Pilgrims in a Strange Land: The First Norwegian-American SDA Church in the United States

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In December, 1861, several Norwegian families led by Andrew Olsen and Tarel Johnson organized the first Norwegian-American Seventh-day Adventist church in Oakland township, Jefferson County, Wisconsin.

The initial steps which led to the organization of this church began in Norway in the 1840's. The Olsen, Johnson, Loe, and Serns families were all farmers in a rural district of Vest-Agder County, twenty-eight miles northwest of Kristiansand, an ice-free seaport in the south of Norway. Andrew Olsen wrote, "My early days were spent in the rural district among the rocks and hills of that mountainous country, where hard work with economy and frugality is the usual lot of the people."

The families had been baptized and instructed into the Lutheran church—the state church of Norway—and they were members of the Bjelland parish. Dissatisfied with the formalism of the state church, they had invited to their homes Quaker representatives and other lay preachers. Under their influence, they had begun to question some Lutheran doctrines, feeling that they were not in harmony with the Scriptures. At the end of one of these cottage meetings in the fall of 1848, an itinerant Swedish lay minister remembered only as Nyland stated, "If we should strictly follow the Scriptures, we would keep Saturday and not Sunday; for there is no Scripture evidence for keeping Sunday."

This was a surprise to the group and led to a great deal of discussion although it did not lead to the observance of the seventh day at the time because of a reluctance to break away from a long-standing Christian tradition as well as fear of persecution.

Despite the dominance of the Lutheran state church, Norway in the nineteenth century did feel the dissenting influence of the Quakers and of the followers of Hans Nielsen Hauge, known as Haugeans. Hauge (1771-1824), a religious protester who wished to substitute a living faith for the formalism in the state church, stressed personal piety, a spiritual outlook on life, and a simple form of worship. From 1796 to 1804 he carried his message of repentance and conversion throughout southern Norway, causing a social conflict between officialdom and the religiously awakened common people. Arrested in 1804 after having set up a printing press in Kristiansand, he spent a decade in prison and was finally released in 1814 after payment of a fine. He died near Christiania (Oslo) in 1824. Most of the early Norwegian immigrants to America were from rural Norway and had been deeply influenced by Haugeanism.

Quakerism was established in Norway by a small group of sailors captured and imprisoned in England in 1807 where they were converted by the Quakers. Upon their return, small societies were established in Christiania and Stavanger. Both the Quakers and Haugeans were harshly dealt with by the government and the state church.

During this time, dissenters longed for a place where they could follow their religious convictions without being harassed. Inevitably, their attention turned to the vast land across the ocean. Their knowledge of the United States came from letters sent back by the first immigrants. These letters were copied, passed among friends and neighbors, and carried from parish to parish by lay preachers. Several immigrant guidebooks were published during this period, the most influential being Ole Rynning's True Account of America, published in
Andrew Olsen who, with Tarel Johnson, organized the first Norwegian-American SDA church in Oakland, Wisconsin.

1838, which declared that in America every man could worship God as he saw fit.

The mainstream of Norwegian immigration to the United States began in 1836 with approximately 19,000 Norwegians emigrating by 1850. Several factors—besides religion—contributed to this population movement: three-fourths of Norway cannot be cultivated and much of the remaining one-fourth is suitable only for trees. Political discontent also played a role and, of course, the strong reaction against the oppressive state church.

Wishing for religious freedom and improved economic conditions, the Olsen, Johnson, Loe, and Serns families decided to emigrate to North America. First to leave, on March 26, 1850, were Andrew Olsen, his half-brother Holver Olsen, Ole Hegland Serns, and their families. The immigrant guidebooks recommended an early start in spring so that crops could be raised for the first year and the new settlers would have time to find or build housing and prepare for winter. The entire trip took the Olsen and Serns families thirteen weeks. They spent nine weeks crossing the Atlantic in the sailing ship Hermes. Four weeks were spent in making the trip from New York City to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They traveled first by steamboat up the winding Hudson River past numerous farms and then by way of the Erie Canal to Buffalo; from there they sailed the Great Lakes to Milwaukee where they were met by a Norwegian named Peter Larson who transported the families by bullock cart the seventy miles to his home in southern Oakland township in Jefferson County, which was part of the Norwegian-American settlement of Koshkonong, Wisconsin.

