Ole Johnson Skrien:

A Norwegian Immigrant in the 1870's

by Sandra H. Skrien

The twin yokes around the peasant Norwegian neck in the 1800's were *odelsbode*[1] and taxes. If their forefathers had not been landowners, they could never hope to hold property because the ancient law *odelsbode* prohibited it. The other yoke, the oppressive tax situation, kept him forever shackled to the landowner.

Is it any wonder, then, that the first Norwegians to leave for America wrote back such glowing reports, and that the commoners willingly left the land of their heritage to strike out for new challenges? According to the "Amerika Letters" received and published in the homeland, "All those who have been in America for a few years, with a few exceptions, are in a contented and independent position. They do not suffer want. Taxes and rent encumber no one."[2] Another one writes, "He [the Norwegian farmer in the United States] can look forward to becoming rich without usury, a difficult task in Norway."[3]

After hearing such reports, many Norwegians found life in their native land unbearable. Whole families left their towns to head for a land where they could not only advance themselves economically, but where they could also own land, change their occupations if they so desired and have a voice in determining their own government. Too, while many landowners' sons could afford to buy exemption from military service, others less fortunate chose emigration as the alternative.

Although Ole Johannesen Skrio[4] had served in the Norwegian Army from 1866 to 1871, he still felt the urge to better himself abroad. His story begins on May 5, 1874, in Bergen, Norway,[5] where he departed his homeland and parents, neither of whom he would see again.

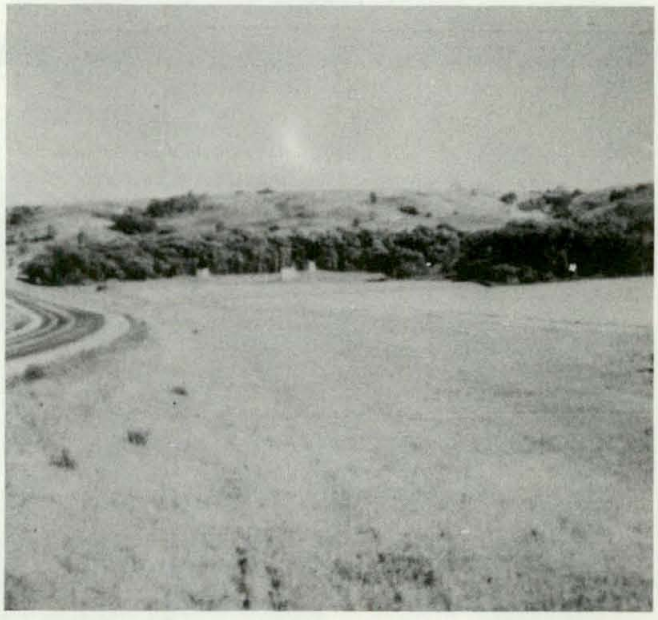
[1]*Odelsbode* was an ancient law by which land passed from one family member to another; it prohibited the common man from buying land.

[2]Howard B. Furer, Ed., *Scandanavians in American*, 986-1970 (Dobbs Ferry, New York: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1972), 103.

[3]*Ibid.*, 94

[4]It was the practice of Norwegians to add "sen" to their father's name, in order to have a surname. Ole Johannesen (son of Johannes Olsen) used five different names formally on legal documents, adding the Skrio, or later, Skrien, because there were so many Johnsons or Johannesens in America. The name Skrien comes from the word "landslide," which was the area that Ole was from in Hallingdal, Norway.

[5]Passenger lists #390, May 25-June 17, 1874 (M237), New York Port of Entry.



From the old land to the new: the old church in Nesbyen, Norway, where Ole and Kari Skrien were baptized and confirmed, and (above) the site of their homestead in Griggs County on the bank of the Sheyenne River.

Courtesy Sandra H. Skrien

The only stop made on the way across the Atlantic was in England, where, as a memento of this layover, Ole bought a Sheffield razor. When the *SS Harold Haasfagen* docked in the port of New York on May 26, 1874, half of the journey was over. Ole delighted in telling how he "met" America. "At last," he thought, "I've arrived in this beautiful, bountiful land of opportunity." When he saw a cart with the most sumptuous red apples on it, he took it as an indication of what a wonderful place this country was and how bright his future was. After being at sea for three weeks, the apple was appealing, not only as a "sign," but also as food. As he sunk his teeth into it, it became soft, and squishy and juice ran down his arms. "I hope this isn't a sign of what America will mean to me," he often quoted himself as having said. He took it back to the vendor and complained loudly that the apple that looked so perfect on the outside was just plain rotten on the inside. "But that's a tomato!" he was told.

