

Reminiscences

Malene Abelsdatter Isene Steen

Written in Norwegian in 1922 when the author was 85 years old and translated by the Norwegian-American Historical Association, March 1979. Occasional clarifications have been added in square brackets.

Since I am becoming old and am no longer able to meet the demands of our age, and because I am in a sense turned inward, I am for the greatest part concerned with the past that I have experienced in this country. It is of interest to me to write down one thing and another in the Norwegian language, our dear mother tongue, which will vanish. English I do not know, so my time is richly mixed with many thoughts.

I was married to Severin Olsen Steen on April 17, 1870. A week later we started the trip to America. When we came to Bergen and got to know what the trip would cost, we found that we were too poor to take the steamboat (ship), but we went on a sailing vessel and had to provide our own food. On the nineteenth of May we left Bergen and our dear Fatherland. We came to this country rather poor. We did not think higher than taking work for daily survival. In the settlement we came to there was hardly a word of English to be heard. We were too poor to go by steamboat. We were seven weeks on the ocean because of constant head winds in the North Sea. It was two weeks before we saw England and after five weeks on the Atlantic we came to Quebec in the middle of July.

We had no idea where to go because we were among the first to leave our community [Dombesten, Norway, on the south side of the Nordfjord just below the confluence of Eidsfjorden and Hundsviksfjorden]. We met a man in Quebec who was somewhat from our region who wanted to go to Jefferson County in Wisconsin. He showed us a letter he had received from an acquaintance there. This letter contained many good instructions. We joined another family. This trip took us [many] weeks, at times on a steamboat, at times on the train. We had to wait often for the steamboat. Finally we landed in Trempealeau Co. [Wisconsin, just north of LaCrosse on the Mississippi].

The crew on the boat was mostly negroes. They began to shove our trunks (baggage) in any fashion ashore and shouted us ashore as well. Suddenly the boat turned and went its way. We stood there entirely helpless. No one came to fetch us. It was late in the day and my husband was down with (klim) fever. That night we sat and at times slept in a shed by the river. The next morning we went up into the town. We understood nothing. There came a man and waved to us that we should follow him. He took us into a store. There were both Norwegians and Swedes. The clerk saw we were in trouble and wanted to give the help he could. The man was German and he told the clerks to speak to us and see if we were Scandinavians. A Norwegian clerk came and talked to us. Yes, we were Norwegian.

He asked where we were going. We showed him the letter which was mailed from Melrose post office [approximately 30 miles inland (east) from Trempealeau]. We asked if he was acquainted there. Yes, he had worked nearby but it was 18 miles from here. He asked the German where he lived and got the answer that he lived 16 miles in the country from the town, but 8 miles on the other side of the post office. The German promised to take us to his home. The rest of the way we would have to walk.

He took us to his home and instructed his wife to make supper for us. By way of payment we had to shock wheat in his field the next day in fierce summer heat. We did not manage much work. Then the German went with us a long ways and showed us the way to Melrose. This German was a fine fellow and I hardly believed he was a friend of the Kaiser.

We came to Melrose and presented our so-called letter. We walked and met this man who lived in a form of poverty that hardly matched the grand words in his letter. He lived in a wretched house with his father. From that time on we had to rely on ourselves and the strength our Lord had given us. We were permitted to stay with two old persons. They received us well and we were able to get cleaned up.

After traveling for nine weeks we really needed a good washing. Our traveling companions across the ocean were mostly from northern Trondheim (Trøndelag) even Lapps. When they came up on the deck of the ship with their fur blankets to shake the dust out of them, some things fell on the deck "dyr" (insects) which we saw with our own eyes. You know what it was ... (lice?). So we came to like our so-called place of destination.

After we had tidied ourselves up a bit, the question of how we were going to support ourselves came up. Where could we get work? We succeeded in getting a job bundling oats. I got 50¢ a day. My husband got 75¢. For threshing he received a dollar a day. We didn't take land there however--didn't think it was advisable. The good land was occupied and the rest was just bluffs and brush. My husband got hold of steady work in Penria (?) [perhaps Peoria] during the winter. In the summer he worked for farmers. In May and June he stood in the scorching hot sunshine and excavated for a dollar a day. It was, in other words, hard to get money. We had to use a good deal [of it] on the cattle. We had a lot of trouble getting a stable and feed for them. We were there for three years [1870-73]. We had to cut the hay on the unused margins of other people's fields.