Jefferson County, five hundred and seventy-six square miles in area, had more forests and swampy areas than the rolling prairies of Dane County, which lies directly to the east. The Rock river is the largest stream and Lake Koshkonong lies in the southwestern part of the county.

The settlement had been established in 1840 and took its name from Koshkonong Lake and Creek—an Ojibway word meaning "shut-in-with-fog." The most important and prosperous of the Wisconsin Norwegian-American settlements, its name was applied to a general region that extended a considerable distance from Lake Koshkonong and included the southeastern portion of Dane County, the southwestern part of Jefferson County, and the northern part of Rock County. By 1859 greater Koshkonong had a population of 2,670 Norwegians.

The settlement was well known in Norway as evidenced by an early report from an immigrant dating from about 1845 which,

... told of the fertility of the soil, the low prices of land, and the good chances for employment. In a letter... received from Ivor Hove, he wrote that he received thirty-five bushels of wheat per acre and that the grass was so high that it was possible in a single day to cut enough for the winter's provision for a cow.... The America fever grew worse with each letter that came from the land of wonders.

Andrew Olsen bought a farm of two hundred and forty acres and immediately began the task of clearing and improving it. The first Olsen home was a log cabin, but harvests were good and cattle raising successful and soon there was enough money to build a large frame house. Ole Serns purchased eighty acres nearby for one hundred dollars on July 11, 1850. The hard work of making a new home, learning English, and otherwise adjusting to a new culture gave the three families little time for their spiritual life.

In 1854 the families of Soren Loe and Tarel Johnson moved to Oakland to be near their relatives. Berte Olsen, Andrew's wife, was the sister of Soren Loe and Tarel Johnson's second wife Todne. The Loes and Johnsons had emigrated in the spring of 1849 and settled in the Fox River Norwegian-American settlement about ten or twelve miles from Ottawa, Illinois.

Founded in 1834, the Fox River settlement, in LaSalle County, Illinois, was another Norwegian-American community established in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. It numbered two hundred and twenty-one families for a total population of 1,252 by the year 1850.

According to Andrew Olsen, the families began their Christian experience in America some time after settling in Oakland when Christian B. Willerup invited them to a series of Methodist evangelistic meetings in Cambridge, Wisconsin, five miles from the Olsen home. Finding Methodism to be a partial answer to their spiritual questions, the Olsen, Johnson, Serns and Loe families soon became members of the Willerup Methodist Church in Cambridge.

Organized in 1854, with fifty-two charter members, by Willerup, a Danish-American missionary supported by the Methodist Home Missionary society, the Willerup Methodist Church was the first Scandinavian Methodist church in the world. A native of Copenhagen, Willerup had emigrated to the United States at an early age. He became a teacher in Savannah, Georgia, at seventeen and was converted to Methodism prior to 1838.
He settled in Pennsylvania where he became a circuit rider—a member of the traveling ministry. In 1850 he was sent to Wisconsin to work among the Scandinavians. Finding their numbers in Milwaukee to be too small, he set out on horseback to minister to the Norwegians in the Koshkonong area.

When recording his first impressions of the Norwegian settlements, Willerup wrote:

I left Milwaukee for a trip out into the country toward the west. When I got out on the prairie to visit families, it was exactly as if I were in Norway. I heard no other language than the Norwegian— their dress, conduct, customs, and the like were just what they were in Norway. Since I found no church, I preached in private homes out in the prairie.

Meetings were held in a log schoolhouse or settlers’ cabins in the Cambridge area with people walking as far as five or six miles even in stormy weather to attend the services. Soon after organizing a congregation, Willerup began to plan a small stone church building. Farmers mortgaged their farms and Willerup contributed most of his mission allowance to pay for the church which was dedicated on July 21, 1852. Willerup used the church in Cambridge as a base while founding other Norwegian Methodist congregations in Wisconsin until 1856, when he was transferred to Racine, Wisconsin.

