

## THE PETERSON BROTHERS OF NORWAY LAKE

Located approximately half way between Bergen and Stavanger on the far west coast of Norway sits an historic village. The name of this village is Moster.

According to Icelandic legend it was in the year 995 A. D. that a Norwegian named Olaf Trygvason docked his ship after sailing across the North Sea from England. At this site, Trygvason, a convert to Christianity who wanted to be king of Norway celebrated a mass and established a church. In that same year—995 A. D.—Olaf II Haraldsson was born. Olaf was raised as a pagan and became a Viking warrior who later converted to Christianity. He became the first really effective king of Norway and in 1024 A. D. at Moster instituted a religious code for Norway. The Church of Norway is considered to date from Olaf's actions at Moster. Olaf was later canonized by the church and is known yet today as Saint Olaf, the patron saint of Norway.

The Norway Lake community can be proud that a number of its early immigrants as well as present day citizens have roots in the Moster area of Norway. Among them is Peter Nelson Grindheim who was born there in 1808. In 1835, Peter married a girl from a small island called Boroy where they lived for several years. Her name was Wilhelmine Cathrine Hansdaughter Sem. Like most Norwegians, Peter farmed but also served as a “school keeper,” a teacher traveling from farm to farm teaching children to read and write.

Peter and Wilhelmine had six children, all born in Norway. Nels, the eldest, was born in 1836, followed by Hans in 1838, Peter in 1841, Sophus Christian in 1844, Anna in 1846 and Andreas in 1848. Sadly, Anna would die in infancy and Andreas lived only to age 7. The four remaining brothers, Nels, Hans, Peter and Christian would all emigrate to America.

Hans, age 17, was the first of the brothers to leave Norway on March 29, 1856. After ten weeks and three days on the ocean, Hans spied the New York harbor. He then headed inland reaching Beloit, WI in the latter part of June where he worked as a common laborer at farming and other odd jobs for three years. Brother Nels arrived in Beloit in 1857. In an interview with local writer Gabriel Stene, Hans described their trip to Norway Lake:

**Reading #1:** “In 1859 Johannes Iverson and family, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Osmundson and baby Samuel, my brother Nels and myself ventured to the Minnesota frontier, out in the wild west. We traveled in a covered wagon, pulled by oxen. After a rather tough journey through the wilds, the trail roads zig-zagging and winding about where it was most convenient to get through with poor bridges or with no bridges over streams, we finally landed at Norway Lake in what was then Monongalia County. Nels took the claim, which is now the home of his son William N. Peterson in Colfax Township. Johannes Iverson and family settled south of Crook Lake, in what is now Andrew Township. I took a claim in what is now Lake Norway Township. That same year, our brothers Peter and Kristian arrived from Norway to Preston, in Fillmore County. They came up to Norway Lake and joined us....The pioneers were in a family-like community, helping each other to build their frontier shacks, shanties, sod houses or small log cabins....The woods were filled with game, deer and elk. The brooks and streams were full of good fish, muskrats were in abundance and we spent the fall trapping and fishing.

In his interview with Gabriel Stene, Hans goes on to enumerate the whole Norway Lake settlement in 1860: the Swen Borgen’s and their son Gunder Swenson, Christopher and Ragnild Engen, Ole Dahl, Mr. and Mrs. Havald Halvorson and their bachelor sons Halvor, Johannes and Ole, Jacob and Lena Jacobson, the Railson Brothers, Even and Andrew, Thomas Osmundson’s, Ole Knutson’s, Even Glesne’s, the Larson’s, Kapperud’s and the John Totland family, also from Moster. Hans states that the “south shore of Norway Lake has a long string of energetic settlers” and “many an incident could be told about these early pioneers.” He does describe one of brother Nels’ and his experiences in the early days:

**Reading #2:** “Nils and I were batching on his claim north of the lake. We had a cow and a calf at John Totland’s who lived across the lake, and we also had our bread-baking and butter-making done at the Totland’s. To go around the lake meant journeying many miles. We were fisherman from Norway, used to boats, fishing and swimming. We conceived the idea of felling a big basswood tree, and cutting and hollowing out the log for a canoe. This we did, and we could navigate well enough when the weather was fine and keeping our tongue

**straight in our mouths and keeping our balance carefully. When we had the wind with us we raised an umbrella as a substitute for a sail and went just a flying. One day we had the wind against us going, but were congratulating ourselves that we would have a favorable trip home. We loaded our craft with a tub of butter, a few loaves of bread bundled up in a piece of cloth, a pail of milk and the umbrella. When we were out in the middle of the lake the wind raised havoc with us. The water washed up into the canoe so that it sank nicely down and then turned upside down. The wind stood straight for our shore, Nils took quick leave and struck out straight for shore. I hesitated a little to look for our floating personal property before I also made the swim for life at full speed. We soon reached the shore. What changes of clothing could one expect to find at a bachelors' home? We hung our clothes on some bushes and waited for them to dry. After a while our canoe floated to shore, the bread floated and so did the butter, the umbrella and the wooden pail, but the milk had not shown up yet. Tin pails were not in use in those days."**

