

KNUTE STEENERSON'S RECOLLECTIONS THE STORY OF A PIONEER¹

I was born in Telemarken, Norway. My ancestors, as far back as can be traced, lived on an estate in Morgendal called Berge. The building on this estate was originally located on a height of land in the center of a valley. It had been the stronghold for Viking chiefs in the early days, and many of my ancestors are known to have held positions of trust.

I immigrated with my parents to America in the year 1850, at the age of six years. It took about fourteen weeks to cross the Atlantic in a small sailing vessel in those days. However, one foggy morning the city of New York was reached. It was then a small city without skyscrapers or railroads. The journey from New York was made in canal boats drawn by horses through the Erie Canal. I can remember how we would have to run and get down under the deck when we went under the bridges. We arrived at Buffalo and from there went by boat to Milwaukee. There we met an old acquaintance of my father who came in from the country with a load of hay to sell. Next day father and mother and three children, of whom I was the oldest, together with our baggage, took our places on the hayrack wagon and were taken fifty miles up into the country. We drove all day and night and I shall never forget the singing of frogs and the barking of

¹ This document came into the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society in the fall of 1920, through the courtesy of Mr. Hjalmar R. Holand, of Ephraim, Wisconsin. From internal evidence it appears to have been written about 1910. It is not reproduced *verbatim et literatim*; but, in order that the flavor of the original might be preserved, the editorial revision has been restricted to a minimum. The footnotes, with the exception of those signed by Mr. Holand, have been supplied by Miss Bertha L. Heilbron, research assistant on the staff of the Minnesota Historical Society. — *Ed.*

the dogs that night. Milwaukee in those days was a small frontier town on the lake. The country which we passed was sparsely settled and swampy.

The family lived in the vicinity of Madison, Wisconsin, for two years.² But my father, one year after our arrival, left for the new Territory of Minnesota. The talk was that there would be much government land opened for settling in that new territory, and he wished to get a piece of land.

In the spring of 1852 we fitted out a yoke of steers, a covered wagon (prairie schooner), and one cow.³ We were to join a caravan of fourteen wagons of movers who were bound for the promised land of the Territory of Minnesota, which was then a wild country inhabited by Indians. Many of the people in Wisconsin said that Minnesota was not a good place to move to for it was too far north and not good for farming and they insisted that Iowa was a much better place to go to. But the party was made up to go to Minnesota. My father had gone there the year before and mother was alone with three children born in the old country and one more a year old, a native American, who afterward became a prominent lawyer and congressman of Minnesota.

² During this period the family resided on a farm of forty acres in Dane County, Wisconsin, which was rented by the father, Steener Knutson. In Norway Mr. Knutson was educated to be a teacher, and while residing in Wisconsin, in addition to working his farm, he followed his profession for a time. Unfavorable economic conditions in his native land brought about his immigration to America, and similar circumstances, combined with his desire to be his own landlord, seem to have caused his removal to Minnesota. Return I. Holcombe and William H. Bingham, eds., *Compendium of History and Biography of Polk County, Minnesota*, 344 (Minneapolis, 1916).

³ The removal to Minnesota took place in 1853, according to the account in Holcombe and Bingham, *Polk County*, 344. This date is confirmed by the fact that Congressman Halvor Steenerson, who, according to the present narrative, was one year old when his mother brought him to Minnesota, was born in Dane County, Wisconsin, on June 30, 1852. Warren Upham and Mrs. Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies, 1655-1912* (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14—St. Paul, 1912); Albert N. Marquis, *Who's Who in America*, vol. 11 (Chicago, 1920).

My father had signed a note for some one in Madison, Wisconsin, as security. After we had started alone with our yoke of oxen, for we were to join the caravan of fourteen wagons a few miles out, and as we were proceeding in the road a few miles, suddenly the sheriff from Madison stopped us and said he had an execution, and he unhitched the oxen from the wagon in the road and drove them away to Madison to be sold to satisfy the debt. Some of the party in the caravan heard about it and they raised a purse among them to satisfy the debt and one of the party went to Madison after the oxen. There in the road, mother with her four children camped in the wagon all night, and I never shall forget the cry of the whippoorwill. I was the oldest one of the children, and I cannot remember a happier moment in my life than that morning at daybreak when one of the party arrived with the oxen and hitched them onto the wagon. In less than one hour we had joined the great caravan and proceeded westward.