Kari Sanden Skrien, Ole's wife, later spoke of her trip from Norway on a sailing vessel. She, her father and mother and five brothers and sisters left in 1871, anticipating a relatively short journey. Due to strong headwinds, the trip took 13 weeks and provisions ran dangerously low. Finally, the food was divided equally among the passengers so that they themselves would know just how much was left. Toward the middle of the ocean whales in great numbers began to follow the ship. In order to keep them from capsizing the ship, the immigrants threw bits of food overboard, and after three days the large mammals moved on.

While we have no description of the route Ole took to Iowa, the obituary of his mother-in-law tells of the last leg of a journey three years earlier. Ole's trip was probably much the same. "After arriving in Albert Lea," the story goes, "they walked the entire distance to the home of Tosten Groe in Silver Lake Township . . . Mrs. Sanden has often told of the trip from Albert Lea (30 miles) afoot with Mother and Father and all [six] children carrying some part of their household possessions."[6] The trunk which the Sandens carried has the family's name and routing painted on the front: *"Asle Olsen Sanden LaCrosse Albert Lea Vort Conty Min Nord Ame."*[7]

Life in sparsely-populated Iowa in the 1870's wasn't always easy. Mrs. Sanden's obituary states: "There were times when MacGregor (120 miles) was the nearest railroad and steamboat point, and a trip out with products to sell and for the purpose of laying in supplies meant several days absence from home. Many times the wives and mothers had to stay alone for several days while the head of the family was away and the loneliness must have been dreadful."[8]

[6]Obituary from *Northwood* (Iowa) *Anchor,* December 17, 1926.

[7]Trunk dimensions are 40" long, 26½" high, 23" deep.

[8]See foot note #6.

[9]*Cooperstown Diamond Jubilee 1882-1957,* (np: np, 1957), 13

[10]For more information about early Norwegian settlement in this area, see Omon B Herigstad, "The First Norwegian Settlement in Griggs County, North Dakota," *Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota* (Bismarck: O.G. Libby, 1906), 131-153.

[11]Pre-Emption Proof papers, Ole J. Skrien, July 10, 1883.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

In March, 1878, Ole Johnson and Kari Aslesdatter were married in Bristol Township, Iowa. A bare two years later, they and their one daughter moved nearly 500 miles into northern Dakota Territory. The *Cooperstown Courier* told of the opportunities in that area: "The man or woman desirous of a choice 160 or 320 acre slice of Uncle Sam's domain should be here this spring without fail . . . Intelligent and vigorous people can elect themselves to perpetual prosperity and snap their fingers at "bosses" and oppressive employers, by driving stakes in Dakota."[9]

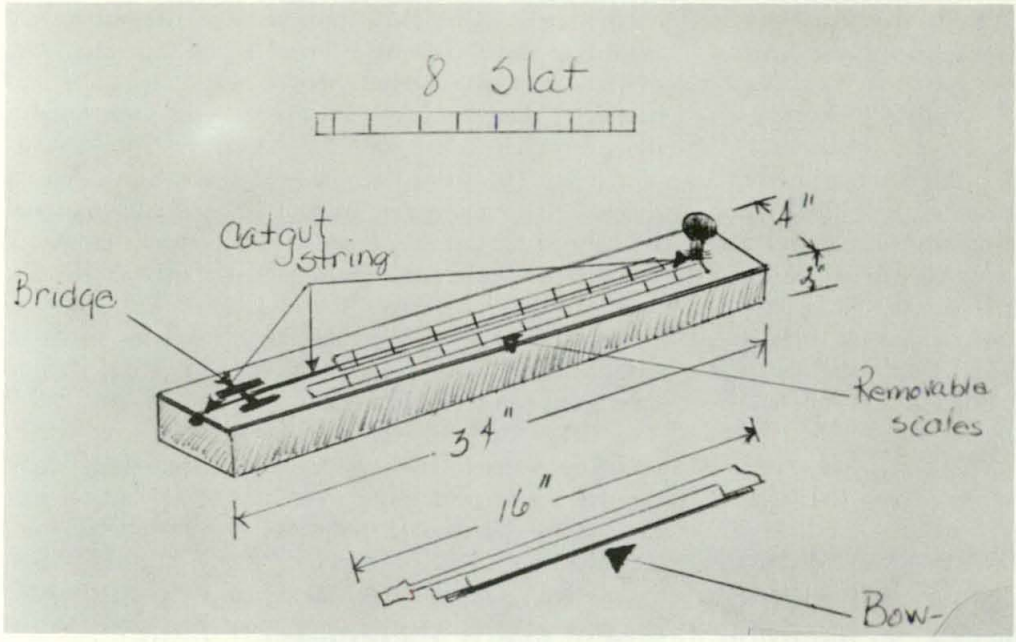
Ole and Kari settled in the Sheyenne River Valley in Griggs County. The area was still sparsely settled, having only been opened by Norwegians from Iowa in late 1879.[10] The Skriens made the trip from Iowa in a covered wagon drawn by two oxen. The area they settled included land along the river, green with shade trees and cool on hot summer days, and acreage on the fertile prairie up from the riverbanks. Their first home was a dugout on a hillside where they lived for two years. Ole, in the meantime, cut trees near the river and made a log house with a shingle roof. This was known as the "palace of the prairie" for many years.

