

A NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN LANDNAMSMAN: OLE S. GJERSET¹

Ole S. Gjerset was born at Gjerset in Romsdal, Norway, on June 2, 1828. From youth he exhibited marked qualities of leadership, coupled with high intellectual gifts, an impressive personality, and great strength of character. With clearness of vision and a mind always open to new ideas he strove with zeal to promote intellectual and social progress, pursuing with energy and determination the aims which he sought to accomplish. In his dealings with others he was cheerful, kind, and liberal-minded, but upright and fearless. Viewing life and its relations in the light of imperative principles, he was governed in his conduct, not by tactics of expedience and compromise, but by qualities of character which have regard for truth and justice and never fail to render full account to the moral law.

As a young man he attended the Molde School at Molde, Norway, showing unusual talents as a student, and after completing the prescribed courses he was appointed teacher and preceptor for the district of Frena in Romsdal. Here he married Karen Marie Eidem, her parents' only child and sole heir to her patrimony Eidem, an ancient farmstead whose history fades into the gray antiquity of saga times. A local historian, H. Haukaas, says about it:

The farm *Eidem* (Old Norse, *Eidheimr*) is one of the oldest in the district of Frena. According to the records it once be-

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Landnamsman literally means a man who takes land or settles. The term is used in the sagas especially about those who first took land and settled in Iceland.

longed to the royal estate of *Hustad* (*Hustadr*). In later times it became an estate for widows of the pastors of the Akrøi church. . . . To the royal estate Hustad belonged Malme, Dale (the home of Karen Marie Eidem's mother), Elnes, Haukaas (a family to which Karen Marie was somewhat closely related), Eidem, Stavik, and probably also Rødset, Valle and Reffshol. Those places were the original centers from which the whole district of Frena was populated. Between these centers the country was covered with forests in early time. According to a well established tradition also supported by other evidence, Eidem, Haukaas, and Elnes are the oldest places in the Elnesvaag district. Many persons well-known from the sagas lived here. At Haukaas lived, according to an old tradition, Hauk Haabrok, whom King Harald Haarfagre sent as messenger, or ambassador, to King Aethlstan of England. From the near-by chieftain seat of Tornes came Tora Skagesdotter, the queen of Haakon Jarl. Here also lived her father Skage Skoftesson, and probably also her brother Tiende-Skofte, who became *herse* in Bud (an old Viking naval station, not very far away). Bergljot, wife of the great chieftain Einar Tambaraskjælver, came from Tornes, and Svein Jarl was born there. Flint-heaps at Tornes and other places show that this district was settled very early. Booths for Viking ships, twenty-seven feet wide and ninety feet long, are found at Tornes, and the chief war beacon for the Frena district is found at Skutaas by the sea. It was used for the last time during the English blockade of the Norwegian coast in the war of 1808.²

After Ole S. Gjerset married Karen Marie and took possession of Eidem he resigned his position as teacher and devoted himself to husbandry and farming. It was his ambition to improve and enlarge his wife's patrimony, to make it a model estate in equipment, buildings, and method of tillage. New tracts of land were added to it, and laborers were hired who worked from year to year, constructing drainage ditches, clearing the land of stone, and bringing it under cultivation. Some gratuitous work was also rendered by the cotters and peasants who dwelt on small parcels of land belonging to the estate, for which, in lieu of rent, they were to render a certain amount of work gratuitously or for nominal pay, according to the custom still prevailing at that time. As the forests of

² H. Haukaas to the writer, March 9, 1924.

the estate could yield sufficient pine timber for building purposes, Gjerset also undertook to erect new buildings, the most important being a large two-story dwelling house, which was in due time completed. The herds of sheep and cattle were also increased. Some welcomed the spirit of progress which thus began to manifest itself, but others shook their heads in doubt and misgiving. Why were new acres always added to the old, drainage ditches constructed, new buildings erected? Since Eidem was already a large farm, was it not pure pride and arrogance, not to say disregard for old traditions, to make all these unnecessary changes? Furthermore they had heard that changes might be expected also in other lines. Where would it end? The answer was difficult for those who pondered and shook their heads. Only one thing was clear; Eidem was no longer to sleep in poetic undisturbed repose. The wheels of progress had begun to turn in obedience to a new will, strong and positive.