Joining the Methodist church renewed the interest of the four families in the study of the Scriptures, and the Sabbath question again occupied their thoughts. At first they consoled themselves with the thought that the Methodist minister, who seemed possessed by the Holy Spirit, would surely know if the keeping of Sunday was not right. After much soul searching, in the autumn of 1854 they decided to study the Scriptures pertaining to this matter themselves.

During that time, Soren Loe and Tarel Johnson made the acquaintance of Gustaf Mellberg, who urged them to keep the Sabbath. Mellberg, a Swedish neighbor, had become a Seventh-day Adventist after his arrival in the United States. He may have been converted in June of 1854 by James White, who wrote Mellberg, “We shall never forget the season when we wept together by the roadside on parting last June.”

On January 22, 1855, Mellberg wrote James White expressing a desire to translate a Sabbath tract of sixteen pages for the Norwegians in his area because he had had several short conversations with four of them about the Sabbath and had convinced three of the four to observe the day as a holy day. He indicated that Elisha S. Sheffield, an Adventist minister, had collected five dollars toward the printing costs. Unfortunately, Mellberg became involved with the age-to-come controversy advocated by J. M. Stephenson and D. P. Hall, two Adventist ministers in Wisconsin, and did not follow through with his work among the Norwegians. The believers of the age-to-come were a minority group of defectors from Seventh-day Adventism who held that probation would continue after the Second Advent and sinners would receive a second chance. In 1855 Stephenson and Hall joined the Messenger party, another group of dissidents led by H. S. Case and C. P. Russell and named for their paper, the Messenger of Truth. By 1858 this group had scattered because of internal disagreements and lack of financial support.

The Johnson and Serns families began to observe the Sabbath during the latter part of 1854. About Easter of 1855, Andrew and Berte Olsen and Soren and Bertha Loe kept their first Sabbath at the home of Andrew Olsen.

Realizing that they would meet opposition, they agreed to give up the seventh day as the Sabbath if Pastor Willerup could convince them that Sunday was the true Biblical Sabbath. When the expected visit came, Willerup brought two associates along. Andrew Olsen stated that, “their efforts only confirmed us the more in the truth; for we saw that they could produce no evidence from the Scriptures that the keeping of Sunday was ordained of the Lord.”

Wishing to keep these families as members of his church, Willerup proposed a compromise: they could “keep their Jewish Sabbath, if they would keep the Christian Sabbath also.” This compromise worked for a while. The four families talked to their associates in the Methodist church and by 1858 four other families had joined them in keeping the Sabbath. Because their beliefs agreed with the Methodists in all but the Sabbath, they were called Seventh-day Methodists.

Prior to 1858, these families had no connection with the Seventh-day Adventists. But in the early spring of 1858, several of the younger members of this company of Sabbath keepers, who understood English, attended meetings held by Elisha S. Sheffield, a Seventh-day Adventist minister, on the subject of baptism by immersion. This caused a lively discussion and when all but a few decided to be baptized the first real break with the Methodists resulted. They were disfellowshipped from their congregation for heresy.

Acceptance of baptism by immersion opened the way for the Advent message to be preached in the community. Waterman Phelps, a Seventh-day Adventist minister who lived near Hebron, Jefferson County, Wisconsin, went to Oakland and began holding meetings in April, 1858. It was a difficult undertaking because he did not speak Norwegian and there was no interpreter. Those who understood a few words would whisper them to their neighbors. Phelps was a powerful speaker and held many stirring sessions.

As a result of these meetings, Andrew and Berte Olsen and one other unknown person were baptized in May of 1858. Later in the month, six more were baptized one Sabbath and five the next for a total of fourteen. Further baptisms followed and in the last week of December, 1858, several young people, including Ole A. Olsen, the son of Andrew Olsen, followed their parents’ example and were baptized. The work in Oakland advanced rapidly. Meetings were held that winter in both Koshkonong and Oakland townships. A number of Americans joined the group and services were held both in English and Norwegian. By March of 1859, the number of baptized Sabbath keepers had reached over twenty.

