Dodge County settlement came to be known as West St. Olaf and that in Olmsted County as East St. Olaf, and the latter also was known as the Rock Dell settlement. Settlers first went to this area from Koshkonong and Dane County, Wisconsin, in 1854.³²

Paul Hjelm-Hansen described the Goodhue County settlement in 1869 as being about thirty miles long from north to south and twelve miles wide from east to west. The eastern tier of Rice County townships, however, was a part of this general area of settlement, of which the southwestern half of Goodhue County formed the major portion. In 1854, the

³⁰ Census, 1860, 1870, 1875; Holand, *Norske Settlementers Historie*, 434-436.

³¹ Census, 1875; Holand, *Norske Settlementers Historie*, 449.

³² Ulvestad, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 1:90.

year when Ringdahl became a pioneer farmer near Zumbrota, several families from Wisconsin and Iowa took land in Wanamingo Township, Goodhue County, in the Zumbro River Valley. Holden, Minneola, and Warsaw townships were settled in 1855 and 1856, and by 1860 all the southwestern townships of Goodhue County were heavily populated with Norwegians. A visitor in 1874 described the settlements as "a compact mass of Norwegians" and stated that in Wanamingo Township there were only two persons who were not Norwegian.³³ Richland, Wheeling, Northfield, and Walcott townships in eastern Rice County received their pioneers in 1854 and 1855. A large number of Norwegians settled in the city of Red Wing, but the northeastern part of Goodhue County was taken up by Swedes rather than Norwegians. Although there was some intermarriage, the two groups seem generally to have remained segregated.³⁴ The Goodhue County area, like that in Houston and Fillmore counties, became a mother area for a large number of Norwegian settlements in western Minnesota and the regions farther to the northwest.

One other area in southeastern Minnesota deserves special mention — the Christiania settlement in southwestern Dakota County, which centered in the townships of Eureka and Greenvale and took its name from the Lutheran congregation organized there. Although the pioneer settlers there were of the same stream that carried the Norwegian element to Goodhue County, the Christiania settlement was not a part of the larger area to the southward. The first settlers located in Eureka Township in 1853 and by 1860 there were forty-eight families in that township and the adjoining one. Newmarket Township in Scott County adjoins Eureka Township and, although it was settled somewhat later, it formed a part of the same

³³ *Nordisk Folkeblad*, January 5, 1870; F. A. Husher, "De Norske i Goodhue County," in *Budstikken*, July 21, 28, 1874; Nydahl, "Norwegian Settlement of Goodhue County," 25-38.

³⁴ The census reports for 1860, 1870, and 1875 indicate intermarriages.

settlement. Forest Township in northern Rice County contained a considerable number of Norwegians also, and they should likewise be treated as a part of the Christiania settlement.³⁵

There were, of course, many Norwegian settlers scattered throughout the southeastern counties outside the areas here described, but according to the census records the settlements mentioned easily contained ninety per cent of the Norwegians in southeastern Minnesota in 1875. The bulk of the pioneers went to that part of Minnesota during the fifties and sixties. Beginning in the middle sixties they went on into the rich farming country of north-central and northwestern Minnesota and to the lands along both sides of the upper Minnesota River.

That the Norwegians did not settle as extensively in southwestern Minnesota as in the counties farther to the north and to the southeast of the Minnesota River is not surprising when one considers the fact that they, in common with many others, felt a distrust of the prairie and a preference for wooded lands. The tradition that prairie land was less fertile than wooded land was widely accepted. The great prairies of southwestern Minnesota and parts of the Red River country were not popular until the other lands had been taken. And when settlements were formed there, most of them were along streams, such as the Des Moines and Cottonwood rivers. The treeless prairies with their endless winds, blizzards in winter, prairie fires and grasshoppers in summer, and supposed lack of fertility were not particularly attractive to most settlers, at least not so long as other lands were to be had. It must be remembered also that the Sioux War was fought in the prairie region and that railroad expansion into this area was slow. The St. Paul and Sioux City and the Winona and St. Peter roads, both of which traversed the prairies of southwestern

³⁵ Ulvestad, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 1: 89; Holand, *Norske Settlementers Historie*, 481; Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, ed., *History of Rice and Steele Counties*, 1: 143 (Chicago, 1910); census, 1860, 1870, 1875.

Minnesota, were not completed through the section until 1872. These widely separated lines were the only railroads in this area for many years. Southwestern Minnesota suffered in the minds of prospective settlers in comparison with the north-central counties.