In public life Gjerset held many positions of trust, which consumed much of his own time. The laws of his country he had studied diligently, and he was so well posted that he became the spokesman and leader of the people of the district in all matters pertaining to popular rights and public policy. Especially did he devote himself with energy to the promotion of the great issue of an improved system of public education. Before his day the instruction of children had been in the hands of itinerant teachers, not always well qualified for their calling, and the branches taught aimed at nothing more than to impart sufficient religious knowledge for confirmation in the Lutheran state church. Through untiring effort Gjerset succeeded in bringing about the establishment of permanent district schools with properly qualified teachers and with a curriculum of studies which aimed at a general public education. Upon a visit to Eidem in 1910 the writer of these lines walked along the *chaussée* toward a cluster of houses which he remembered,

but which he had not seen since he left them on a May morning at the age of five and a half years. Now he had come to view once more the never-fading scenes of childhood. The day was beautiful, the mountains majestic, strange, yet partly familiar. Vague memories of childhood arose like a distant *fata morgana* at every turn. There again was Eidem. How strange!

On passing the public school he stopped to speak to the teacher, who was in the garden. He was introduced, and when his name was mentioned, the teacher stared. . . . "Gjerset! The son of Ole S. Gjerset?"

"Yes."

"Why, your father founded this school."

This and like bits of gratuitous information helped to fill the vague outlines of childhood memories with more tangible features of the past. He resumed his walk with new and thoughtful interest.

In his own home Gjerset always welcomed young people who came to receive from him without compensation instruction in singing and other useful branches. In him they found not only an able teacher who awakened in them love of knowledge and of careful and thorough intellectual work, but also a broad-minded and fatherly companion who understood them and their little problems and sympathized with them. One of those who in this way had sought his help, a very intelligent man, Bjarte Hatlebak, who died recently at his home near Eidem at the age of eighty-six, says: "When Gjerset came to Eidem, I hired out to him in order that I might be near him and profit by his instruction. Whatever I possess of book-knowledge I have learned from him." We can probably say without contradiction that wise is the man who knows how to win the hearts of his fellow men. That Gjerset had done so is made evident in many ways. Upon reaching Berlin, Germany, after a visit to Eidem in 1910, the writer of these lines received a letter from a man living somewhere

in the Frena district, in which he says: "I have heard that you have been at Eidem. If I had known that you were here, I would have come if it were ever so far, for I knew Ole S. Gjerset, and traditions about him are still told in these districts."

But progress was slow in Romsdal. The soil was poor and the climate unfavorable. Farming, husbandry, and the fisheries brought small returns, and as a family of children were gradually born to the owner of Eidem, he began to think of their future and what chances they might have to fight life's battles successfully where nature yielded her blessings in so scant a measure. The improvements made would scarcely increase the net income, and in spite of added acres and increased herds he found that for the children the future did not look promising. For some time he had studied carefully the accounts of America, the land of opportunity with its salubrious climate and endless areas of rich soil which could be had for the asking. Would it not be better to seek a brighter future for the children in the new world? These thoughts gradually ripened in his mind into a firm resolve. He would do what others had done, leave friends and fatherland and seek his own and his children's fortune in the United States of America. Sad days now dawned upon the Eidem household. Friends of high station and low pleaded with him not to leave his fine home and the district that needed his services, but the die had been definitely cast. As Karen Marie was the only child, there was no one near of kin who could become the owner of Eidem. The estate had to be alienated from the family, sold to strangers, a special calamity in Norway, where estates are usually held in unbroken family ownership century after century and are regarded as the basis of everything permanent and worth while in family life and tradition. But sentiment can have no voice in the hour of supreme necessity. Eidem was sold, the household goods disposed of under the auctioneer's hammer, and preparations were made for the