The years between their arrival in 1859 and August of 1862 were days of peace and progress in the Norway Lake settlement. While there were numerous contacts with the Native Dakota Indians who frequented the Norway Lake area as a prime hunting area, relations with the settlers were generally good and as Hans Peterson himself is reported to have said: "We never feared the Indians, they were friendly. Although they were heathens, they were human beings like we are. They had responsibilities of life like we have. They felt hunger and suffering like we did. They had to scratch for a living like we did." By August of 1862, serious problems between the Dakota and the white settlers along the Minnesota River were brewing and when war broke out, the violence quickly spread into Monongalia County where, on August 20, a Dakota war party attacked and killed 13 settlers at the West Lake Settlement a short distance from Norway Lake. In the spring of 1862, after spending 1861 prospecting and steam boating down the Mississippi, Hans Peterson returned to Minnesota. That summer he went to work for New London pioneer and founder Louis Larson who had just purchased a horse-powered threshing machine. They had just set up the rig near Monticello when word arrived of the Indian uprising and Larson and Hans rushed to St.

Cloud. Meanwhile, a friend of the Peterson Brothers named Mathias Fjeldhaugen, one of the founders of the Crow River church, who lived in the Lake Prairie Settlement (Colfax Township) and had learned of the attack at West Lake, became concerned about the Peterson Brothers. While he knew they were alert and capable he was concerned enough to insist on checking on them. Fjeldhaugen is quoted as saying:

**Reading #3: “I couldn’t stop to think. It was a matter of life and death so I didn’t let the grass grow under my feet. We kept inside the timber as much as possible taking a northeast and southwest direction through the township for six miles. When we reached the spot where the present house now stands, we ran the last half mile across open prairie until we came to the house of Nils Peterson.” They found him at home. Yes, he had heard shouting and shooting across the lake but thought it only a drunken orgy as the Indians went crazy when they had liquor to drink, so he had not given it any further thought.**

Unknown to Nels, many of the Norway Lake settlers had taken refuge on an island in the lake after the West Lake attack. According to Fjeldhaugen’s narrative, they gathered Nels’ cattle and some belongings and headed for Lake Prairie which they reached late in the day. The group then headed east to Paynesville, then St. Cloud and settled their families in for the winter at St. Francis.

Hans, meanwhile, arrived in St. Cloud which he found in great turmoil. He proceeded on to Paynesville where he found Even Glesne and others from Norway Lake. Sending the families on to St. Cloud, the men made plans to return to Norway Lake to gather what personal property they could. Overnighing in the area, the men returned to St. Cloud where Hans joined a militia of 100 men under the command of Captain Freeman and headed for Forest City near Litchfield. Hans states that “We buried the bodies of the unfortunate as we found them.” Among those they buried were a number of bodies north of Willmar including the husband and son of Guri Enderson. Hans described burying the man with whom he traveled to Norway Lake in 1859:

**Reading #4: “I was detailed as a guide, as I had been trapping along the creek and knew where the slain Johannes Iverson lived. We found his body about half**

a mile south of his cabin with his wooden shoes on and his scythe by his side. Swathes of cut grass lay south to north on a slope west of a high stony knoll. We could see his little log cabin from the place. He was lying eastward. The company of 100 riders were on top of the hill on the east side while the four of us who were detailed to do so were digging the grave. It was a difficult task. He had lain there three days. The ground where he lay was soaked with water owing to the heavy rain that had fallen. We did not dig any deeper than three feet. He had worn wooden shoes when he was killed. We lay the wooden shoes and the scythe by the grave. We did not go to the scene where the little Swedish colony had been wiped out, the thirteen victims were buried in one grave, as it was reported that the job had been done by others.”

All four Peterson Brothers, Nels, Hans, Peter and Christian enlisted in Company D of the First Minnesota Mounted Rangers. According to historical records all four were mustered on October 16, 1862 in St. Cloud. Their first duties were to patrol an area between Sauk Centre and Fort Abercrombie just across the Red River in Dakota Territory. They witnessed atrocities committed on white settlers by the Dakota and faced skirmishes with them. Eventually they reported to Fort Ridgley on the Minnesota River to join the expedition under General Henry Sibley to forge to the front and punish the hostile Indians. The orders were “Pursue the Indians, take as many prisoners as you can, and kill as many as you can.” In his interview with Stene, Hans had this to say:

**Reading #5: “Whether these orders were issued by General Sibley, or by higher authority, I do not know. Some laid it to President Lincoln, but I always refused to believe it, as Abraham Lincoln was a man with a big heart and great sympathy. We headed first for the Yellow Medicine Agency, to Big Stone Lake, and Lake Traverse, where we met a reinforcement about three days out. Then over wild unsettled country we pushed our way into Dakota Territory, out on a boundless prairie which resembled being on the ocean. With us on the march were about 300 head of beef cattle. The head camp was made on the Cheyenne River. After crossing the river we pursued the Indians ahead of us. These were miserable days and long weeks. We struck water that did not agree with us. Sickness prevailed.”**

The five mile long Sibley column which left Minnesota on June 16, 1863 by mid-August had reached its western most point and had turned eastward. Shortly after, tragedy struck the Peterson Brothers as described by Hans:

**Reading #6: "Sickness continued to prevail among us. Brother Kristian had contracted a cold during the chase, this in connection with the bad water made him very ill. He was carried along in the ambulance for a day or two. A young volunteer, 16 years old, James Ponsford died. We had then come to the country now embraced with Griggs County and here brother Kristian died at a point eight miles south of where Cooperstown is now located. We were able to secure some rough lumber and made a box for him, and put him away as nearly as we could in a civilized manner. His grave is located two miles north and two miles east of what is now Hannaford, North Dakota. From the point where we buried our brother, it took us three days to reach Fort Abercrombie. About half our beef cattle had then been consumed. From there we crossed the country to Fort Ripley on the Mississippi River, and from there to Fort Snelling, where we were relieved and given our honorable discharge."**

Nels, Hans, and Peter were discharged from service on November 4, 1863. At the time of his death, Christian was only 19 years old. Upon leaving the army, Nels was 27, Hans 25 and Peter 22 years old. Four young men who had seen and done more than most men do in an entire lifetime.

Following their military service Nels, Hans and Peter's thoughts apparently turned to romance as Nels was married to Marthe Elenvold Mathiasdatter in late 1863. Marthe was the daughter of Mathias Fjeldhaugen, the man who went to check on Nels after the Indian attack at Norway Lake and who served with Sibley at the same time as the Petersons. The following winter, Peter, Nels and Hans along with Andrew Railson spent the winter trapping. During these long and cold winter nights, Hans had lots of time to think and his thoughts turned to Norway:

**Reading #7: "During this time I was overcome with a longing to go back to the motherland, to the old folks at home. Finally I could not stand it any longer, and hinted in a letter to them that they might see me in the near future. This was the spring of 1864, and I was soon on my journey to Norway, and arrived there**

**safely. It was a thrilling moment when I got back to the boyhood tramping grounds where I had left my child's shoes. Arriving at the old house I finally knocked on the door. Mother opened it and invited me into the house. I told her I come from America and was looking for a little home, and had heard that this house was for sale. 'No,' she said, 'We expect a son from America, and this house is not for sale. My husband is a member of the school commission. They have a meeting today. He will soon be here. In the meantime make yourself at home.' He soon arrived. I got up from my chair, reached him my hand for greeting and told him I was from America. That I was looking for a comfortable little home and had heard that this house was for sale. 'No,' he said, 'at least not now. We expect a son from America.' I thought to myself that I must have changed a lot in these eight years while I have been away. My eyes became moist, tears appeared and I hurried to make my identity known. Now I was home again under father's and mother's roof and within the cozy walls of the old home. There was a happy reunion and homecoming, joy among relatives and friends. I spent three years there. When returning to America I was accompanied by a young wife. This was in the spring of 1867."**

The girl Hans married in 1866 was Miss Anna Johannesdatter Totland who worked as a housemaid on the Grindland farm. There is a family story that says it was Anna more than Hans who wanted to go to America. It seems she had a sister, Gunhilde who immigrated eleven years earlier. Her parents were dead, the farm had been sold and she had no ties to Norway. They left Norway with their baby daughter Petra and forty other people from Moster, among them the Ole Mikkelson and Ole Knutson families who would settle in Colfax Township. It is interesting to note that the Mikkelson's had 10 children and the Knutson's had 6 and all 20 people lived with the Petersons from July of 1867 to May, 1868. Hans would remain a resident of Norway Lake Township for the rest of his days.

Once Hans left Norway, his parents, Peter and Wilhelmina Grindheim, were once again alone. Since their three surviving sons were now in America, they decided to go there as well. Wilhelmina became deathly ill on the ocean voyage and almost died. One family historian writes that Peter did not like living in America and became very homesick for Norway. His farm also needed to be sold so in

1873, Peter returned to Moster. Wilhelmina did not feel that she could survive another ocean voyage so she did not accompany him. Peter became ill in Norway and died there in January of 1874. He was 65 years old and is buried in the Moster church cemetery. Wilhelmina lived with her sons at Norway Lake until her death on February 15, 1896. She was 88 years old and is buried in the West Norway Lake Lutheran Cemetery near Sunburg.