J. M. Stephenson and D. P., Hall, mentioned previously, held meetings in the neighborhood and visited the church members at their homes advocating their age-to-come theories. Francis Johnson, son of Tarel
Johnson, confessed in March, 1859, that:

I fought that which I now consider truth, and embraced the theory of the future age. I became worldly-minded, and I might say dead; but thank God, I was not plucked up by the roots. I spoke hard words against the gift of prophecy which had been manifested in the church, and against the Review. I feel to confess all my wrongs to my brethren and friends, and ask their forgiveness. I have confessed my faults to the Lord, and I believe that he has forgiven my sins.

According to John G. Matteson, the Oakland church was not seriously affected by these theories.

By 1858 the Messenger party, of which Stephenson and Hall were members, had lost most of its support. Early in 1858, James White reported:

Not one of the eighteen messengers of which they once boasted as being with them is now bearing a public testimony, and not one place of regular meeting exists to our knowledge among them.

However, age-to-come Adventists did remain a factor in Jefferson County. In 1890 they had a group of thirty-six meeting in a rented hall. At that time, the Oakland church was the only Seventh-day Adventist church in the county and had a membership of thirty-eight.

Church organization was a problem for the early Sabbath keeping Adventists. “Coming out of Babylon” or separating from the organized churches of the day was considered one of the marks of those expecting the soon return of Christ. As Roswell F. Cottrell, a pioneer Adventist minister expressed it: “To ‘make us a name’ and to have any legal organization would be to become part of Babylon; legal incorporation would be union of church and state.”

Still, the subject of church organization in the state of Wisconsin and at Oakland could not be side-stepped indefinitely. At a conference held in September of 1861 at Avon, Wisconsin, all the arguments for and against organization were presented and it was finally voted to follow the Battle Creek model for church and conference organization. Later that year, the Norwegians implemented the decision locally under the guidance of Elders Isaac Sanborn and William S. Ingraham, the two leading Seventh-day Adventist ministers in the state. It is interesting to note that while the Norwegians supported the move to organize, the Americans, including Waterman Phelps, drew back. This was attributed to the fact that some held age-to-come views and that others, Phelps among them, were addicted to tobacco, the use of which would not be allowed after organization.

Nevertheless, before leaving Oakland, Waterman Phelps gave the following testimony concerning the Norwegian Adventists:

I wish to say to the Norwegian brethren, that I am thankful and indebted to them for what they have done for me, since I started to preach among them, and I'll add for their benefit, that in benevolence, meekness, and righteousness, they rank above most people that I have known and lived among. God bless them!

William S. Ingraham reported to James White from Monroe, Wisconsin, on April 15, 1862, that:

I have just returned from Oakland. We had a good meeting there. Three more joined the church. Probably Bro. Phelps is beyond the reach of the truth. He is going into the future age delusion.

Until 1864 the church members met in private homes or the neighborhood school house, but in that year Andrew Olsen donated a plot of land which was the highest point in the community, a pleasant, low hill overlooking the surrounding countryside, large enough for both a church and cemetery. The church building was completed the same year, and the members began to look for an Adventist pastor who spoke their mother tongue.

The felt their prayers were answered when John G. Matteson, a Danish Adventist from Poysippi, Wisconsin, visited them in the summer of 1864. Matteson had become a Seventh-day Adventist in 1863 and was to spend the remainder of his life preaching to the Scandinavians both in the United States and in Scandinavia. He met several times with the Oakland church members and promised to come back in October to hold a series of revival meetings.
That Matteson was as pleased to contact the Oakland members as they were to welcome him is evidenced by his statement:

When I began working among Adventists I met with little encouragement, except among a few Norwegian Sabbathkeepers, the Olsen and Johnson families in Oakland, Wisconsin. They were at the time the only Scandinavians who observed the seventh-day Sabbath.