great journey. On a May morning in 1871 wagons stopped before the door at Eidem. On these, chests and baggage were loaded; the family stood ready to depart. Only Karen Marie's old mother was to remain behind, as she considered herself too old to venture upon so hazardous a journey. If there is anything more bitter than death, Grandmother Eidem must have experienced it that day, when she was to part forever from her only daughter and all her grandchildren. Aged and alone she was to return to the house, now empty — sold to strangers. For Karen Marie the cup of grief was no less bitter. Every step taken in the long preparation for the journey had been an agony; and now the day had finally come when the tenderest ties must be severed, when she must part from her mother, her friends and associates, her home and patrimony, to begin a long journey into unknown lands, where she must live a lonesome life among strangers. But the bitter cup had to be drained for the sake of the children who accompanied her. If they have ever enjoyed any advantages, any good fortune in this new land, let them not forget the price at which it was purchased. With that as a commentary let them sit down and ponder again the old commandment: Honor thy father and thy mother. The wagons moved on, and Eidem disappeared from view.

In the little family group of emigrants was also Ole Eidem, Karen Marie's son of a former marriage, now nineteen years old, tall and handsome, gifted and well educated, charming in manners and conversation, always a great favorite. He was leaving his grandmother and a girl of his own age to whom he was engaged, but in the bitter moment of parting he was buoyed up by the imagination and hopefulness of youth. In a few years he could probably return to see again his grandmother and his fiancée. It was a fond hope which was never realized. He became in America a popular and successful merchant, but died in Watson, Minnesota, at the age of fifty-six, without ever visiting Norway again.

From Bergen, Norway, the family went by steamer to Hull in England, whence they proceeded overland by train to Liverpool. Here they embarked on the steamer "Peruvian" of the Allan Line, and reached Quebec, Canada, after a voyage of eleven days. Through Canada they traveled on the customary railway immigrant trains to Grand Haven on Lake Michigan, and they crossed the lake in a steamer to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The journey was thus finished in as short a time and with as much comfort as circumstances in those days would allow immigrants. But the ride day after day through the forests of Canada in immigrant cars with hard wooden seats, coupled to long freight trains with little or no comforts or accommodations was very trying for Karen Marie, who was in delicate health and had a family of little children to care for. From Milwaukee they continued their journey by train to La Crosse on the Mississippi. But here Gjerset became seriously ill from the excessive heat and the humid and oppressive summer atmosphere of the Mississippi Valley, so unlike the cool mountain air of Norway and the fresh breezes of the sea to which he had been accustomed. After some weeks of illness and convalescence the journey was continued by steamer up the Mississippi to St. Paul and Minneapolis, and thence, on the Manitoba Railroad, to Litchfield in Meeker County, Minnesota, where another stop had to be made. Upon diligent search Gjerset was able to find lodging for himself and his family in the log cabin of a Swedish settler, Tørnbom, in the woods at some distance from Litchfield, and here shortly after their arrival, his daughter Amalia was born. No medicines or medical aid could be had, and the comforts in that cabin were about the same as on Robinson Crusoe's island; but there was at least shelter and the cheering presence of fellow human beings who were glad to render assistance to the extent of their ability — important things when we return to life's fundamental elements. Karen Marie, who was rather diffident and timid in small matters,

was always very brave when she was brought face to face with a real crisis, and never did she display greater courage than in those trying days in the Tørnbom cabin.

As soon as the days of danger and anxiety were over Gjeraset set out alone upon a journey to find a suitable location for a home in this sparsely settled frontier region, going first by train to Benson, which was almost as far as the Manitoba Railroad was yet built. From Benson he turned southward on foot across the prairies, and continued his march till he came to the Big Bend on the Chippewa River in Chippewa County, Minnesota. Nowhere, he thought, had he seen finer farm lands, and after careful deliberation he filed on a claim of eighty acres, according to the provisions of the homestead law at that time. When he returned to his family at Litchfield, he could tell them that he had now become the prospective owner of a fine tract of land in as beautiful a farming country as he had ever seen. He felt buoyed up by a new hope. If great sacrifices had been made, if trials had been endured, he felt that the future gave promise of rewards which were already beginning to appear.

