
"Free Land for All"

A Young Norwegian Woman Homesteads in North Dakota

by Erling N. Sannes

Norwegians began emigrating to the United States as early as 1825, but their numbers peaked after the Homestead Act of 1862. That act offered 160 acres of public land to any citizen or emigrant who intended to become a citizen, was over the age of twenty-one, and would live on the land and improve it for five years or more. Among those Norwegian emigrants who responded to the promise, "Free Land for All," was Bertine Sem, a young, single woman from Snåsa, Norway, who left her family and her country to become a North Dakota farmer during that state's frontier period. This portrait of Bertine, researched and written by her grandson, is based on her reminiscences and those of other family members, some of whom still live in Norway. A longer version of this essay appeared in the Norwegian history journal, *Kumur*, in 1990.¹

Bertine Gurine Olesdotter was born at Strindmoen, a farm near Snåsa, Norway, on August 12, 1879, the daughter of Ole Kjalen and Maren Anna Olesdotter.² After her father died when Bertine was only two years old, she and her widowed mother moved to Seem, a nearby farm, where Bertine grew up in an older sister's household. Most of her life at Seem centered around caring for her sister's three children and involved long hard days of cooking and cleaning.

It is not known when Bertine first began thinking about going to America. By the time she reached young adulthood, emigration from Snåsa to America had been underway for many years.³ Although no members of her own family had ever gone to America, she must have known many from Snåsa who had emigrated in



response to the appeal of opportunity and land of their own. U. S. railroad companies and other business interests had widely distributed promotional pamphlets printed in Norwegian, persuading foreigners to emigrate. These publications varied from those that gave factual, if optimistic, information to some that made exaggerated claims about what awaited immigrants who settled in the West. An example of the latter, printed in English, is a pamphlet that reported North Dakota as a land of "majestic crystal lakes ... a land fair enough to tempt the angels in their flight to pause and wonder whether a new and better Eden had not been formed." It spoke of Dakota farmers who "dressed in the latest New York styles, wearing a diamond shirt-stud ... [or] a hemstitched handkerchief redolent with the fragrance of the rose," and described farms as "grand-ducal estates, where crops never failed."⁴ Though these poetic descriptions may have romanticized Dakota, nevertheless, the opportunities for free land did exist, and the railroads did, in some cases, assist settlers with transportation and other inducements to draw them to the western frontier.

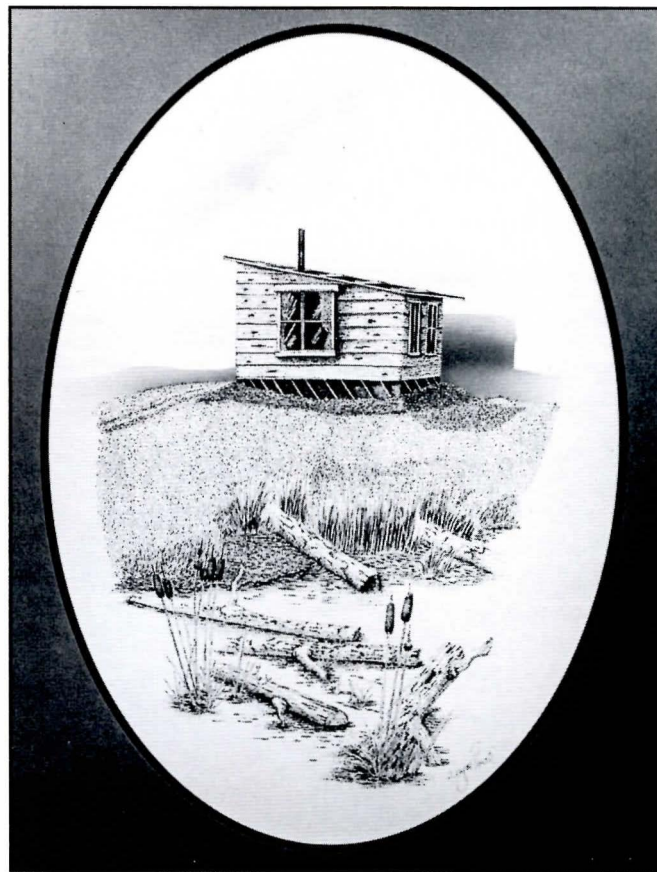
Family members described Bertine as strong-willed, independent, and capable of giving direction to her own destiny, and that destiny, when she left Snåsa in the spring of 1902, was to have a farm of her own. Little is known about Bertine's trip across the Atlantic Ocean, except that a near tragedy occurred when the ship on which she was a passenger ran aground while entering the harbor at Halifax, Nova Scotia. Although none of the passengers perished, most lost all of their baggage; all

