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NORWEGIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

Prepared by Leif Ahlgren

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The Norwegian Immigration to the United States

The great immigration to the United States from Norway was a long exodus—a little over a hundred years to be exact. In relation to the number of people who came through, it was a quite short amount of time. Although the Norwegians weren't the first people to leave their land, they did so at one of the most feverish paces ever known. Norway lost a total of 45% of its natural population increase during its years of exodus. The only country to lose more of its population in the 1800s was Ireland. There are many questions as to why they Norwegians came; what kind of Norwegians they were, and where they ended up.

In 1821 a man named Klein Pedersen came to the United States to investigate for Norwegian Quakers if moving to the United States would be a good solution to their growing opposition in Norway. Cleng Peerson, as the Americans called him, assessed that the new world was a suitable place for the seekers of religious freedom. So in 1825 the Quakers sailed from Norway in their very own ship, called *Restauration*. These 52 Norwegians were from Stavanger and first settled in Kendall, New York, but after poor conditions and death, the survivors moved to the Fox River Valley of Illinois. There they established the first Norwegian settlement in the Midwest.

The movement to the U.S. grew slowly over the next ten years, but from 1843 on, no fewer than one thousand Norwegians left their homeland each year to come to America. Previously, Norwegians had to utilize the Swedish iron trade routes to travel to the U.S. Göteborg, Sweden was the main city Norwegians departed from, but after 1836, ships left from the main ports of Norway every spring. These ships usually went to New York City, where immigrants were inspected at Ellis Island to see if they were healthy enough to be allowed into the country. From there, if their destination was the Midwest, they had to take a boat up the Hudson River to the Erie Canal. There they took the ship further west through the Great Lakes and to cities like Chicago and Milwaukee. After England passed the British Navigational Acts in 1849, ships came in as far as Quebec. This gave Norwegians easier access to the Midwest, and once the railroad system was finished in the 1850s, virtually any U.S. port could be used by immigrants.

The first Norwegians who settled in the Midwest initially settled in the states of Illinois and Wisconsin—then in Iowa and Minnesota, and later in the Dakotas. By 1860, 55,000 Norwegians were already living in the Midwest. Three out of every four were either born in Norway, or had Norwegian parents. Up to this time, 78,000 Norwegians had forsaken their homeland. Most of them were families from either eastern or western Norway.

After 1865 we see three gigantic waves of emigration from Norway. The first began in 1866 and lasted until 1873. These immigrants were the children born in the Norwegian baby boom of the 1820s. They were mostly families from the country communities who wanted a better life. They also were thinking about the well-being of their children. The emigrants had wanted to give their children a better opportunity to live than they had. Norway was in a

recession and the farming was poor. With only 3% of Norway being fertile and the rapidly growing population, many poor families could not see continuing to live in Norway. Moving to the United States seemed to be the only good solution. In 1862 the U.S. Homestead Act was passed. It stated that all settlers were allowed 160 acres free of charge, if they settled in certain areas of the Midwest. This proposal brought the Norwegians by the thousands. It was probably particularly attractive to younger men who had grown up on farms. It was customary in Norway at that time for the oldest son to inherit the family farm. Younger brothers would have to either work on their brother's farm, or move out. In all during the first great wave, 110,895 Norwegians had emigrated—roughly 15,700 Norwegians per year. Norway's natural population increase had gone down 63.4% because of this.

In the 1860s Norwegians from the cities began to come also, and by 1876 they were in a majority. The people began coming from the cities as well as the country now. Just because they had lived in the city prior to leaving Norway, we cannot assume that they were all city folk. Many people from the country moved to cities before leaving for America. They did this to find work where they could earn enough to buy their ticket.

The second wave of emigration was from 1879 till 1893. In those years Norwegians traveled to the U.S. at a rate of 18,900 per year. In the years between 1878 and 1884, no fewer than 21,000 Norwegians left each year. That is approximately 1% of the population that moved away each year. The largest year of immigration occurred in this wave. It was in 1882 when 28,800 Norwegians left. That was the largest amount of people to ever have emigrated in one year from Norway, and it was more than the population of Norway's then third-largest city, Trondheim.

The third wave of emigration started in 1900 and lasted until 1914. Many people got their ticket paid for them before they came (as high as 40% of all immigrants in some years). Often, these were men who came as indentured servants of Norwegian immigrant farmers, who fronted them the money for the ticket. These farmhands were usually young. A third of them were between 15 and 25 years of age. Many men came and worked off their debts on the farm of the man who bought their ticket. Eventually they earned enough to buy their own land to farm themselves. Others who came intended to eventually go back to their homeland, after earning some good money. Often they stayed because the pay was too good and they enjoyed living in the young and diverse new country.

Although many Norwegians came to America, there were also many first- and second-generation Norwegians who returned to their homeland. Poor crop yields and harsh weather persuaded many to leave the United States. In Norway's 1920 census, approximately 55,000 Norwegians living in Norway were Norwegian Americans, and 7,600 of them were born in the United States. The great depression was also hard on everyone in America. Some Norwegians thought that a life back in the old country didn't sound so bad, compared to the conditions they lived under in those years. Between the years 1931 and 1940, 32,000 Norwegians moved back to Norway. In the years between 1891 and 1930, when the great migration stopped, a total of 155,000 Norwegians had moved back to their homeland.

The great Norwegian exodus was a truly overwhelming phenomenon. Rarely have so many people left their homeland to move to another country. In all, more than 800,000 Norwegians came to America—a number equivalent to Norway's entire population in 1801. Because of that volume of immigrants there are many Norwegian clubs and organizations in the U.S. today. Many American Norwegians enjoy visiting relatives and returning to their forefathers' land, and likewise, the Norwegians of today can find a place to stay with their American cousins when they come to the U.S. on vacation.

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