We lived in Wisconsin for three years. There was no land to be found except bluffs and brush country. We decided to stay there for just a while. We lived with strangers. As you can understand, we could unfortunately not stop for long at the best places. For me it was an informative and instructive journey which I find difficult to commit to writing.

We began to study and look out toward the great Minnesota prairies. We bought a wagon which didn't have a seat with springs. We placed a good cover over the wagon, picked up almost all our belongings, and placed our young-horned team of two cows in front of the wagon and a heifer behind the wagon. I sat in the wagon with the two small children. One (Mary) was two years old, the other (Olai) eight weeks. Then we took off [at the end of June, 1873]. I looked back when we drove past the church, thinking, God only knows whether we'll get a church to sit in again and hear God's Word explained for us.

Our trip went slowly, but we kept making progress. Sometimes we drove during the day, sometimes during the night. It was often so hot that we couldn't drive the team, and besides, they had to feed. The roads at that time were difficult. We drove through great forests--60 miles long--as well as brush country. My husband often had to take and draw the oxen because we couldn't get through. Our guide was a map of Wisconsin. When we left Wisconsin behind, my husband bought a map of Minnesota. He quickly studied the map and started driving again. I sat in the wagon and often thought that we resembled the three Wise Men from the east. Of course, they followed the star in order to find the baby Jesus, while we travelled in order to find an earthly home.

The trip was instructive in many ways. I had to stop often and reflect on the wisdom cattle can have if one treats them well. Our cattle accepted the wagon as their home. As soon as they saw we touched the wagon, they were ready to come along, no matter where it might lead. When we came to the Hudson river [the St. Croix at Hudson, Wisconsin], I thought we could go no farther. The river was so wide. We stood there awhile, but we didn't wait long before a ferry came and took us in--both us and the team in front of the wagon and the other animals. We ourselves sat in the wagon. So we sailed across the river.

Although it would be a long trip, we considered going to Kandiyohi County [around Willmar, due west of

Minneapolis]. The roads were just as difficult. The train was to be found at only a few places. It hadn't even started to go to Willmar. But our trip surpassed expectations. We stopped when we felt like it, near creeks. We lit a fire, I washed clothes and dried them while the animals grazed. We had a little copper kettle, a wash tub, a washing board, and soap. It wasn't possible for me to iron. I also cooked *dravle*, as we Norwegians called it. [*Dravle* is simmered curds and whey. "Cook fresh milk for 8 hours and add a bit of sugar and cinnamon. Served especially at big occasions like weddings."] We had plenty of milk and I made several dishes with it. But it was hard to get bread. My husband had an idea, however. We milked the cows, stopped near some settlers, carried the milk to them, and in return received a loaf of bread. So it surpassed expectations.

After three weeks of driving, we reached Kandiyohi County. There were several familiar families there. We thought about driving on to Herman [northwest of Willmar, just south of Fergus Falls]--we had a letter from there--but it was just prairie and we had our doubts about whether it was advisable to build out on the prairie. We bought, therefore, state land in Kandiyohi County. The first years there we lived with a *stril* family. [*Stril* refers to inhabitants of the coast around Bergen.]

Later we built a house for ourselves. You can believe me when I say I was happy, even though the house wasn't much, just a cellar with a bad roof. It didn't keep out the water when it rained, and the mosquitoes wouldn't leave us in peace in the house either. My husband took jobs to pay for the land until winter came. Then he put the house in shape. We didn't want to hire a carpenter to build it. No, we would build it ourselves and do the best we could.

The second year we were there we got good crops on our little field. The third year we were visited by a multitude of grasshoppers who destroyed all the hay. There was quite a bit of _____, so people did have something for the cattle. Those terrible insects stopped long enough to lay the earth full of eggs and then they left. The next spring all those eggs began to hatch. It was frighteningly mysterious to see God's power. When those little creatures were grown, they consumed everything, even a good deal of the bark on trees. The fields lay black on Midsummer Eve as if they were newly plowed.