Bertine saved was the clothing she wore and a small handbag containing a few personal articles.⁵

She lost little time in getting settled down to the life of a farmer after arriving at the city of Bottineau in Bottineau County, North Dakota, in the later part of April 1902. On May 7 she declared her intention of becoming a citizen of the United States, one of the requirements of the Homestead Act of 1862. On the same day, she paid a fourteen dollar filing fee and claimed homestead rights to 160 acres of land.⁶ Her claim was in the southeast quarter of section ten, Bentinick Township, in the western part of the county, a remote and rural area not yet reached by the railroad. Bertine was one of more than a thousand people who filed claims in this area of North Dakota in May of 1902.⁷

Bertine lived in a small tent her first few months on the prairie. For a source of income, she picked buffalo bones that were strewn all over her land and shared the proceeds with another settler who hauled the bones to the nearest rail terminal.⁸ In return for Bertine's caring for his wife and new baby, a neighbor broke fifteen acres on her land on which she planted flax. That fall she cooked for a threshing crew of another farmer in exchange for the threshing of her flax; she had enough left to pay for the construction of a small homestead shack.⁹ Since there was no wood in the area and the price of coal was prohibitive, she burned dry grass and flax straw, twisted tightly into small bundles, for heat.

About fifteen percent of the original settlers in the township were women, but unlike Bertine, who was alone, most of the others had family members on nearby farms. Alone on her farm, Norwegian-speaking Bertine was relatively isolated. Although a wide variety



Opposite, Bertine Gurine Olesdotter, taken in Norway, ca. 1899. Above, Wayne Pruse of Mandan, North Dakota, produced this pen-and-ink drawing of Bertine's homestead shack from an original photograph. In filing her homestead proof, Bertine described the shack as "a 12 x 10 feet, double board" house with "tar paper on roof & walls." All photographs in this article are courtesy of the author.

1. Erling N. Sannes, "Free Land for All: Ei ung Snåsavinne some nybyggjar i Nord-Dakota," *Kumur*, Arsskrift nr. 11, 1990, pp. 18-32, with a postscript by Professor Jørn Sandnes, University of Trondheim. A copy of the journal and an English translation are housed in the State Archives and Historical Research Library, Bismarck, ND. A useful work on the immigration era is Howard Zimms, *A People's History of the United States*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1980). For recent books that focus on women homesteaders, see Glenda Riley, *A Place to Grow: Women in the American West* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1992) and H. Elaine Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1991).

2. Like many immigrants to the United States, Bertine adopted as a family name the name of the farm where she last lived in Norway—*Seem*—although the spelling was altered to *Sem*. Prior to 1925, when the use of a fixed family name (surname) became compulsory, many Norwegians were identified only by their Christian names and their father's name, i.e., Bertine Gurine Olesdotter (daughter of Ole). As the use of surnames came into use, some families adopted the name of the farm on which they resided. When patronymics were commonly used, as in Snåsa, a woman did not change her name at marriage.

3. Jørn Sandnes, *Snåsaboka, Bind II*, (Snåsa: Snåsa Kommune, 1960), pp. 166-171, 181-185. Biographical sketches of Snåseans who emigrated earlier to eastern Bottineau County can be found in Olav Redal, *En Norsk bygde historie*, (Souris, North Dakota, ca. 1919).

4. P. Donan, *North Dakota: The Lake-Gemmed, Breeze-Swept Empire of the New Northwest*, (Chicago: Charles R. Brodix, 1883), pp. 6-13, copy in Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois. Letter, C. C. Andrews, Stockholm, Sweden, April 6, 1870, to Alexander Ramsey, *Alexander Ramsey Papers and Records, Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers, 1870-September 1871*, Roll 19, Frame 00254, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota. This letter is an example of the methods some U. S. business interests used to persuade Scandinavians to emigrate. Andrews was the U. S. ambassador to Sweden and Norway, and Ramsey, long-identified with railroad interests, was a U. S. senator from Minnesota. Andrews writes that in "both kingdoms [Sweden and Norway] all classes are opposed to emigration" and "that there would be much less emigration if the emigrants knew of the denials and hardships they meet with in the U. S." To stimulate emigration, Andrews proposed to Ramsey that he (Andrews) travel to the more populous parts of Norway to "learn indirectly what persons could be relied on to circulate documents. . . ."