The rather extensive Norwegian settlement in southeastern Brown County, northwestern Blue Earth County, and north-eastern Watonwan County cannot be said to belong properly with the general group of southwestern Minnesota settlements, as it was established in the middle fifties, much earlier than most of the pioneer settlements in this general area. Johan Schrøder, of the staff of the Norwegian newspaper *Fædrelandet*, described this settlement in 1867 as extending about fourteen miles east and west, and about eight miles north and south. A letter published in *Emigranten* in 1857, from a Norwegian who had gone up the Minnesota River in 1855 and built a sawmill at South Bend, undoubtedly attracted the attention of many to this area, and it serves to explain to some extent the establishment of this rather isolated Norwegian colony in the fifties. The "Linden settlement," as it was frequently called, was composed of the townships of Butter-nut Valley and Lincoln in Blue Earth County, Linden and Lake Hanska in Brown County, and Madelia and Rosendale in Watonwan County. The Sioux War drove a large number of the early settlers eastward, but after 1864 they commenced to return. The years from 1870 to 1875 were difficult, if one is to believe letters from settlers in Brown and Watonwan counties. One settler who had lived near Madelia for five years stated in 1875 that in the first two years hail destroyed the crops and in the next three the grasshoppers ate almost everything. A Brown County pioneer in 1872 advised people, especially men with large families, to keep away from that region, for in summer it was visited by drought, grasshoppers, and hailstorms, while in the winter there were severe blizzards. Nevertheless, the Norwegian population of the district grew

considerably in the sixties and seventies. Other townships in the three counties named also received some settlers, although no others were as heavily settled as the Linden colony.³⁶

From Windom in southern Cottonwood County a considerable Norwegian settlement extended down the Des Moines River Valley through Jackson County. The pioneers in this area went to the vicinity of Petersburg in southeastern Jackson County in 1858, and others arrived in 1859 to settle farther to the northward in Belmont Township. These settlements were completely destroyed in the Sioux War.³⁷ By 1870, however, a large number of Norwegians had again established themselves in this region and in the early seventies they spread into other townships in the northern part of Jackson County, Cedar Township in northwestern Martin County, and Long Lake and Odin townships in southwestern Watonwan County.

There was no other considerable area of concentration of Norwegian settlers in the southwestern counties, where, as indicated on the map, the Norwegians were scattered and relatively few in number. Perhaps the most heavily settled section, in addition to those already mentioned, was in Rock County, particularly the townships of Martin, Mound, Beaver Creek, and Vienna, which were occupied entirely in 1870 and after. In 1875 it was remarked that immigration to Rock County was increasing and that the farms there had not been badly damaged by locusts.³⁸

Many Norwegians were grouped along both sides of the upper Minnesota River. A few took land in Camp Township in southern Renville County in 1858, but these and the few

³⁶ Johan Schrøder, *Skandinaverne i de forenede Stater og Canada*, 262 (La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1867); *Emigranten*, March 6, 1857; *Minnesota*, March 16, 1872; *Norden*, July 12, 1875; census, 1870, 1875.

³⁷ Holand, *Norske Settlementers Historie*, 519; Ulvestad, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 1: 99; "Den store mindefest," in *Vossingen*, December, 1925, p. 3.

³⁸ Census, 1875; *Norden*, August 5, 1875. Mound was known as Gregory Township in 1875.

others who went there later left at the time of the Sioux War. The permanent settlement of this area began in 1865, and by 1875 there were 728 families, including 4,236 persons, living in the townships bordering on and tributary to the Minnesota River on its northern bank. On its southern, or more properly, its southwestern side, there were 2,671 Norwegians.³⁹ This great group of 1,254 families, not to mention a considerable number of unattached persons, constituted one of the principal Norwegian settlements in Minnesota and it remains so to this day.

The Norwegian settlements in eastern Nicollet County and southern Sibley County constitute a comparatively compact area, composed of the townships of Lake Prairie, Granby, New Sweden, Bernadotte, and Traverse in the former, and Kelso, Sibley, and Alfsborg in the latter. Oshawa Township, farther to the southeast in Nicollet County, including the city of St. Peter, was also fairly heavily settled by Norwegians. The first Norwegian pioneers went to this area in 1853 and took land on the site of St. Peter. The bulk of the early settlers went to the northern townships in the county, however, and between 1854 and 1860 built up the so-called Scandia Grove or Lake Prairie settlement.⁴⁰

Before the pioneer farmers had penetrated the great north-central area of Minnesota, there extended from Nicollet Coun-