Energetic preparations would now have to be made to build a home on the new land and to put a part of it under cultivation. The purchase of a wagon, draft animals, and other necessities was, therefore, undertaken promptly. As horses were scarce and costly in this new country, he followed the custom of pioneer settlers and bought, besides a new wagon, a pair of steers of the usual Texas type, tall and bony, with immense spreading horns. There could be no doubt that they could pull even the breaking plow. Never before had he used such a wagon or such a team. Assisted by his oldest boy, Oluf, about twelve years of age, later lawyer and state senator in Chippewa County, he hitched up the steers to get a little practice. It was a fine June day, and things seemed to go well. Seated in the wagon he and Oluf drove along the road from Litchfield, where the purchase had been made, when suddenly

the steers gave a start and launched into a wild runaway. Not even the swiftest horses could have excelled in speed these muscular giants of the prairies. The wagon and its contents were scarcely an impediment. On they rushed in mad panic as if fleeing from some invisible enemy, impelled by the primeval instinct of *sauve qui peut*. Oluf, the embryo state senator, clung as well as he could to his place in the wagon-box, but Gjerset himself, growing alarmed at the outlook, tried to jump from the wagon, and landed on his head in a clump of hazel bushes. But under the hot June sun even the giant steers could not long continue this violent exercise. They were soon so overheated and exhausted that they had to stop for breath. Their fear as well as their energy was gone, and they walked quietly the rest of the way to the Tørnbom cabin. The wagon, being new and strong, was not damaged, and as Gjerset and Oluf had escaped injury no great harm had been done. Was it that the steers had acted in obedience to a sudden mischievous impulse or did they only wish to take a little physical exercise of the kind they usually indulged in on the prairies? Who knows? But the performance was often repeated later, sometimes with more serious consequences to themselves.

When the journey could again be resumed after the stay at Litchfield, the Gjerset family went by train to Benson, while Ole Eidem and Oluf were to follow with the oxen, the wagon, and the greater part of the baggage. Benson at that time consisted of a very simple wooden railway station and a few board houses, called stores, in which some enterprising young men were doing a little retail business. After some days Ole Eidem and Oluf arrived with the oxen and baggage, without having suffered any mishap, and the preparations were then begun for the last stage of the journey to Big Bend on the Chippewa River. Early one morning chests and baggage were loaded onto the wagon, the steers were hitched to it, Karen Marie and the children — Oluf, Gurianna, Søren, Knut, Magnus, and the infant sister Amalia — were placed as securely

as possible on top of the load, and the march began over the prairies towards Big Bend, twenty miles away, Gjerset and Ole Eidem driving the steers. The prairie stretched as an unbroken plain to the horizon in all directions. No hills or trees greeted the eye, except along the Chippewa River, where there were small areas of timber. But there was something impressive in these vast stretches of level fertile soil, which seemed to offer such unusual opportunities. There was sunshine and song of birds, a luxuriant growth of grass and wild flowers. It was America, or their part of it, as they first learned to know it. The hope of home and rest finally beckoned the little group of weary immigrants, long since tired of watching the ever-changing scenes. The steers trudged on patiently. Fortunately their old malicious mischief-making impulse did not seize them. What if they had run away? What would have become of Karen Marie and the infant Amalia, and the rest of the children, seated on top of the load? They would undoubtedly have been scattered along the prairie among the chests and baggage, and if alive how could they have reached Big Bend, twenty miles away? But the steers behaved unusually well that day, as if conscious of a great responsibility. It was one of the few times they did not run away when hitched to a wagon. In the evening the Gjerset family reached Nils K. Hagen's log cabin in Big Bend, where they were received with open arms by Nils Hagen and his splendid wife, Kari. The comforts of home and the cheering friendship of sympathetic people had been found, and the Hagens invited the strangers to share the cabin with them until they could build their own house on their claim near by.