5. Research continues to identify Bertine among the passenger

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HOMESTEAD.

APPLICATION

No. 73,349

LAND OFFICE AT MINOT, NORTH DAKOTA,

May 7, 1902

I, Bertine Sem of Bottineau, N. Dak.

do hereby apply to enter under Section 2289, Revised Statutes of the United States, the Southeast Quarter (SE 1/4) of Section 10, in Township 168 N. of Range 81 W., containing 60 acres.

Bertine Sem

LAND OFFICE AT MINOT, NORTH DAKOTA

May 8, 1902

I, R. O. Sanborn Register of the Land Office, do hereby certify that the above application is for Surveyed Land of the class which the applicant is legally entitled to enter under Section 2289, Revised Statutes of the United States, and that there is no prior valid adverse right to the same. Received from Irving R. Barkway, Clerk District Court, Bottineau, N. Dak.

R. O. Sanborn
Register.

Bertine Sem's application for 160 acres of free land in Bentinick Township, filed May 7, 1902.

of ethnic groups were represented among the settlers in Bentinick Township, there were only two Scandinavians within four miles of her homestead.¹⁰ In February 1903, Bertine received a welcome respite from her life alone in her homestead shack when a young farmer from another part of the county, whose wife was from Snåsa, asked her to come to their home to care for the children while his wife recovered from an illness. It had been almost a year since she had spent any amount of time with Norwegians or seen anyone from Snåsa. After a month with this family, Bertine's neighbors welcomed her "homecoming." Her reputation as a good cook, especially with bread and pastries, had become well-known. She baked for some of her bachelor neighbors and washed and mended for others for which she received in return, a few more acres of turned-over sod and help with picking rocks.

At the end of her second year, Bertine had enough money to buy two horses and a walking plow and to

build a combination barn and granary. By the end of the 1904 planting season, she had eighty acres broken and planted into crop. That year was bountiful both in yield and price.¹¹ By now, too, the railroad ran to within eight miles of her farm to its terminus at the newly-platted city of Westhope. The construction of the new town brought an influx of people, one of whom was a twenty-one-year-old carpenter, Erick Sannes.¹² Erick was also from Snåsa and was a casual acquaintance of Bertine's from her youth. Erick had come to America in 1901 and had worked on farms in a distant part of the county his first three years in North Dakota. Although in his early letters home he expressed much satisfaction with the \$18 to \$20 a month wage he received, this initial enthusiasm soon waned when he found that the work was seasonal, leaving him unemployed several months of the year. He eventually found work as a carpenter but the \$1 a day he received for working twelve to fourteen hours a day, six days a week (out of which he

had to pay up to \$4 to \$5 a week for food and lodging) did not leave him much for his other needs or for pleasure.¹³

In the meantime, Bertine had come to realize that North Dakota farming was a two-person operation. For the single woman, there was the practical need for someone to help with the farmwork, especially the heavy tasks such as rock-picking and sod-breaking, not to mention the natural desire for companionship. With Erick close by, their thoughts turned to marriage, but there was a problem: A woman who married before acquiring title to a homestead forfeited her rights to the land because she was no longer considered the "head of a family."

To solve this problem, Bertine took advantage of a provision in the Homestead Act that permitted well-established farmers to get title to the land before the end of the usual five years, upon payment of a small fee. With the sale of the 1904 crop, Bertine had enough money to make this payment and get title to her land. On December 22, 1904, she appeared at the Land Office with three neighbors who attested that she had maintained continuous residence on the land, that she had a permanent residence thereon, and had eighty acres of the land under cultivation. Satisfied that she was in fact a *bona fide* farmer, the government granted her a deed to the land.¹⁴ After receiving title to land in her own name, Bertine married Erick the next month, on January 25, 1905.