The Oakland Adventists desired that Matteson live near them; to this end, Andrew Olsen built a cabin in 1865, hoping to induce him to move to the area. He did, together with his wife and their three children, early in 1866, and remained in Oakland for eleven happy years:

We never lived in a more quiet and peaceable place. The climate was healthful, the children could run about the field and grove, and they grew up as happy and healthy as any children I have ever seen. It was a great loss to them, healthwise and otherwise, that they had to move away from our home in Oakland.

While in Oakland, Matteson had a dream about James and Ellen White, in July 1867. This was a time when the Whites were being severely criticized by some members of the church, and the letter he wrote to them reporting the dream in detail must have been of some encouragement:

I was in a large house where there was a pulpit somewhat like those we use in our meetinghouses. On it stood many lamps which were burning. These lamps needed a constant supply of oil, and quite a number of us were engaged in carrying oil and filling them. Elder White and his companion were busily engaged, and I noticed that Mrs. White poured in more oil than any other. Then Elder White went to a door which opened into a warehouse, where there were many barrels of oil. He opened the door and went in, and Mrs. White followed. Just then a company of men came along, with a great quantity of black stuff that looked like soot, and heaped it all upon Elder and Mrs. White, completely covering them with it. I felt grieved, and looked anxiously to see the end of these things. I could see Elder and Mrs. White both working hard to get out from under the soot, and after a long struggle they came out as bright as ever, and the evil men and soot disappeared. Then Elder and Mrs. White engaged more heartily than ever in supplying the lamps with oil, but Mrs. White still had the precedence.

I dreamed that the following was the interpretation: The lamps represented the remnant people. The oil was the truth and heavenly love, of which God's people need a constant supply. The people engaged in supplying lamps were the servants of God laboring in the harvest. Who the evil company were in particular I could not tell, but they were men moved upon by the devil, who directed their evil influence specially against Elder and Mrs. White. The latter were in great distress for a season, but were at last delivered by the grace of God and their own earnest effort. Then finally the power of God rested upon them and they acted a prominent part in the proclamation of the last message of mercy. But Mrs. White had a richer supply of heavenly wisdom and love than the rest.
Coming when it did, Matteson's letter must have brought a note of cheer to the Whites in their struggles. Toward the turn of the century, a church school was developed in Oakland. The first teacher was Hettie Huntington of Green Bay, Wisconsin, who arrived from Battle Creek College in January 1899. Initially, there were eight pupils and for a time the school was held in the church and later in a private home. By the second year, the number of students increased to ten. Their program was quite spartan. In Hettie Huntington's words:

We had only a wood heater, which did poor service. No textbooks. We searched our arithmetic problems out of the Bible. For readers we used the Gospel Primer, Christ's Object Lessons, and whatever we could find. Our only blackboard was about three feet by four feet. No busy work excepting as we would cut up picture post cards for puzzles, or cut out letters and paste them on small cardboard squares for jumbled words. There was nothing to buy not even crayolas.

I received twelve dollars per month wages, and boarded around, from two to four weeks at a place. Our needs were few, our lives simple. We were in the country, four miles from a post office, and once a week—usually on Saturday night one farmer would hitch up a horse to go after the neighborhood mail, which was the event of the week.

Miss Huntington married Henry A. Olsen, a nephew of Andrew Olsen, in August, 1900, and became a member of the community. She continued to teach for five years but her wages were reduced to ten dollars a month because it was felt that her husband could help contribute to her support. Four other young teachers followed her pattern and married into the community.

Through the years, the Oakland church served as a center from which evangelistic work spread among Scandinavians both in the United States and Europe. Matteson, the first minister, was provided with a base of operation for spreading the Advent message to Scandinavians throughout the Middle West for eleven years before he was sent to Europe to continue his work among the Scandinavians there.