Without delay Gjerset began to haul lumber from Benson for erecting a house, and this work was carried forward with such energy that the family could establish themselves in their own home before fall. Hay was cut for the oxen and cattle, and a few acres were broken so that a small crop could be raised the following year. More could not be accomplished

the first season. Hagen warned Gjerset of the danger of prairie fires, and told him how to safeguard himself against it. A few furrows were broken around the house some rods apart, and the grass between these was burned. With the breaking to the north of the house and this protection on the other sides it was thought that ample precaution had been taken. But Karen Marie was troubled with an apprehensive dread of this new enemy. She would often take a chair and seat herself on the breaking with the children about her, in an effort to protect them against this mysterious danger which, she had been told, might sweep down upon them at any time, as soon as the grass withered in the fall. There was in her nature a strain of tender melancholy, probably due to dramatic experiences in her own life. What sacrifices had she not made! And how great the change for her and her family! But the children were good companions, as they kept her constantly occupied in waging a brave battle for their welfare and protection, and being by nature very active, she found little time to brood over losses or the changing whims of fortune. Even the dread of prairie fire kept the mind in a state of tension and created a certain interest in life. One day in the fall a good breeze was blowing, and the sky was gray with a haze which resembled smoke. In the evening the sky was lit up with a lurid red illumination, and before long the whole horizon to the west and northwest seemed to be aflame. The prairie fire was coming. In the dry tall grass of sloughs and prairie, fanned by a good breeze and with nothing to impede its progress, it traveled with incredible rapidity. The roar of the flames was heard like a rumble even at a great distance, and in the darkness of the night the surging ocean of fire might strike terror into the stoutest heart. Karen Marie and the children were wailing in helpless fear. She pleaded that they should all retreat to the breaking, which would afford some protection; but Gjerset, who had never yet flinched in the face of danger, maintained that there was no cause for alarm, that

all necessary precaution had been taken. Why should they flee? There was no time for long deliberation. On the fire came with a rush. Rags and pails of water were grabbed and the children were ordered to stay in the house. The critical moment had come. Karen Marie forgot her tears and heroically joined the little fire brigade which sallied forth to fight for the house. Quick as thought the fire was upon them, the wind carrying it with one mighty sweep across the furrows and the fire-break so that the flames enveloped all. But the danger was soon over. The fire-break had broken the solid front of the onrushing flames, and although they swept across it, they did not immediately gain any force on the other side, and Gjerset, Karen Marie, Ole Eidem, and Oluf, armed with wet rags, soon brought them under control. The house was safe, and the fire was already far beyond it, going towards the near-by Chippewa River, where it stopped. Behind lay the prairie, black as a mighty pall, dotted here and there with whitening buffalo bones.

As far as the eye could see there were no human habitations. The Indians had been moved away after the great massacre in Civil War times, but the settlements throughout this region, having made little progress since those trying days, were still small and scattered. A few log cabins were found along the Minnesota and Chippewa rivers, but Montevideo, which is now a city of over four thousand people, consisted at that time of a mill run by water power from a river dam; and as the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad was not built till many years later, Benson in Swift County and Willmar in Kandiyohi County were the only markets for wide areas. But settlers soon began to pour into this new region, mostly Norwegians, coming either directly from Norway or from older settlements in Wisconsin, and in a few years all available homestead land was taken. Many of the settlers had large families, and the population grew rapidly. Nikolai Hanson had six sons and three daughters; Gabriel Gabrielson, one son and six daughters; Morten Larson, two sons and six

daughters; Nils K. Hagen had seven children, four sons and three daughters; Knut Johnson had thirteen children, most of whom were born in the settlement; to Ole S. Gjerset nine children were born, of whom one died in infancy in Norway. The three youngest, Amalia, Albert, and Carolina (Mrs. T. C. Wollan), were born in America. In large sections of Chippewa County the settlers were almost exclusively Norwegians. The same was the case also in the counties of Swift, Pope, Stevens, Kandiyohi, Renville, Yellow Medicine, and Lac qui Parle. In this fertile region was thus founded one of the greatest Norwegian settlements in America.

Ole Gjerset had not come to America in quest of an opportunity to make a living. His main purpose had been to enable his children to become more successful and prosperous under the stimulus of a more favorable economic environment, and he considered it necessary, therefore, to acquire so much land that farming could become an occupation of some importance. Early efforts during the first few years convinced him that the soil was fertile and would yield big returns if it was properly tilled and if no untoward circumstances hindered the growing of crops. Horses and farm machinery were purchased, and all the available land on the first eighty-acre homestead was put under tillage, another eighty acres being added after some years. As the large land grants of the Manitoba Railway extended through this region, every other section of land was owned by the railroad company, but this land was not placed on the market for sale till many years subsequently. Of this land Gjerset took possession of two quarter sections, with the expectation of purchasing them as soon as the company should offer them for sale. They were permanently added to the old homestead through purchase by one of the younger sons, Magnus, who later became the owner of the farm. The area of tillable land had thus been increased to 440 acres.