After their wedding, she and Erick had hoped to travel to Norway to visit their families, but Bertine's early success as a farmer proved to be short-lived. Crop failure and a drop in grain prices in 1905 left them with only enough for the bare necessities, and they postponed the trip to Norway. As time went on, there were many more crop failures due to drought, grasshoppers, hail, and other disasters. The trip home was never taken.



Bertine and Erick Sannes on their wedding day, January 25, 1905, in Bottineau County, North Dakota.

In the summer of 1906, the first of their six children was born. Although household tasks increased with the birth of each child, Bertine never completely removed herself from work in the fields. One of her babies was born in a field, far from the house, where she was picking rocks with Erick. As the family grew, Erick and

lists, available in Canadian records, of ships carrying emigrants during this era.

6. *Tract Book 151, Township 162 North of Range 81 West, North Dakota*, p. 208, copy in the State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, North Dakota, hereafter *Tract Book 151*.

7. Leonard and Bette Lodoen, *This Land is Mine*, (Westhope, North Dakota, 1976), p. 153.

8. Dissatisfied with the long distance to rail terminals, residents and grain growers protested the failure of the GN to live up to its "flattering promises and inducements to come in and settle up this country, promising us a railroad to haul out our stuff when needed" (*Mouse River Standard*, August 1, 1902). They threatened to market their grain on points of the Canadian Pacific Railroad instead. Apparently their efforts succeeded because, by 1904, the GN had reached Westhope in Bottineau County.

9. *Case File 8445* for Bertine Sem, Record Group 49, Office of Land Management, National Archives, Washington, D. C., hereafter *Case File 8445*.

10. *Tract Book 151*.

11. *Westhope Standard* (Westhope, North Dakota), October 7, 1904, p. 2.

12. In his eagerness to become Americanized, one of the first things Erik Oluf Johannessen did was to change his name. While he retained his first name with a different spelling, he chose to drop the patronymic Johannessen (Johannes's son), and selected a surname based on the family farm name. But *Sandnes* was a commonplace name, literally translated "sand point," so he chose the less common modification, *Sannes*. For more information on farm names in Norway, see Oluf Rygh, *Norske Gaardnavne*, (Kristiania/Oslo, 1897-1924), volumes 1-19 with a joint index volume, published 1936.

13. Letter, Erick Sannes, Bottineau County, North Dakota, May 1, 1901, to Ingebrigt Sandnes, Snåsa, File 2987, *Snåsa historielag*. A survey of contemporary newspapers verify these figures as typical for the time and area.

14. *Case File 8445*.

15. *Probate File 3088-18*, Bottineau County Court, Bottineau, North Dakota, January 21, 1956.



Bertine Sannes, carrying milk pails in the yard of her original farmstead in Bentinick Township, about 1940. The trees in the background, survivors of North Dakota's extreme climate, form a shelterbelt that Bertine planted upon her arrival in 1902.

Bertine expanded the little homestead shack with a larger addition and, of course, enlarged their garden as well. Increased dairy production provided food for the family as well as a source of income (from the sale of cream and butter) for the purchase of other needed supplies and for the payment of taxes on the land when crops failed. The dairy cattle were largely Bertine's responsibility. There were times when she milked twelve to fourteen cows by hand twice each day. She carried heavy pails of milk from the barn to the house for separating, and carried what was unused back to the barn and fed it to the animals.

To meet the needs of the family, it eventually became necessary to expand the size of the farm. Most farmers used their land as collateral to buy more land, but Bertine, who had worked so hard to retain the title to her land in her own name, refused to risk mortgaging her farm. She insisted they find another way.

At the time of her death in 1955, Bertine Sem Sannes had the longest continuous residence and was the only one of the original settlers still living on their homestead

in Bentinick Township. Interestingly, after her death, Erick and their offspring had to go through a legal process to establish that they were her heirs under the law, since the title to the land was still recorded under the name of Bertine Sem. The deed to the land she had held for fifty-three years was unblemished by a mortgage.¹⁵

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Erling N. Sannes is a labor historian who lives in Bismarck, North Dakota. Since his retirement from Job Service North Dakota, he has devoted himself to research, political activism, and progressive issues. He received the Editor's Choice Award for 1992 for his article, "Queen of the Lecture Platform": Kate Richards O'Hare and North Dakota Politics, 1917-1921" in the Fall 1991 *North Dakota History*. He has also published articles on labor history in several regional history journals.