Eleven children from the families of the pioneer members of the Oakland church became church workers. This was in many cases the result of their upbringing. Matteson testified to this:
Our brethren in Oakland took great pains to make their children useful. They had to work diligently on the farm when they did not attend school. They had a very good English day school and a good Sabbath-school.

Martin M. Olsen, son of Andrew, reminisced, “for my parents the most important goal was not to work hard and get rich. The most important question to them was: How can we bring up our children for the Lord?” His mother was always concerned that they not come under poor influences at school. Morning and evening worship were part of their daily calendar, and the ushering in of the Sabbath on Friday was an occasion for special celebration. Martin remembered that “once in the middle of the week my brother E. G. and I were some distance away from home and one said to the other, ‘I wish we had Friday night twice a week.’ We thought there was too much time between each.”

The Andrew Olsen family contributed six children to church work. The oldest son, Ole Andres, attended Milton College in Wisconsin and Battle Creek College in Michigan for a total of two years. Ordained to the ministry in 1873, he was president of the Wisconsin (1874-76, 1880-81), Dakota (1882-83), Minnesota (1883-85), and Iowa (1884-45) conferences before going overseas to serve as president of the Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish conferences. In 1888 he was elected president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. During his administration, 1888-1897, there was a tremendous growth of the church and its institutions not only in the United States but also in Europe, Africa, Asia, South America, and the Pacific Islands. Beginning in 1898, he labored successively in South Africa, Europe, Britain and Australasia. When he died in 1915 at the age of 69, he was serving as vice-president of the North American Division and secretary of the North American Foreign Department.

Andrew’s second son, Andrew D., received his ministerial license in 1876 and was ordained in 1880. He served as president of the Dakota (1883-1887) and Minnesota (1888-1889) conferences. He died in 1890 of pulmonary consumption at the age of thirty-eight.

Martin M. Olsen received his ministerial license when he was twenty-two and served as a minister for ten years in Michigan and the Dakota Territory. In 1889 he was sent to Denmark, where he remained until his death in 1940. He served the church as a teacher, minister, editor, and conference president.

Edward Gunder Olsen was educated at Battle Creek College, received his ministerial license in 1879, and was ordained in 1881. He was a missionary to Norway and Denmark for seven years, president of the Iowa conference (1893-1896) and church pastor in Wisconsin, South Dakota, Colorado, and Iowa. He died in 1931 at Mason City, Iowa.

A fifth son, Albert J., was a Bible worker and colporteur and eventually became a publishing department secretary. He worked in the states of Alabama, Wisconsin, and Michigan.

The youngest daughter, Anna married Frank Armitage, a minister. They went as missionaries to Solusi Mission, in Africa, in 1898, where she died of malaria that same year.

Two of Tarel F. Johnson’s sons became ministers. Ole Andres attended for one year the Seventh-Day Baptist college in Milton, Wisconsin, spent four years at Battle Creek College, and one year in New York City studying Greek and Hebrew. Ordained to the ministry in 1876, he served as a church pastor and evangelist in Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Montana, and was president of the Wisconsin Conference (1894-1896). In 1900 he became president of the Norwegian conference where he remained seven years. He taught in the Scandinavian department at Union College (1891-93, 1897-99) and at Walla Walla College (1908-1922). He authored The Bible Textbook. Ole died at Loma Linda, California, in 1923.

Henry R. Johnson was a minister in Wisconsin, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan. He taught at Union College and the Danish-Norwegian Seminary at Hutchinson, Minnesota. He died in 1933 at Luck, Wisconsin.

The Serns family contributed two sons to the ministry. Mahlon H. was a pastor-evangelist in Wisconsin. Arthur Eugene was a minister until 1925 when he became a medical student at the College of Medical Evangelists in Loma Linda, California. He practiced in Santa Barbara, California, and died there in 1957.

From humble beginnings in the American Midwest, the Norwegian-American Seventh-day Adventists exerted a mighty influence for good in their adopted homeland and the world at large, proclaiming the soon return of their Lord and living the hope of the second Advent in all their relations. Like the Biblical worthies, they “all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off” (Hebrews 11:3).