What was to be done? We owed money on the land. We had to pay the agent 60 dollars to take it back even though we had cleared a lot of fields on it. But my husband had an idea. He asked me to make some good rusk [dried bread]. He said he would buy butter when he needed it. He packed the rusk and *spekekjøtt* (smoked salted meat) in a sack and then he left to go westward to look for homestead land. There were no trains to depend on at that time, and besides we wouldn't have been able to afford them.

Some days he travelled as much as 60 miles. Here and there he saw settlers several miles from each other, for the most part bachelors. It was hard to come across anyone who had a meal to sell. Some nights he stopped and slept in haystacks--there was no one around. Evidently they had left after their small fields were threshed. He didn't give up, but travelled on. He finally came to Ortonville, tired as could be. Nevertheless, he got to say hello to old Knut Orten [Knut Orton]--a Sogning from our own nation, and that was a precious encounter. Orten said that if you want good farmland, go just a mile north of Ortonville and you will find plenty of homesteads. In Ortonville there were three or four shanties at that time. (Knut Orten was the first person buried in Ortonville cemetery.) [Ortonville was platted in 1872 by and named for Cornelius Knute Orton.]

[So] my husband went on. He came to this hill where the schoolhouse now stands. He looked enthusiastically around and decided to take land. (He saw a settler in the so-called Lyseng's woods.) He came home again and told me he had taken land in Big Stone [county]. I didn't like the idea. Where we were living we had a church and worship services at regular intervals, something they didn't have in Big Stone county. My husband comforted me by saying that there would be a church and minister in Big Stone soon.

Big Stone was settled quickly. We moved there in October, 1877. Our house there was also simple [a one room sod house cut into a hillside, 16 ft x 14 ft], though no worse than the one we had had. The first months we were there we had a worship service at our house [thereby organizing what became St. Pauli Lutheran Church of Clinton]. Five miles west of us were three or four families who belonged to the same denomination. In addition, we had those first three years two or three worship services. There was neither an English nor a Norwegian school here (so we had no place to meet for church). But we didn't lose courage. We waited for a change. It came. We weren't disappointed.

There were so many who had settled here that we thought about calling a minister. We got Pastor Gjerve and we were happy. But the happiness did not last long because a short time afterward the election [predestination] controversy came up and it hindered the building of our church. Not long after a new change occurred which I don't care to discuss. [Not until] 1896 was the church completed and dedicated.

[A "brief history" of St. Pauli Lutheran Church printed on its centenary in 1996 describes the controversy that delayed development of the congregation by quoting from *The Lutheran Church in American History* by A.R. Wentz: "The spirit of unrest and intolerance was abroad in the land ... Divisions and breaks took place on doctrinal and practical grounds. The most bitter controversy was that concerning predestination." Although the Norwegian Synod had joined with the Missouri Synod in 1872 to form a Synodical Conference, within a few years about a third of the Norwegian congregations withdrew and formed what became known as the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood. These dissenters disputed the Missouri Synod's doctrine of predestination, namely, that God's election is the sole cause of man's salvation. Among the leading advocates of the anti-Missourian position were the founders of St. Olaf College, whereas the founders of Luther College supported the Missouri doctrine of predestination.]

Well, back to the life of the settler [in Kandiyohi County]. In the middle of June, 1877, my husband began fixing up his wagon and picking up various foods and lumber. He then hitched his team of oxen to the wagon and started traveling. I stayed home with the three children [Mary, Olai, Abel] and took care of the cattle. He drove just about to the homestead and stopped where the schoolhouse and graveyard are now. He told me about his wish, "I wonder if there won't sometime be a church and a 'resting place' here for the 'tired poor.'" He was exhausted after his trip. He built a little tent with the lumber and stayed in it for three months. There were most likely few meals for him. [He got some help] from the only neighbor and then he began clearing the land. I can't remember how many acres. After that he started cutting hay with a scythe. He cut up so much hay that we had enough for 23 head and he sold the rest for \$40. There were many who settled there in the spring.

When he finished with the haying, he began building our house. When he came so far that we could live in it, he came back to Kandiyohi County to get the family and the cattle and take us to Big Stone. When we were ready to go, Pastor Markus came and offered to get hold of a little money for us and the others around there who were cleaned out by the grasshoppers. The government had sent some money. We thanked him for the offer, but said we thought we could manage on our own since we were entrusted with strength to work. We assured him that we planned on remaining in the same denomination, since at that time the conference battle against the Synod was at its worst (most bitter). Everything is a transition.