³⁹ Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, ed., *History of Renville County*, 1: 548 (Chicago, 1916); census, 1875. The townships settled by Norwegians were Bandon, Beaver Falls, Birch Cooley, Camp, Cairo, Emmet, Ericson, Flora, Hawk Creek, Palmyra, and Sacred Heart in Renville County; Big Bend, Granite Falls, Havelock, Kragero, Leenthrop, Rosewood, Sparta, and Tunsberg in Chippewa County; Appleton and Fairfield in Swift County; Baxter, Cerro Gordo, Lac qui Parle, and unorganized territory in Lac qui Parle County; Lisbon, Minnesota Falls, Normania, Otis, Sandnes, Stony Run, Wood Lake, and Yellow Medicine in Yellow Medicine County; and Swede's Forest in Redwood County.

⁴⁰ Ulvestad, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 1: 111; Holland, *Norske Settlementers Historie*, 478; William G. Gresham, ed., *History of Nicollet and Le Sueur Counties*, 1: 163 (Indianapolis, 1916).

ty, in the big bend of the Minnesota River, northward for about a hundred miles to Stearns County a great wooded region that was generally known as the Big Woods. Forming part of this region and embracing the territory farther to the northwest was a country of lakes, groves, meadowland, and prairie that came to be known as Minnesota's Park Region. Into this area with its plentiful woodland and numerous streams and lakes went thousands of Norwegian immigrants. In the period after 1865 it became the most extensive Norwegian settlement area in the state. It was not as densely occupied as some of the districts to the southeast, but the Norwegians formed a larger percentage of the total population than in that region. From southeastern Kandiyohi County there extended in a northwesterly direction an almost unbroken series of Norwegian settlements covering a territory bounded on the west by the treeless prairies and on the northeast by forests. This belt of settlements extended up into the Red River country. There had been some Norwegian settlers in the north-central part of Minnesota prior to 1865, notably around Norway Lake in northwestern Kandiyohi County, but the great majority of the pioneers arrived after that date. One railroad, the St. Paul and Pacific, passed through the middle of the area in the late sixties. Two others skirted the edges of the region — the Northern Pacific on the north and the Hastings and Dakota on the south. It was a region of tremendous potentialities for the agrarian Norwegians.

The Norway Lake settlement in northwestern Kandiyohi County was the first established in that region. Until 1870 the part of Kandiyohi County where Norway Lake is located was a separate unit known as Monongalia County. From 1858 to 1862 a considerable number of pioneers went to this region, but most of them left during the Sioux War.⁴¹

⁴¹ Holand, *Norske Settlementers Historie*, 538-543; Victor E. Lawson, Martin E. Tew, and J. Emil Nelson, compilers, *Illustrated History and Descriptive and Biographical Review of Kandiyohi County*, 120-391 (St. Paul, 1905).

Settlers began flowing into it in 1864 and by 1870 there were Norwegian farmers in most of the townships of the county, centering especially about Norway Lake. Another center of settlement was White Bear Lake in Pope County; the southwestern two-thirds of that county was heavily settled by Norwegians. The town of Benson in eastern Swift County likewise formed a center for a considerable group. Alexandria in Douglas County was not only the center of settlement in that county but also for the entire Park Region. The federal land office, with a Norwegian named Lars Aaker in charge, was located there. He was president of the Scandinavian Immigration Society, which was organized in Minneapolis in 1869, and he was very active in attempts to attract people of his own nationality to Douglas County and the adjoining region. Paul Hjelm-Hansen spent about two months in and about Alexandria in the late summer of 1869 and his letters are full of praise for the rich lands and great agricultural opportunities of this area. The southwestern third of Otter Tail County constituted a compact area of Norwegian settlement, to which the pioneers went in large numbers in 1867 and the years immediately following. In western Becker County, Lake Park Township formed the center of a considerable settlement begun in 1870. Its growth was greatly stimulated by the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad through the township, and the earliest settlers obtained employment on the construction crews, thus earning enough to tide them over the first season as pioneer farmers.⁴² Settlements in southwestern Todd County, in eastern Grant and Stevens counties, and in western Stearns and Meeker counties were also parts of this general area of settlement, forming in most cases the outer fringe of the region.

⁴² *Nordisk Folkeblad*, March 24, July 21, 1869; *Svenska Minnesota Bladet* (Red Wing), March 27, 1869; *Fergus Falls Advocate*, July 1, 1871; Ulvestad, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 1:115; Alvin H. Wilcox, *Pioneer History of Becker County*, 418 (St. Paul, 1907).