Peter Peterson was married twice, first to Anne Elenfold Mathiasdatter who died a few years after they were married. He then married her sister, Marti Elenfold Mathiasdatter. Anne and Marti were sisters of Nil's wife Marthe and all three were daughters of Mathias Fjeldhaugen, later changed to Johnson, the man who went to check on Nils after the Indian attack at Norway Lake. Peter and Anne had three children: Wilhelmina, Peter and Oline. Peter and Marti, later changed to Marie, had 12 children: Andreas, Christian, Peter, Johann, William, Matthew, Nicoli, Arne, Henry, Clara, Alfred and Palmer. Peter continued to farm in Norway Lake Township until sometime around the turn of the century. The 1910 census finds Peter and Marie living in Silverdale, Washington. Marie died in 1913 and Peter on October 2, 1923. They are buried in the state of Washington. Most of the children moved to Washington. Christian remained on the Norway Lake farm.

Upon their return to Norway Lake from Norway, Hans and Anna and their baby daughter Petra settled down to farm and raise a family. They raised a total of 13 children: Petra, Johanna Louise, Christiana Christine, Peter Andreas, Antonette or Nettie, Wilhelmina, Hansine, Christian, Carl, Louise and three who died young Dorthea Sophie, Anna Gurine and Dorthea Louise. Six of Hans' children remained in this area: Petra, Peter, Hansine, Christian, Carl and Louise. Hans lived most of his life on the farm in Sections 23 & 24 of Norway Lake Township. His wife Anna died at age 55 in 1895. Hans lived to the ripe old age of 94 dying in 1933. We can be thankful for his long life as he left us a valuable history of those early years. Hans and Anna are buried at the West Norway Lake Cemetery near Sunburg. Hans and Peter were charter members of that congregation.

Nels, the oldest brother, was the first to marry shortly after leaving the army in 1863. He was married to Marthe, yet another daughter of Mathias Fjeldhaugen



and, as soon as it was considered safe, they returned to Norway Lake to take up farming and raise a family. On November 19, 1865, their second son, William, was baptized by Pastor Thomas Johnson, the same date the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway Lake is considered to have been formed. Nels would play an important role in the growth and life of this church his entire life. Following the death of his father, Nels, as the oldest son returned to Norway in the spring of 1874 to settle his father's estate. An auction was held on May 18 and Nels returned to America shortly after. Granddaughter Nella Swenson has written that later in life, Nels, Peter, and Hans all sent money back to the poor people of their home community in Norway.

Nels and Marthe lived on the farm located between Games Lake and Norway Lake most of their lives. They raised five children and an adopted nephew Carl Ludvig Johnson. The children were: Sophus Christian, who became a prominent Lutheran minister, William who took over the home farm, Peter Andreas, Ole Mathias, and Carl Sam, who eventually farmed the Norway Lake Fort Farm. Nels Peterson died in 1912 and Marthe in 1918. They are both buried at First Lutheran Church of Norway Lake Cemetery.

In conclusion, these words from Nels' obituary serve as a tribute to all four of these amazing Peterson Brothers:

**Reading #8: In the death of Nels Peterson the community has lost one of its most esteemed citizens, the local church a devout large hearted member, the family a kind and loving husband, father, grandfather, brother and uncle. For more than a half a century Nels Peterson was identified with the local congregation of the Lutheran church. The religious instruction of the young at home, the further education of young men to enter the church as teachers and preachers were among his chief concerns, and he was liberal in helping along this kind of work in word and deed. In the early days of the settlement Nils Peterson and his brothers, Hans and Peter were crack hunters of these regions. They came to the county in the summer of 1859, 53 years ago. They made hunting expeditions to Lake Johanna, Lake Minnewaska, and other places. They could tell many interesting experiences with the Indians with whom they had**

**hunted and camped. Nils and Hans were the first settlers in this country who hailed from the estate of Grindheim, Norway, and were the founders of the large colony of people from that place which has since located in Colfax and Norway Lake townships. The new-comers would usually come to the Nils Peterson home where they would get the assistance they needed in selecting a homestead and getting settled. Peterson disliked being the object of praise and gaze. He hated all kinds of showy sham and glittering humbug. To be, not to seem was his watchword.**

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Primary Sources:

“A Peterson Brothers History” compiled by Peter Gandrud

“Peterson Roots” compiled by Nella (Peterson) Swenson

“Old Norway Lake Reminiscences,” Willmar Tribune, series of articles by Gabriel Stene under the pen name “The Pioneer Kid,” July 29, 1925-January 26, 1927.