The caravan moved along and days and weeks passed. One night we camped near a big Indian camp and the Indian children came out and played with the white children. Every night a good place for grass for the oxen and cows was looked up. As a rule, the country we passed through was well wooded and, consequently, there was no lack of firewood for cooking meals in camp. Finally we arrived at the Mississippi River at the place where the city of La Crosse now stands. It was then barren sand prairie with a few shanties and a steamboat landing.⁴ There we met our father who had gone a year before. He had had bad luck as he had fallen into the ice and

⁴ La Crosse was growing rapidly in the early fifties. In 1851 there were but five families in the town; by 1854 this number had increased to three hundred. The rapidly growing pioneer community undoubtedly presented a rough and shabby appearance, and when Steenerson compared his earliest impression of the town with the La Crosse he knew in later years he probably recalled the picture here recorded. Spencer Carr, *A Brief Sketch of La Crosse, Wisc'n.*, 12, 28 (La Crosse, 1854).

cut one of his fingers off. He had also taken a contract and had been cheated out of the pay.

After a day or two of camping on the sand prairie near La Crosse, the caravan commenced to cross over the Mississippi River into Minnesota. It was a steam ferry and it took about two wagons each time and landed them in La Crescent on the Minnesota side of the Mississippi River.⁵ From the ferry landing to the trading post of one store called La Crescent was about a mile or two, consisting of low bottom with grass so high that it reached over the oxen's backs and in places so soft that the wagon went in up to the hubs. From there the caravan went over some ridges and bluffs heavily wooded by oak timber. No road or house was in sight anywhere.

The second day we struck a branch of the Root River, a little valley called the Looney Valley, where the members of the party spread out and established themselves on claims of land.⁶ As the country was new and near to low river bottoms much sickness prevailed — fever and ague. My father had just built a small log house about twelve feet square with a roof on one side only and unchinked and not plastered when both my father and mother were taken sick with ague. Sometimes they were shaking with cold so that their teeth would clatter. After that spell they would again be sweating so that

⁵ Settlement at this point was started in 1851 by Peter Cameron, who erected the first house. This structure, in which the owner later conducted a general merchandise business, was probably the store mentioned by Steenerson. Edward D. Neill, *History of Houston County*, 422-425 (Minneapolis, 1882).

⁶ The valley of Silver Creek, one of the several streams which join the Root River in the vicinity of Houston, was known as Looney Valley. The title was derived from the family name of the earliest permanent settlers, John S. Looney and his three sons, who took up claims in the valley in 1852. For a time it was believed that the principal town of the region would develop at this point; a townsite company was organized, and a "paper village" was surveyed and platted. A post office known as Looneyville was established here in 1855, but it was discontinued in 1858. Neill, *Houston County*, 399, 401, 403.

the perspiration would be streaming from their faces, and then they would get very thirsty. They would then call on me for water. I had a pint flask which I would fill at the little stream about ten rods from the house, and run back to the house and give it to my father. He used to empty it in a few swallows, and thus I kept them supplied with fresh drinking water. I had also to supply the house with firewood. I picked up old dry small branches and broke them up, which made very good firewood. Thus the summer went on and in the fall when the weather got a little cooler they got a little better. Then to get a little start my father sold his claim for sixty dollars and moved across the Root River near where the village of Sheldon now stands. There was a sparkling spring brook and a narrow valley between high bluffs. Here the family of boys and girls grew up and the old folks got to be quite prosperous.⁷

The country was wild and Indian camps could frequently be seen. Wild deer were plentiful, roaming the bluffs. One eve-

⁷ The first settlement of Norwegians in Minnesota was made near the present village of Spring Grove in Houston County in 1852. This rapidly spread westward and northward, embracing the valleys where Steenerson's father and his companions settled, all the western half of Houston County, and the eastern half of Fillmore County. From 1852 to 1875 it was perhaps the chief American destination toward which thousands of emigrants from Norway turned their faces. From 1865 to 1875 it was a preëminent point of radiation from which hundreds of caravans of Norwegian pioneers set out to found new settlements in western Minnesota and the distant Dakotas. There are now in this settlement thirty-nine Norwegian Lutheran congregations, having a membership of 11,664. The total population of Norwegian descent is at least 15,000. An historical sketch of the settlement appears in the writer's *De norske settlementers historie*, 358-378 (Ephriam, Wisconsin, 1909).—*Hjalmer R. Holand*

Steenerson, the father, evidently attained a position of some prominence in the pioneer settlement, for he was chairman of the first town meeting in 1858. He also was a member of the original board of trustees of the "Houston Society of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church," an organization of about sixty families. In this community he continued to reside until 1875, when he again turned pioneer, this time finding a home on Minnesota's northwestern frontier in Polk County. Neill, *Houston County*, 453, 455, 456; Holcombe and Bingham, *Polk County*, 344.

ning in midsummer a large number of Indians came past our house, as their trail lay close by. They were very much intoxicated. Mother heard them coming about a mile off and took the ax into the house and locked the door safely. They made quite a racket outside of the house and we thought every moment they would break in, but they passed on.