In 1873 the Timber Culture Act was passed by Congress for the purpose of reforesting treeless areas in the West. It provided that a man might secure title to a quarter section of the

public lands by planting forty acres of timber, and proving a ten-year growth. These terms proved too difficult and were later modified to ten acres in trees and an eight-year growth, but even then the terms were so difficult that only slight results were obtained. Gjerset filed early on a quarter section, according to the first provision of the law, and undertook the difficult task of planting and cultivating forty acres of timber. The ground had to be cultivated for some years to put it in a proper state of tillage. The trees were then planted, twelve feet apart, as the law provided, and were cultivated, pruned, and cared for during the next ten years. The undertaking was successfully completed, the only one of the kind ever carried through according to the first provisions of the Timber Culture Act in all that great region. Gjerset became the owner of the quarter section, and forty acres of timber on the treeless prairie now stand as a unique monument to his industrious and intelligent efforts. The place was later bought by his son Oluf, practicing lawyer in Montevideo, Minnesota, who has added new tracts, increasing it to over 600 acres. After acquiring this new quarter section the area of tillable land in Gjerset's possession amounted to 640 acres.

If farming had been as profitable as the fertility of the soil seemed to promise, even this area would probably have been considerably increased. According to the old Norwegian view, well established from early ages, land possessed a certain dignity and worth, aside from its purely commercial value. It was the pride of the old chieftains; it insured economic well-being and personal independence; it gave stability and permanence to the family in whose possession it remained from century to century. This view of land as a family heritage which Gjerset had acquired from his fathers he also transmitted to his sons. Only two of them, Magnus, who became the owner of the old homestead, and Søren, who died young, engaged in farming as a vocation, but all of them became

owners of farm lands, even of considerable areas. In all they acquired title to not much less than three thousand acres. But it is worthy of note that this land was held largely for reasons of sentiment, in harmony with the old conception of land ownership, rather than as a speculative venture. For long periods of years, during the ups and downs of prices this land was held, even when it might have been sold to good advantage from a business point of view, and in most cases these large tracts of good farm lands have been of little economic importance to the family.

Farming in the great Northwest in pioneer times was associated with many hardships due to lack of markets, fuel, roads, mills, and every comfort and convenience belonging to well-organized rural communities. But more grievous were the bitter disappointments wrought by unfavorable climatic conditions and other unforeseen ills. In this large, treeless, inland region the climate in early days was unusually capricious and severe. In the winter there was usually a very heavy fall of snow accompanied by excessive cold and violent storms which often lasted for several days. It might then happen that pioneer farmers in trying to make their way with their teams of oxen through the snowdrifts and over the trackless prairies would perish in the terrible blizzards. In the summer there might be an excessive rainfall or there might be great heat and prolonged drought. Often when early prospects were good, the harvest might be very meager, but if no destruction or damage was wrought it might yield fine returns. In spite of difficulties real progress was made during the early years, and the pioneer farmers felt encouraged and hopeful.

But now that they were beginning to feel that they were successfully surmounting the difficulties of pioneer life, they were suddenly overwhelmed by the calamity wrought by the Rocky Mountain locusts, which for years harried the Northwest, destroying the crops over large areas. In 1873 great

