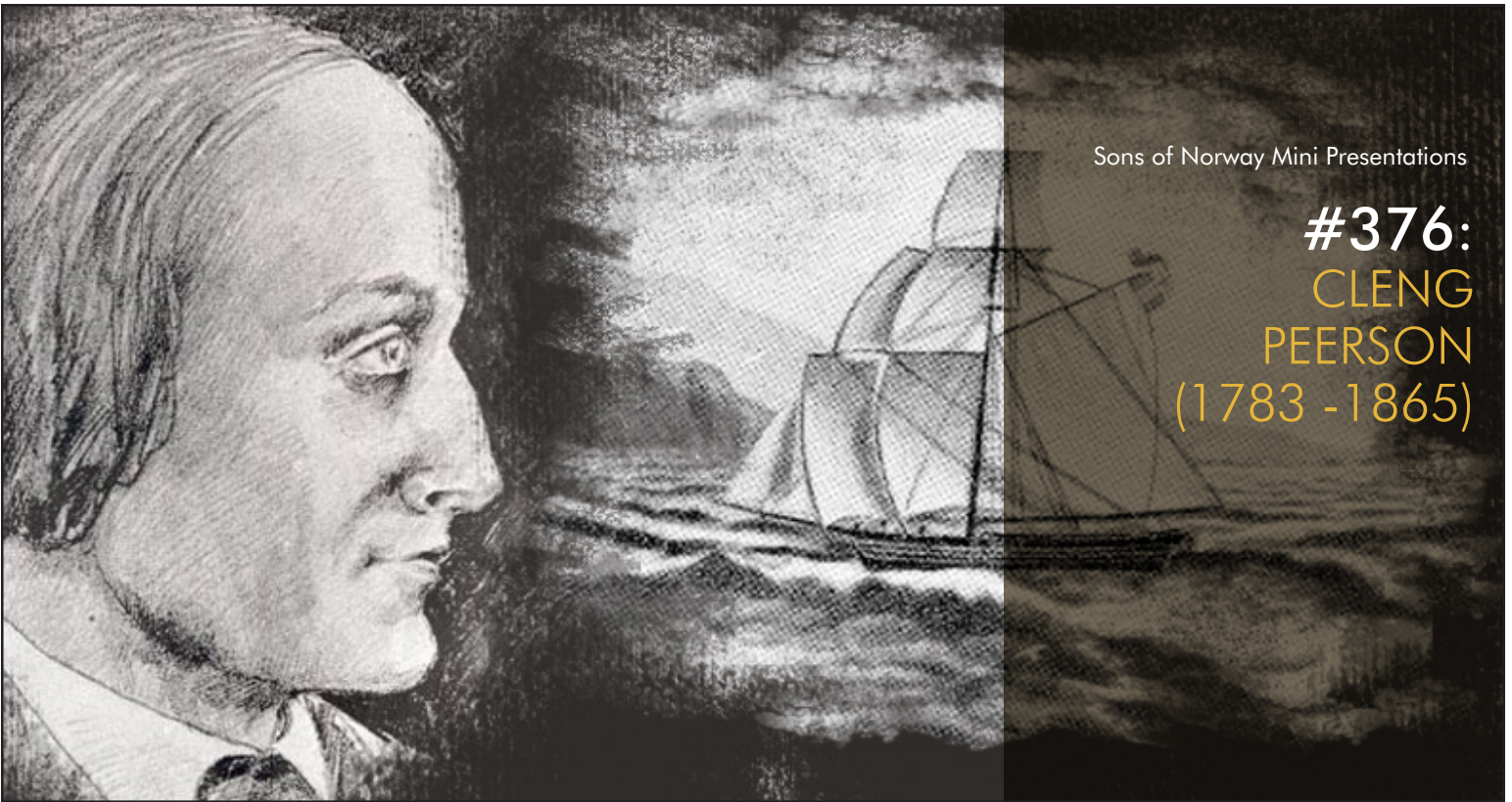


#376:
CLENG
PEERSON
(1783 -1865)



Cleng Peerson was a trailblazer for Norwegian emigrants, dubbed the “Father of Norwegian Immigration to America.” Drought, religious discrimination, the high price of land and Peerson’s adventurous spirit made him decide to go to the New World. He wanted to help other Norwegians attain better lives.

Born in 1782 in Tysvær, near Stavanger, he was originally known as Kleng Pedersen Hesthammer. His first exploratory voyage to the U.S. in 1821, at age 38, was funded by religious groups in Stavanger. He wandered around the U.S. on foot for several years, familiarized himself with the culture, and returned in 1824, preparing a group of 52 to emigrate on the small sloop *Restoration* in 1825. He traveled ahead and met them in New York, and they established a community in northern New York, near Rochester, now called the Kendall Settlement.

Never content to stay in one place, Peerson made two more trips back to Norway in 1838 and fostered new settlements of Norwegians—especially Norwegian Quakers—in New York, Missouri, Illinois, Iowa and Texas. He would travel west to scout new land, returning to previous settlements to promote the newer community to the residents.

In 1850 Peerson arrived in East Texas and stayed with Norwegian friends for several years. In 1854, seventeen pioneers from Hedmark, Arendal and Koppervik settled in newly formed Bosque County, near Clifton. It became the largest Norwegian settlement in the American Southwest and received national historical recognition. Peerson was granted 320 acres by the State of Texas for his organizational efforts—the only Norwegian to ever receive a gift of this kind from the US government. Peerson remained in Bosque County for fifteen years, until his death in 1865, helping the pioneer community get established. It was his longest stay in one place during his years in America.

An off-beat spirit with no particular profession, Peerson was portrayed as a dreamer, and called “Peer Gynt of the Prairies” for his propensity to wander the flatlands of the U.S. in search of his next new settlement. He assisted many religious groups in escaping persecution in Norway, yet did not adhere to a specific faith himself. He favored communitarianism, and helped everyone, often doing it in such a subtle way that people didn’t even think to thank him. Most accounts of his life have been given orally, since he left behind little in the way of writing- only five letters from Peerson are known to exist, and occasional writings in magazines and newspapers. He wrote a piece for *Bergens Tidende* during his stay in Norway from 1842 to 1843. A few days earlier in the same newspaper, he’d been accused of pushing America propaganda. He rejected the claim, but did say that he was “unreservedly in favor of North America.” In addition, in 1852, he wrote in the *Workers’ Union Sheet* that U.S. citizens were service-oriented and helpful.



A quote from one of the reports of the Cleng Peerson Memorial Institute in Stavanger, Norway sums up Peerson's temperament and life's work: "At times of his life, Peerson had been characterized as a visionary; at other times, a glib salesman looking out for his own benefit. If the latter were true, he did not succeed very well in the attempt, for he seldom seemed concerned about his own material circumstances, and was even quite willing to give up what little he had accumulated... Of one thing we are certain. Had not Cleng Peerson appeared on the scene, the exploits and accomplishments of all those who listened to this magnetic personality and joined him in pursuit of his dream would likely have not happened to be recounted here."

It is estimated that Peerson traveled 48,000 miles in his wanderings, if one includes his European travels prior to emigration. About a third of this mileage was on foot—roughly the same as walking five times from New York City to San Francisco.

Cleng Peerson was laid to rest in the cemetery in Norse, Texas, where the Norwegian community put up a monument in his honor. In 1982, on the 200th anniversary of Cleng Peerson's birth, King Olav V visited the historic Norwegian-American county.

Today, the Cleng Peerson Institute in Clifton, TX exists as a cultural, educational and research center to promote topics relevant to Texas and Norway.