I had a nice yoke of steers which I broke and they were so well trained that when I hollered "Whoa" they would stop almost within an inch of where I wanted them to stop. Being quite an ox driver, I and another young fellow rigged up a breaking team with six yoke of oxen. We had a big grub breaker which cut twenty-four inches and we could turn over brush land which was covered with brush and small trees. We used to take contracts by the acre and did fairly well.

Later I disposed of my oxen and invested in horses and a threshing machine. It was a four-team horse power machine. We did quite a lot of threshing. Everybody in the neighborhood thought it was a big and fast thresher, as we could thresh over four hundred bushels of wheat per day, which was great in those days. The year before the neighbors had fooled with a machine which they sawed off in the middle and only used the cylinder. Then they would afterwards separate the wheat from the chaff in the wind. The year before that again they used to lay the bundles on the ground in a ring and then drive the oxen over them to tramp the wheat out. The cleaning was done in the wind by holding a pailful and letting it drizzle out a little at a time, so that the wind would blow the chaff away from the wheat. This was about 1855 to 1860.

Houston County in this part is cut up with narrow valleys and those valleys were settled mostly by Norwegians. A few years later the bluffs and ridges were settled by Irish emigrants.⁸ I went up to the Irish ridges to look for threshing

⁸ Neill, in his *Houston County*, 454, records that the "settlement of the 'Ridge' in the eastern part of the town [*Sheldon*] was initiated by Jerry Cunningham, a native of the 'Emerald Isle,' who landed in New York in

jobs. I stopped at Mr. Cratty's for dinner. I was invited to the table and sat down. The menu was plain salt and potatoes and water. That was the first and only time that I feasted on salt and potatoes for dinner. Well, I engaged to thresh Mr. Cratty's job. Mr. Mulligan, Mr. Russell, Mr. Murphy, and others of the Irish settlement were to help him. Mr. Cratty would work hard on his own job but when he came to help his neighbor he would shirk and do as little work as possible. It made it almost impossible to thresh in the Irish settlement. The next day we moved the machine to Muldoon's farm. Mr. Cratty was then placed in the straw stack, but he did not keep the straw away so it clogged the machine. This made it very difficult to get any work done, for the farmer would work hard for himself but would shirk when he should help his neighbor.

The next year I turned my attention to contracting for building bridges. I built many and made some money. They were small bridges for the road district across small streams. They were built with four stringers and poles across, some straw on top of the poles, and then scraped dirt on top. This was quite a money-making business and I believe I would have made a successful contractor if I had followed it up.

The next fall I went to the Black River Falls pinery. A bunch of us young fellows walked all the way from La Crosse to Neillsville.⁹ It was a long, tedious walk in stormy weather. The camp was a house about three feet high on each side and had a very peaked roof. The entrance or door was in the gable end. There was a big fire in the middle of the house with a big opening in the center of the room for the smoke to go out. There were sleeping bunks made on the ground with the feet turned to the big fire. There were about fifty men

1851." A few other Irishmen followed him, and the district became known as a center for Irish settlement.

⁹ This town is in Clark County, Wisconsin, about seventy miles north-east of La Crosse.

in the camp of all nationalities. When the big logs in the fire were roaring and burning, it made good light in the shanty. There was a bench at the side of the fire, about a foot and a half high, which we sat on. When we wanted to go to bed all we had to do was to tip backwards into the bunk on the ground. There was also a big cook shanty.

Mike O'Leary and Pat Connelly had their places just opposite mine. They used to bother the life almost out of a German by the name of Garbush, who was a simpleton. Sometimes they told him to open his mouth and looked down his throat, and they used to say that they could see sauerkraut in his throat. They abused him so much and were so mean to him that he had to quit the job. My work consisted of following up the chopper and sawing the trees into logs.