damage was done in Nebraska, Iowa, southern Minnesota, and other places; but greater still was the havoc wrought the following year, when the young generation of insects, hatched from eggs laid in the ground, attacked the growing vegetation early in the season. In many places the crops were wiped out, and the hardships of the farmers became so great that in southern Minnesota many abandoned their farms and moved away. In 1875 the destructive ravages continued. Energetic steps were taken both by the people themselves and by the local authorities to combat the evil, but the insects appeared in such numbers that nothing of real value could be accomplished. In July, 1875, a correspondent of the Norwegian-American weekly *Fædrelandet og Emigranten* writes: "On the 9th of this month the locusts flew over New Ulm in such numbers that they darkened the sun." Some counties offered bounties for destroying locusts, paying at the rate of one dollar a bushel for insects caught. In Nicollet County it was reported in 1875 that by July 8, 17,281 bushels of locusts had been caught. In Blue Earth County 20,000 bushels had been caught up to July 10 of the same year. But even these vast amounts did not perceptibly reduce the destructive insect hosts. As a measure for protecting the crops these efforts were utterly unavailing. In 1876 the locusts extended their invasion still farther northward in Minnesota, arriving in many new districts shortly before harvest, often totally destroying the crops. On July 11 of that year it was reported from Benson: "The locusts have harried this district for three days, and have done such damage that the prospects for a harvest are poor. The destruction has been wrought throughout a district starting six miles north of Benson, and extending fifty miles southward through the counties of Swift, Chippewa, Lacquiparle, and part of Stevens."⁸ From other parts of the state like reports were received. An investigation conducted by the state government showed that in twelve coun-

⁸ *Fædrelandet og Emigranten*, July 20, 1876.

ties, in an area a hundred miles wide and two hundred miles long, the crops had been severely damaged and in some places entirely destroyed, so that the average yield per acre would not be over eight or ten bushels.

On Gjerset's farm in Big Bend there was nothing to harvest in 1876. The fields were plowed at harvest time, and preparation was made to seed as big an area as possible the next spring, in the hope that if there should be a good crop the losses sustained could be made good. But the spring of 1877 saw a new generation of hungry young locusts emerge from the ground, more numerous than that of the previous year. The green fields were soon eaten black. Everything planted was entirely destroyed. Even the grass was so eaten and corrupted that the cattle did not thrive. Again the fields had to be plowed at midsummer. When the locusts had grown to full size, they flew away, and this section of the country has never since been visited by this plague, but behind was left complete economic ruin. Most of the pioneer farmers had no reserve capital with which to operate. Once and in some places twice before, they had lost their crops. Now they were again to provide food, clothing, fuel, seed, and funds for running expenses for another year. For many the situation was very trying. So far as markets could be found, sheep and cattle were sold, even at the lowest prices, and the farms were mortgaged to obtain small loans at high rates of interest. In most cases the hopes of the pioneer farmers had been blasted, and their chance of economic success destroyed, as they were now plunged into a mire of mortgaged indebtedness from which, for a generation, they were not able to extricate themselves. Even after the locusts left, crops continued to be poor in many districts, as a new enemy, the rust, attacked the wheat, so that in many places grain farming never again yielded a profitable return. With the development of diversified farming, dairying, the planting of corn, and the raising of hogs and cattle, a new era of progress dawned for the

farmers, but many of the early pioneers did not live to enjoy the new prosperity.

Ole S. Gjerset had brought some money with him from Norway and had been able to make a good start in farming when the locust destruction came. But what capital he possessed was spent in the initial preparations, and he now had to share the economic hardships with the rest. The hope of better economic opportunities in the new world, for the realization of which he had sacrificed so much, had suddenly vanished, and life seemed to offer no better prospect than a persistent struggle against misfortune. The winter storms swept over black plowed fields which for two years had yielded nothing. Herds of cattle, which could not be sold at any price, sought shelter from the chilling blast. All charm had disappeared from pioneer farming on the prairies of the great Northwest.

From Norway Ole S. Gjerset had also brought with him to America his intellectual interests and a large chest full of books. In a bookcase on the wall he placed these precious volumes of history, geography, sagas, travels, psychology, law, medicine, religion, language, music, and mathematics, which gradually became the center both of interest and activity in the home. The greater the disappointment in farming and economic life the more completely the minds of all the children turned to these intellectual possessions, which grew ever more precious under the hardships of the pioneer environment. When the winter evenings grew dark and stormy, and nature looked cheerless and forbidding, Gjerset gathered his children around the table, wood was put on the fire, the books were taken from the shelf, and most happy hours were spent in study and conversation. Every winter evening from seven o'clock till ten, and usually also in the daytime, especially during the winter months, the home was a school, and Gjerset was a trained and inspiring teacher. A number of branches were studied: books of Christian doctrine, arith-

metic, geography, history, grammar and composition, writing, and singing. The family was organized as a choir, and when blizzards blew the songs resounded, making the evenings pleasant in the lamp-lit home. Gjerset had gathered a large collection of songs of various kinds, together with melodies, neatly written in a bound volume, and among the books of songs and music this soon became a family treasure.

