

## **Kristoffer Engen<sup>1</sup> and Ragnild Borgen, Charter Members of East Norway lake Lutheran Church**

Kristoffer Hansen was born in 1832, one of five sons and two daughters born to Hans and Olava on the small Bjerkeengen husplass in Vest Torpa, Nordre Land, Oppland, Norway. At the age of 25, Kristoffer Bjerkeengen had to take stock of his life in Norway. He decided to emigrate to America. No doubt he read in *Emigranten* about free land in America and opportunity for anyone willing to work hard.

So, Kristoffer, his younger brother Andreas, and his sister Helene and her husband Andreas Olsen set off for America in the spring of 1857. With stops in Rock Prairie, Wisconsin and Allamakee County, Iowa, Kristoffer – and maybe his brother Andreas – read about more fertile prairie land in western Minnesota from Ole Halvorson Næss' 1857 article in *Emigranten*. Hjalmar Holand's 1908 *Den Norske Settlementers Historie* credits Even Railson's "influence and reports on Norway Lake's charming attractions" with quite a few people moving to "this distant territory in 1859."

Among them was Christoffer H. Engen. Martin Ulvestad wrote in 1907 that "next after the Railsons came Christopher C. Engen from Nordre Land." Kristoffer Engen established a "squatters" claim on Section 12 in Monongalia Township. Kandiyohi County's 1905 Centennial History states that C.H. Engen was "the first permanent settler" in Arctander Township, establishing a claim on Section 12 on July 16, 1859. Svein-Erick Odegaard wrote in the Vest Torpa bygdebok that Engen relatives in Norway had word that Christoffer's brother Andreas also made his way to Kandiyohi County in 1859.

The 1860 census of Green Lake post office in Monongalia County shows Christopher Hansen farming a parcel of land he valued at \$217 and living next door to Even Railson.

Ragnild Swensdatter Borgen and Kristoffer were married at Saint Cloud on May 11, 1861. The 1905 *Illustrated History of Kandiyohi County* reports that Christopher and Ragnild's nuptials, conducted by Rev. A. Nelson in St. Cloud, were the first recorded marriage in Arctander Township of (at that time) Monongalia County.

Ragnild was born in Rollogg prestegjeld, Numedal, Norway in 1839 to Swen Gunderson and Margaret Mehus. She met her young shoemaker/farmer husband when her family moved to Norway Lake in 1860.

August 1862, in the midst of the Civil War, the local Dakota Native Americans in Minnesota had enough bad treatment from their agents and started an uprising. "Even Railson states that he notified Christopher Engen. Railson and Engen had their rifles, and walked around the lake in order to see if any Indians were near. They did not see any, and went to the Isle of Refuge." They stayed on the Island for several unpleasant days, made more so by an infestation of fleas. The Engens went to Zumbrota in Goodhue County to wait out the troubles, according to Ragnild's obituary.

Church minutes show that in 1874 the Norway Lake Lutheran Church took a "vote on the non-members" including Christopher Engen. Since he had been actively involved in the Norway Lake church for 12 years by then, this could have been because he considered himself a Haugean all along. In any case, Christopher and Ragnild stayed with East Norway Lake for a time, but by January 1891 had joined Nannestad Haugean church a mile to the west, most likely after a falling out with Pastor Fjelstad.

In February of 1899, the same year their adopted daughter Louise married and moved to Wisconsin, they sold their Section 12 land (minus one acre) to their nephew and godson Christian Engen giving him a warranty deed that was not recorded until March 1907 (Book 31, page 493) when Christoffer died. This may have been modeled after the Norwegian "life estate."

Ragnild Engen died on December 4, 1903 at the age of 64. Her obituary in the *Willmar Tribune Weekly* states, "The deceased was a devout member of the Norway Lake Hauge church, and the funeral occurred at that churchyard, with Rev. J.S. Halverson of Spicer officiating. Peace to the ashes of the brave pioneer woman who shared with her husband the trials and hardships of the early settlement."

Christopher Engen died on March 2, 1907 at the age of 74. Doctor Jacobs from Spicer listed his causes of death as: (1) possibly influenza, and (2) Bright's disease, a liver disease that was unusually common among men from Nordre Land.

His obituary in the March 13, 1907 *Willmar Weekly* Norway Lake column stated: "The funeral of the late Christopher H. Engen occurred from the home of the deceased's nephew, C.M. [Christian] Engen, on Thursday, March 7 - Rev. Halvorson of Spicer officiating. The remains were laid at rest in the Hauge cemetery, and were followed to their last resting place by a train of 37 [horse and buggy] teams. It was one of the largest funerals ever seen at that cemetery. Among those who attended the funeral was Mrs. Theo Nelson of Baldwin, Wisconsin, an adopted daughter of the deceased."

Kristoffer and Ragnild are buried at the Nannestad Hauge church cemetery in Arctander Township.

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1 This is a shortened version of an article by Pat Lindgren, Marlin Henjum, Ron & Mary Ann Peterson and Susan (Nelson) Benson. The shortening was done by Earl O. Knutson. The sources of information are listed within the text.