

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### THE KENSINGTON RUNE STONE DISCUSSION AND EARLY SETTLEMENT IN WESTERN MINNESOTA

In the course of an interesting discussion of "The Kensington Rune Stone," Mr. Hjalmar R. Holand makes the following observations concerning the general background of the region in which the stone was found:

The first white settler in the county [*Douglas County*] came there in 1865 and lived alone as a hermit in the wilderness for several years. Immigration followed the projected survey of the Great Northern Railway, which passed through Alexandria about twenty-five miles east of the finding place in 1878. At Alexandria Senator Knute Nelson was one of the first settlers. He took a homestead, now included within the city limits, in 1870.

In 1858 the nearest railroad point to the finding place of the stone was La Crosse. Not until 1862 was there any construction in Minnesota. In 1866 the first railroad west of St. Paul was built as far as St. Cloud, one hundred twenty miles from Kensington. No railroad reached Douglas County until 1878 when Alexandria, twenty-five miles from Kensington, was reached.

In the same article Mr. Holand states that the year 1858 "was many years before a single white settler had found his way to that section of the state."<sup>1</sup>

The statement that the first white settler in Douglas County came there in 1865 and "lived alone as a hermit in the wilderness for several years" is not supported by the manuscript United States Census Schedules for 1860. These records prove that there were no less than 195 settlers in Douglas County by 1860, and they are all listed under the general heading of "Alexandria postoffice." Two of them, Hans Oleson and

<sup>1</sup> *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 3: 174 (December, 1919).

Abram Oleson, were Swedes.<sup>2</sup> By 1865 settlement had been begun in the following townships and villages of the county: Alexandria (1858), Brandon (1860), Carlos (1863), Holmes City (1857), Hudson (1864), Ida (1863), La Grand (1860), Lake Mary (1863), Moe (1863), Orange (1863-64), Osakis (1859), and Urness (1862-63).<sup>3</sup> As early as 1860 there was a population of 240 in Otter Tail County, according to the United States Census Schedules for that year.

Extensive Scandinavian settlement occurred in western Minnesota long before the railroad reached Douglas County. The census for 1870 reveals the fact that there were in that year no less than 1,227 Swedes and Norwegians and 71 Danes in Douglas County, which was not reached by the railroad until eight years later. The Scandinavians had indeed already pressed farther west and north, for there were in 1870 in Otter Tail County 829 Swedes and Norwegians and 41 Danes. In Pope County there were 1,075 Swedes and Norwegians and 1 Dane; in Stevens County, 88 Swedes and Norwegians; and in Grant County, 169 Swedes and Norwegians and 1 Dane.<sup>4</sup>

To say that Knute Nelson, who settled in Alexandria in 1870, was one of that city's first settlers is perhaps a trifle misleading. Alexandria was founded in the summer of 1858 by Alexander and William Kinkead, and by the time the future United States senator arrived in the village it was twelve years old and had, according to the 1870 census, 503 inhabitants, of whom 202 were foreign-born. Holmes City, not far from the Kensington region, was a thriving little village of 452 souls in 1870, 270 of whom were foreign-born. That the large majority of the foreign-born inhabitants were Scandinavians admits of no doubt. Holmes City, it may be noted, was

<sup>2</sup> One copy of these census schedules is now in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. The section on Douglas County population is in the United States Census Schedules, 1860, vols. D and O-R.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names, Their Origin and Historic Significance*, 175-179 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17).

<sup>4</sup> *United States Census, 1870, Population*, 360.

founded by a group of pioneers from Shakopee — Thomas Holmes, Noah Grant, and W. S. Sanford. Benjamin Densmore made a trip to Otter Tail Lake in the fall of 1857 and his journal contains several references to Holmes City. The settlement seems to have been made “sometime between May and October, 1857, probably in the early summer of that year.”<sup>5</sup>