Karen Marie did not attempt to instruct the children in secular branches, but was very insistent that they should learn well their books of Christian doctrine, and sometimes she would read the gospels with the younger children. The progress made by them in their studies became more and more her chief concern and seemed to inspire her with new hope. One fall when the shadows of evening were falling after a dreary October day, one of the younger boys was seated at her side learning his lessons. Suddenly she picked him up, put him in her lap, caressed him, and stroked his hair saying: "You will be a student, and you will be very successful. But you must always keep away from that which is evil. Do not let anything that is wicked and wrong ever ruin your career." Karen Marie was quiet in her demeanor and seldom gave expression to her emotions. The boy did not grasp the meaning of this rather unusual demonstration of affection, but he learned to understand it better later. It was a mother's determination to win in life's most important battle.

Experience showed that in spite of his interest in agricultural pursuits and his large plans regarding farming Gjerset continued to be, as in his early years, preëminently a student. Never was he happier than when he could seat himself at his writing table and give himself wholly to diligent and persistent intellectual work. All troubles were then forgotten, as he lived and moved with ease and freedom in the kingdom of his own mind. He had a fondness for mathematics, and prepared a textbook in geometry, which he considered chiefly

as an intellectual pastime. He also took a keen interest in the various doctrinal controversies waged among Norwegian Lutherans in America in those days. When the controversy about predestination broke out, he joined the Anti-Missourians, and wrote extensively on this deep and obscure theological question, exhibiting great skill and ability as a dialectician. When one considers the ease and skill with which he wielded his able pen, the clearness and penetration of his mind, his scope of knowledge and remarkable grasp of a wide range of subjects, one can only regret that life did not vouchsafe him the opportunity to follow a student's career, for which his talents so pre-eminently fitted him.

During early years there were neither schools nor churches in the newly settled regions. The children and young people growing up in the pioneer settlements, suffering from the various disadvantages of pioneer life, found little opportunity to acquire even the most rudimentary education and were in danger of becoming an intellectually stunted and ignorant generation. Owing to the economic distress caused by the locust ravages the people in the stricken districts were not able to build schools or hire teachers. Little could be done to provide the much-needed educational facilities. For years Gjerset taught school for the children of the settlement during the winter months for little or no remuneration, as he still harbored the same keen interest in public education which characterized his early career. Part of the time was devoted to religious instruction, but the ordinary school branches were also taught. In the summer he often taught Sunday school in his own home, inviting the children of the neighborhood to come on Sunday afternoon and devote the time to singing and the learning of lessons of various kinds. In his own busy life he took special delight in awakening intellectual interest among the young people, and if his efforts were successful, even in the smallest degree, he was happy and considered himself amply compensated. In church work he always took

an active part. He was one of the organizers of the Norwegian Lutheran Synod congregation in the Big Bend settlement, served temporarily by the Reverend Lars Markhus of Norway Lake, Kandiyohi County, Minnesota, until the Reverend O. E. Solseth became permanent pastor in 1873.

When he grew old he sold the farm for a small sum to his son Magnus and retired to Watson, Minnesota, where he spent his declining days with his daughter Amalia (Mrs. O. Erikson). Here he died on January 30, 1902. The funeral was conducted by his pastor, the Reverend Hjalmar S. Froiland, who began his sermon by saying: "A great man has departed from us. I knew Ole S. Gjerset well, and as he grew older my visits with him became frequent, but I never called on him to give him spiritual advice. I came to him to learn, to profit by his superior wisdom and insight." What greatness he possessed was not of wealth, power, or station in life, as he possessed none of these; it was rather of influence due to greatness of mind and strength of character.

KNUT GJERSET

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