We arrived safe and sound in Big Stone [county]. The first two years there we were afflicted by hailstorms. There wasn't much left after them. We didn't get very big yields of hay either. Since then the financial state (of the settlement) has more or less kept improving so there is a beautiful settlement here, as well as churches and schools. When we started here, we went to Ortonville to get the mail every Sunday. We had to get by with reading the mail once a week. The nearest market was in Morris. The first house in Clinton was built in 1883.

In 1904 we rented our farm and moved to Clinton. We had a good house and barn there. On the 27th of June, 1908, a tornado struck which tore away every bit of property on our lot. Our two children who were

at home were sent to the basement. It was a miracle they lived. As far as I know there was nothing left that wasn't damaged except a package with various legal documents in it and a cardboard box with half a dozen knives and forks. I can't even begin to list and estimate all that was lost. We were rich nevertheless since we got to keep our children. My husband and the horses were away working and I was in Dakota, so it was just property that we lost, but it was quite a bit.

Well, I can't attempt to figure it all up and besides, I don't feel like it. I myself took it as a rod of admonition and evidently my family was of the same opinion. The Lord has richly compensated us.

My husband was not without hope. He began rebuilding right away. He was the first of those here in town who suffered damage to start rebuilding. He put the house on the same lot and the barn on the place as before. Evidently a whole lot of money came in from the government, and other gifts as well. We didn't take any of the money that came in--didn't know how much it was and didn't ask either. We tried to help ourselves as best we could, so we didn't burden anyone with this matter. ([That's how] we lived on the farm for 28 years.) In 1906 the church in St. Pauli's Parish was built. In 1905 our women's society was started.

Now this tells about just a small fraction of our wandering. There are many experiences over such a long time, but I better stop soon and thank my dear Savior for the fortunes and misfortunes, for the joys and the sorrows. God has up to this day wondrously guided and upheld me. My husband died on April 15, 1918 and was buried according to his wishes beside our departed daughter [Dena Rasmie Steen(1881-1893)] and their dust rests in Long Island's Graveyard [southeast of Clinton] until the day of resurrection. Blessed be their memories.

I hope to soon follow after. I am advanced in age--85 years old. Many days of grace have been allotted me, and old age is at hand. Hence my strength is being sapped and my hearing is failing. The language of my mother and father is almost out of style and will soon be no more. I don't know English, so the time is rather long and lonely. I mustn't complain, however, because other than that I am well. I am, for the present, both mentally and physically healthy and can pass the time with various kinds of work. May God sustain me in His Word and in my faith until and in my last hour. After death may I meet all my dear ones in heaven, not because I deserve it, but because of his grace and mercy.

I can also mention that we have been members of the denomination and this parish these 52 years. Serving us as ministers were the following: in Wisconsin, Pastors Egensen and Alusen; in Kandiyohi County, Pastor Markus; in Big Stone, first, Pastor Hartmen who is now in Norway, Gjevre, Al Anderson, Wipperud, C. B. Ingebrigtsen, Engel Olson, and presently Pastor Moe. We have had four temporary ministers: Kofod, A. J. Anderson, Pederson (in Benson) and Brevig.

And so I'll end my modest writing over my experiences in this country. There could be a lot more in these 52 years to mention, but this should do it.

One more thing. I want to mention that when we began "the life of the settler" here in Big Stone and had ministers only during fall and spring, we used to gather together every Sunday, once with each family that had enough room in their house, and we sang hymns and read the sermon in our *Huspostill* for that particular day. [*Huspostill* is a household devotional book, then common in Norway, which included sermons for use on Sundays when the congregation was not served by a minister.] We also catechized the children in the lessons which their parents had instructed them to learn. Most of our friends had taken a *Huspostill* with them from the Fatherland. They were published by various people: Moller Lars Linarot, Rosenius Luber, Johan Arndt, Harms Hofager, and Pontopidan. I think we benefitted from it. I would hope that no home be without devotions.

I wish I could have written this in English.