Although the greatest expansion of Norwegian settlement in the rich Red River Valley came in the eighties, many pioneers went there prior to that decade. This region was comparatively unknown to Norwegians as a place for settlement before the publication of Hjelm-Hansen's letters in 1869. Both the Northern Pacific and the St. Paul and Pacific railroads penetrated it in 1871, the former crossing the Red River at Moorhead and the latter terminating for a time at Breckenridge. The financial crisis of 1873 put a temporary stop to railroad building, but by the late seventies construction was again being pushed. That a rail line had been built or was projected through a particular locality was mentioned as an incentive to settlement in almost all the letters from Norwegian pioneers in the valley. It soon became the destination of thousands of Norwegians.

The year 1869 marks the beginning of Norwegian settlement on the Minnesota side of the Red River. A pioneer from St. Ansgar, Iowa, took land in that year in southwestern Clay County, and a few months later other pioneers settled in Moorhead Township, farther north. In 1870 a group from Mound Prairie in Houston County settled in Moland Township, immediately east of Moorhead. Others from Winneshiak County, Iowa, settled in the vicinity of Hawley and Rollag in the same year. In 1871 Norwegians took land along the Marsh, Wild Rice, and Sand Hill rivers in Polk County, and many of them voiced their enthusiasm for the new country in letters to newspapers.⁴³ Although the Red River Valley of Dakota was settled more rapidly than the Minnesota side, possibly because the higher elevation there was thought to

⁴³ Ulvestad, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 1: 87; Tollefson, in *North Dakota Historical Collections*, 7: 149-151; Dora J. Gunderson, "The Settlement of Clay County, Minnesota, 1870-1900," 27-31. The latter item is a master's thesis prepared at the University of Minnesota in 1929. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy. For examples of letters from Red River Valley settlers, see *Fædrelandet og Emigranten*, June 13, 1872, August 28, 1873; and *Nordisk Folkeblad* for the years from 1873 to 1875.

render that side less liable to floods, the upper Red River Valley of Minnesota in 1875 contained 1,234 Norwegians in a total population of 2,931 — about 42.1 per cent of the total. Most of the pioneers seem to have lived for a time in counties farther south before going to the Red River country; thus pioneer settlement in this area was largely the result of domestic migration rather than of direct immigration from Norway.⁴⁴ The great majority of the settlers went into the region by oxen and wagon. Not until the Dakota migration took on the immense proportions of the eighties were the railroads utilized extensively by emigrants, and even then the prevalent mode of travel was the slow-moving ox-drawn wagon. In time, the northern Minnesota counties of the Red River Valley as well as those farther south became heavily settled by Norwegians, but this development did not take place until the late eighties and nineties.

The region between the Mississippi and the St. Croix rivers seems to have been the least attractive of all areas in Minnesota to the Norwegians. As indicated on the accompanying map, the settlements there were scattered and small. With the exception of a few Norwegians in and about Stillwater in Washington County, practically all in this region arrived after 1870. None of the settlements were of sufficient extent to warrant detailed description.

The number of Norwegians who made the Twin Cities their home was not large in the early period in proportion to the total population, but it increased steadily, and by 1875 Minneapolis had 2,318 and St. Paul 481 Norwegians in their respective populations.⁴⁵ Although the Norwegian immigrants in Minnesota were for the most part farmers who went there to acquire land, many skilled laborers, professional men, and tradesmen who took up their old occupations in the new

⁴⁴ Census, 1875. See especially the schedules for Polk, Clay, Wilkin, and Traverse counties.

⁴⁵ Census, 1875.

country and common laborers who lacked sufficient capital to start farming were included among them. Such newcomers naturally made their homes in the cities. Up to the late sixties, however, most of the settlers crossed the Mississippi River at such points as MacGregor, Prairie du Chien, La Crosse, Winona, and Red Wing. As long as land was to be had in southeastern Minnesota, immigrants found little occasion to go as far north as the head of navigation. With the construction of rail lines from Chicago to the Twin Cities and thence to all parts of Minnesota, however, Norwegian immigrants began to move farther north and west, and many settled permanently in Minneapolis and St. Paul. In recognition of this fact, the *Nordisk Folkeblad* in 1869 removed its publication office from Rochester to Minneapolis and in the early seventies a number of other Norwegian newspapers and journals began publication there. As the political capital of Minnesota and the economic metropolis of the entire Northwest, the Twin Cities rapidly became the center of a huge area of Norwegian settlement.

CARLTON C. QUALEY

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
MINNEAPOLIS



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).