Under the Homestead Act, a settler could obtain land free by remaining on a claim for five years and improving it, or he could pay a prescribed sum of money for the same acreage and reduce the time of residence necessary for ownership. After living on and improving the land for nearly three years, Ole took out the Pre-Emption Proof papers[11] on the 160 acres he had settled. He paid $2.50 an acre for it, and the papers show that he took up residence on the land on July 10, 1880, and that his first act was to build a dwelling. By the date of the certificate, June 30, 1883, he, his wife and two daughters were living there, and he had broken 32 acres and had raised 215 bushels of wheat and 160 bushels of oats.

To fulfill the requirements of the Homestead Act, three neighbors attested to the time of residence, the improvements, the amount of fencing and what crops were raised. John Torfin, Andrew Torfin and Omund Nelson, the first white settlers in the entire area, all spoke as witnesses for Ole. They each verified the existence of the "dwelling house, log, two log stables, one straw shed, well, 160 rods of rail fence and 32 acres broken."[12]

As a foreigner, Ole could not own land without complying with another requirement of the Homestead Act: "In case the party is of foreign birth, a copy of his declaration of intention to become a citizen or full naturalization certificate, officially certified must be filed with the case."[13] This he had filed originally in Iowa, but followed up with the "Declaration Register" in August, 1883. His full citizenship was granted in the name of Ole Johnson Skrien on June 18, 1889. The 160 acres on the Sheyenne River in Dakota Territory were his on July 3, 1883.

Even though the immigrants were accustomed to the cold weather in Norway, the deep and continuing snow and the eternally blowing wind made the long winters in Dakota difficult and lonely. Kari Skrien was a typical pioneer wife who spent many hours cleaning, carding and spinning wool from their sheep and knitting the yarn into warm mittens and socks



The Norwegian folk instrument, *salmodik*, was handmade from wood and brass wire. Not only was it a link with the old country, but it enlivened many gatherings of settlers in their new and unfamiliar land.

Courtesy Sandra H. Skrien

for her family. On one occasion, a man who had been lost in a snowstorm wandered to their home. Kari noticed immediately that his hands and feet were frozen, and she began to thaw them out with cold water. She then put him to bed where he stayed for several weeks until he recovered.

Ole was a religious man deeply entrenched in the Lutheran faith of his homeland. He was instrumental in the organization of the *Nes* Church near their home which was named after the town he came from in Norway. Bible stories and songs played on the *salmodik*[14] were commonplace entertainment for the long, cold evenings. Ole served as *klokker*[15] or song leader for the local congregation. Kari often read to her children from the *Bible*, the *Bible History* and the *Catechism*.

The following event typifies the early homesteading tradition in the Sheyenne Valley. It took place in June, 1887, and the following account was in the Cooperstown paper:-

> "Mr. and Mrs. Esten Haugen . . . of this community was the first couple to celebrate a golden wedding anniversary in Griggs County. Guests gathered from miles around on the Thor Hagen Homestead in June, 1887, for the festivities, so characteristic of the pioneer hospitality and friendliness commemorated by the fiftieth anniversary celebration today.
>
> "Visitors either walked or traveled by oxen to this wedding and brought with them their contribution to the dinner. The log cabin at which the event was held was the second home of Mr. and Mrs. Thor Hagen. They had at first lived in a dugout in a ravine east of the Sheyenne valley, but the following winter proved to be cold and severe. A snowstorm at one time threatened to block the dugout entirely since the wind had drifted snow up to the top of the hill.
>
> "Therefore on the following spring the family decided to move up the hill and began immediately to build a log cabin, which was the scene of the golden wedding. The logs were taken from Ole Skrien's timberland, south of the Fluto bridge with the help of Amund Gilbertson. The cabin was made sixteen feet square, the addition on the left having been added later. As can be seen in the picture the left side of the cabin was banked with sod and roof was made of bark under a covering of sod . . . "[16]

Though the immigrants brought few belongings from Norway, they carried many traditions with them. They had special foods on religious holidays, even though they were far away from home. At Christmas, they did their best to have lutefisk and lefse, the mainstay of the holiday fare in Norway. Sweet desserts, many made with cream, were a tasty end to the meal. The Christmas cookies were often fried, one at a time, and either rolled out thinly and deep-fat fried as in the case of *fattigmon*, or perhaps dipped in batter and fried on an iron in deep fat as with *rosettes*. *Krumkaka* batter was placed in an iron and heated over the fire, then formed into cones and filled. One consistent food was *rommegrot*, or cream mush, a mixture made of cream, boiled with flour until the butter ran off, then served with cinnamon, sugar and the butter.