When Paul Hjelm-Hansen visited Alexandria in the summer of 1869 — a year before Knute Nelson arrived — he found in that city six Scandinavian clerks, thirty Scandinavian day laborers, and ten or twelve servants of northern origins.<sup>6</sup> There were several Scandinavian business men, including Dahl and Vig, painters, L. Johnsen and J. Sundblad, hotel proprietors, Andreas Larson, a Swedish mason, and S. Holmberg, a Swedish wagon maker. There had even been organized a “Scandinavian society” and it had forty members. The Reverend Nils O. Brandt of Decorah, Iowa, visited Alexandria while Hjelm-Hansen was there in the summer of 1869 and held a Norwegian service in the village. The next day he went to Pelican Lake and he later held a “big meeting” of Norwegian farmers at Holmes City. The people at the latter place were considering the advisability of calling a minister. Hjelm-Hansen also states that during the previous fall (in 1868) two Scandinavian ministers had visited Alexandria to baptize and confirm children.<sup>7</sup>

Hjelm-Hansen was a well-educated Norwegian author and journalist who traveled through western Minnesota in the summer of 1869 from Alexandria to the Red River of the North and wrote a series of travel letters for the benefit of prospective

<sup>5</sup> *United States Census, 1870, Population, 178*; “Benjamin Densmore’s Journal of an Expedition on the Frontier,” in *MINNESOTA HISTORY BULLETIN*, 3: 180–182; and Constant Larson, *History of Douglas and Grant Counties*, 1: 125, 132, 174, 325 (Indianapolis, 1916).

<sup>6</sup> A letter by Hjelm-Hansen, dated at Alexandria on July 12, 1869, is printed in full in *Nordisk Folkeblad*, July 21, 1869.

<sup>7</sup> *Nordisk Folkeblad*, July 21, August 11, 1869.

settlers. In these letters, which were published both in Norwegian and in Norwegian-American newspapers, he tells of many Scandinavian settlements which he visited in the general region west of Alexandria. The settlers in most cases, he notes, had come a year or two earlier. In the Pelican Lake region there were a considerable number of Scandinavians, some of whom he mentions by name. Near Union Lake was the so-called Oxford settlement, which numbered about 150 Norwegians. At Danish Prairie, near Fergus Falls, there were 30 Danes, 2 Swedes, and 4 Norwegians, and near Wall Lake, a few miles northeast of Fergus Falls, there were some Danes and 25 Norwegians. Near Pomme de Terre, in the "Ten Mile Settlement," there were 170 Norwegian farmers. Twelve miles from Dayton, Hjelm-Hansen found about 40 Norwegian farmers, and not far from this settlement he found a group of 30 Norwegians.<sup>8</sup> Not only did Hjelm-Hansen's letters have a considerable influence in helping to forward the movement of Scandinavians into the fertile lands of western Minnesota and of Dakota, but they also form an interesting source of information on the progress of settlement to 1869. It is to be hoped that the letters will eventually be brought out in an English translation.

Two years before Hjelm-Hansen made his western journey, a book dealing with the Scandinavians in the United States and Canada was published by Johan Schröder at La Crosse, in which there is an interesting brief account of Douglas County. The author states that 150 Norwegian and Swedish families have established themselves in the six southern townships of that county. Nils Mikkelsen is named as one of the first settlers. Special mention is made of Holmes City and Alex-

<sup>8</sup> *Nordisk Folkeblad*, September 8, 1869. An interesting account of Hjelm-Hansen and his work in promoting Scandinavian settlement is given in Axel Tollefson, "Historical Notes on the Norwegians in the Red River Valley," in the *North Dakota Historical Collections*, 7: 133-147.

andria, the former being given the greater prominence. The author's preface is dated April, 1867.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Johan Schröder, *Skandinaverne i de Forenede Stater og Canada med indberetninger og oplysninger fra 200 skandinaviske setlemlenter. En ledetraad for emigranten fra det gamle land og for nybyggeren i Amerika*, 267 (La Crosse, Wisconsin. 1867). Schröder was also the author of a long article about "The Discovery of America by the Northmen," in *Nordisk Folkeblad* for April 9 and 16, 1868. This article concludes with an unfounded report of a Norse rune stone said to have been discovered on the Potomac in 1866. It may be noted that the files of *Nordisk Folkeblad*, a Norwegian newspaper which appeared in 1868 at Rochester and was soon removed to Minneapolis, contain many references in 1868 and 1869 to Douglas and Otter Tail counties, and some interesting letters from Norwegians who had visited or settled in the western part of the state. See, for examples, *Nordisk Folkeblad*, March 19 and 24, 1869.



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