

NEW LAND, NEW LIFE!

Norwegian Immigration in Minnesota: 1825-1925

Farm Settlements and Homesteading

Land represented dignity and family stability to Norwegian immigrants. Norwegians valued farming as a means of survival and as a vocation. Farming brought the Earth, God's gift, under cultivation. Most immigrants would farm. They had thought of a farm in terms of two, ten, or twenty acres. In America, the Homestead Act of 1862 allowed anyone to earn or buy a 160-acre farm by either farming the land for five years or by paying \$1.25 per acre.



**Log House, 1853, Gordonsville, MN
Minnesota Historical Society.**

Immigrants chose farm sites near water and woods in southeastern Minnesota, making land clearing more difficult and taking longer to produce cash crops. Wooded riverbanks reminded them of Norway and provided fuel, lumber, and wild game

Beginning with a log house, Norwegians built their farms “little by little,” gradually adding a cluster of small buildings, including a horse stable, a cow barn, a sheepfold, hog barn, hay shed, chicken house, dog house, wagon sheds, granary, corn crib, smokehouse, and privy, all arranged somewhat like farms in Norway.

A few had money to buy land, animals, equipment. Many needed loans to buy oxen, a plow, and seed. Most could register a land claim and find work to pay for it.

Most early farms were labor intensive, beating grain with a flail and picking corn by hand. Farm children herded animals before there were fences. Relatives and neighbors from Norway helped with harvest and barn-raising, and shared simple equipment. They led a simple and frugal life, and produced most of their own food and goods. The log cabin was often incorporated into a new frame house, or converted into a stable.

In the early 1870s, immigrants settled the prairies of western and northwestern Minnesota, using sod for their homes. Sod houses were small and dark, with insects, mice, and snakes for company. When it rained, the roof often leaked. “Soddies” were snug and warm against the cold, but were eventually replaced by frame houses, barns, and trees for windbreak.

The prairie seemed overwhelming and threatening. Some succumbed to monotony and to scorching heat and winds. Settlers feared prairie fires, or fairen, as Norwegians called them, which spread rapidly, and consumed all in their path. Grasshoppers did the same.

Wind and snow turned into blinding blizzards. It was common to tie ropes between farm buildings to feel your way back to the house in a storm.

By 1910, Norwegian-Americans farmed 57,500 farms out of 175,000 farms in Minnesota. Average 160-acre farms were worth \$20,000.



**Mrs. Beret Hagebak at the Hagebak sod
home near Madison, MN. About 1896.**

**Photographer: Hugh J Chalmers,
Minnesota Historical Society**



**Painting, Closing the Bargain,
by Herbjørn Gausta.
Luther College Fine Arts Collection;
Decorah, Iowa**