Typical of the holiday gifts in the pioneer home were perhaps a knife for the boys and a doll head for the girls. Oranges were a special treat highly valued by the children. Toys in those days were homemade, simple and allowed for much imagination. A "bicycle" was simply a wheel with a stick through the middle held in both hands by the "operator" who then ran behind it as fast as he could and with luck would win the "bicycle race."

Stick games played with a group of children were always fun. *Prakaball* was played with at least four or more people, a ball and a stick. Each person had a hole in front of him, and kept his stick in it, if he could. One person was "it" in the center and tried to get his stick and the ball into another's base by striking the other sticks, or otherwise coaxing them to take the stick out of the hole.

The Norwegians generally were an educated group when they immigrated; many of them could read and write quite well. One of the highest priorities as the prairie was settled

[14]A *Salmodik* was a stringed folk instrument brought from Norway.

[15]A *Klokker* was a church official having partly the duty of cantor and partly of sexton.

[16]Copied from a letter from Lillie Simenson, Secretary to the Clerk of Courts, Griggs County, N.D.

was the schooling of the children. The first school in the Dakota Territory area where the Skriens settled was opened in 1881, only two years after the first white people came. Sessions ran from January to March and the immigrants urged their children to learn English in school even though they spoke Norwegian tongue at home. Pioneers often had trouble trying to understand English; "in" and "on" gave great trouble, as did the colors. But teachers were revered and often did quite well with the eager young Americans.

Good crops rewarded hard work the first three years Ole and his family were in Dakota, but a drought the following few years caused him to have to work parttime for the railroad. After "drying out" for 10 years, they decided to move to Minnesota, where other neighbors had gone. After selling their land, Ole, Kari and their four children first rented a farm in the Fertile, Minnesota, area. Here another child was born, but after a few years, they again moved, this time south 200 miles to Pipestone where they again rented a farm. Water was somewhat scarce in that area, and several families had to use the same well. Because one farmer watered his cattle from the well, it was necessary to wait until the well filled up again before any more water was available. Naturally, everyone tried to get there before that farmer. He was a German and a Catholic, and the story goes that they didn't really get along anyway. Another child was born here, but in the late 1890's Ole decided to return to northern Minnesota.

While camping near Ulen one evening, they were visited by a childhood friend from Norway and decided to settle in that area. Ole initially rented a farm near Flom, but a short time later bought 160 acres in Becker County, near Ulen, where they lived until their deaths. This land was all virgin prairie, and he paid a speculator in New York $10.00 an acre, considerably more than what he had paid for the homestead land. He bought a log cabin in Flom and moved it to the new place. In this log cabin their last child was born in 1899.

One of the first jobs to be done was gathering all the buffalo bones on the land. Years before, the buffalo hunters had gone through the area, slaughtering the animals for the hide and leaving the flesh and bones. By the end of the 19th Century, a flourishing business developed in which the bones were converted to fertilizer.[17] The Skriens took advantage of the situation to pick up some cash.

Although Ole was ready to move again in a few years, Kari put her foot down. In this place they stayed the rest of their lives. They built a large barn in 1909 and moved from the log cabin to a new house in 1916.

Ole never believed in tractors and as long as he lived did the farm work with horses. Kari churned butter and sold it in large quantities in town. Her churn was shaped like a half-barrel cut lengthwise and turned on its side; it stood on three legs. A dasher fit through the front end just above the cork which allowed the buttermilk to drain during churning. Nearly five gallons of cream were necessary for the job. The youngest son, Oscar, remembers once pulling the cork when his mother was preparing to churn. Cream streamed over the kitchen floor, and he headed for the nearby woods. What her immediate reaction was he didn't know, but what happened later he has remembered for the last 70 years.

Ole and Kari celebrated their 60th anniversary in 1938, and after having met a lifetime of challenges, faced the unknown and risen to meet the obstacles, they were separated by Kari's death in the same year. Ole lived for three more years and died at the age of 96. They had raised children and opened prairies nearly halfway around the world from their birthplace. Yet, they never spoke of going home to Norway. They were home here.

[17]See LeRoy Barnett, "The Buffalo Bone Commerce on the Northern Plains," *North Dakota History*, 39-1 (Winter, 1972), 23-42, for a description of the bone trade.

Pioneer social occasions almost invariable called for a group photograph, and the Golden Wedding Anniversary of the Esten Haugens in early Griggs County was no exception. In this June, 1887, picture, Ole Skrien is the third man from the left and Kari Skrien is the second woman from the right (holding the child).

Courtesy Sandra H. Skrien