The next fall I entered into partnership with another young fellow to start a saloon in Houston, Minnesota. We bought a small building and lot, and stocked up with liquor. There was some parleying between us as to what should be the name of the firm. We had read in the papers that when O'Bryan first came over he had an O to his name so big that you could roll a barrel through it, but after a few years in this country it grew smaller, and a few years later he dropped it altogether. So we thought it was a good idea to drop the "son" from our names. Consequently, the firm name was styled Steener and Hawkins. There were many good customers. I mostly took charge of the business end of the firm. Mr. Hawkins played the violin and was an expert at card playing, and the business went along nicely. In those days whiskey was cheap and it was not seldom that a farmer bought a whole barrel at harvest time and set it up on the outside wall of his house and let those who wanted to drink help themselves.

In our saloon we had a bedroom partitioned off. We had a customer by the name of Michael, who used to spree for a week or two at a time when he got started. As it was Christ-

mas and both of us wanted to go away to some dances in the country, we concluded to lock Michael up in the bedroom until we got back. We happened to stay away longer than we expected to and after a few hours Michael woke up in the bedroom. He was thirsty and hungry and there he was a prisoner. He told us later that he had made up his mind to die there of hunger and thirst. When we came home and unlocked the room, he was so glad and happy that tears came from his eyes. He petted us and said, "God bless you byes. I thought I was going to die here."

There were some "smart Alecks" in town by the names of Ramsdell, Flinn, McCarthy, Flaerty, Flannigan, and Muldoon. One day someone heard them talking between themselves. They asked one and the other if they had seen "them two Narrwiggins" who had started that saloon. One fellow, who had not been in this country very long, inquired what kind of people "them Narrwiggins" were and if they would eat hay. Muldoon answered that they would eat straw, too. "Well," said Flannigan, "let us go over to their saloon some evening and have a good time, get free drinks, and clean out the saloon." "Yes," said McCarthy, "those Narrwiggins are cowards and one of us can drive off a barnyard full of them." "Well," said one of them, "we will go over to their saloon next Saturday evening and take what whiskey we want to drink and chase them out."

We had been informed of their talk by a friend of ours and we got ready for them; the lamp was lit and Mr. Hawkins took his place behind the bar ready to wait on customers that might come. I took my place at the end of the bar with a stove poker hid in front of me under the bar and with one hand on it ready for the emergency. The stove poker was made from a twisted lightning rod about two and one-half feet long with three-cornered sharp edges. Pretty soon, the party of six came in through the door and went up to the bar

and demanded the drinks for the crowd. Mr. Hawkins set out the glasses and bottles and the drinking began. Several drinks had been served but no pay offered. Then they commenced to smash some of the glasses and spill the whiskey. They shoved each other over the stove and, after a little, the stove began to tip over. Then I took a firm grip on the stove poker, which I had had my hand on all the time. I then moved forward quick as a flash and plied my stove poker to the right and left over them, cutting gashes in their heads and shoulders. They fell right and left, and as soon as they came to their feet again they made for the door and I after them with the poker in my hand. One fellow, when he was outside of the door, took hold of an empty beer keg and raised it and was going to knock in the front window. I then gave him a powerful blow over the arm and he fell on his knees. He got up again double quick and ran for dear life. That ended the raid that night. The next morning I took my stove poker and laid it on the end of a log and straightened it out with a hammer and it was as good as ever.

The next Monday morning we were arrested and taken before Justice of the Peace McGinty. After some hard pleading I got permission to go and get an attorney. I went by train to La Crosse, a distance of twenty miles, to hunt up a lawyer. I was careful not to employ anyone with an "O" or a "Mac" to his name, and I succeeded in getting a good one. We had a hearing next day, took a change of venue to the next nearest justice, and got cleared.

There was an outbreak of the Indians in western Minnesota. They murdered men, women, and children around New Ulm and Fort Ridgely. A big scare came as far east as Houston County. We, as the rest of the neighbors, loaded up and started, and left the growing crops and cattle on the farm. We drove as far as La Crescent on the Mississippi River. The road was lined with teams and wagons loaded with women

and children, and there were thousands in camp at La Crescent. They tried to cross the Mississippi, but were not allowed to cross over to the Wisconsin side, for it was claimed that the Indians had already been put down by the soldiers. After a few days they all returned to their farms.

In the spring of 1869 I started for the West to take up a land claim. Another young fellow and I had a prairie schooner each, and we wended our way through southern Minnesota until we reached Lac qui Parle County.¹⁰ I took a claim just below where the Lac qui Parle River enters into the Minnesota River.¹¹ There was an Indian corn plantation on the bottom where I intended to take out papers on the land. It was in a large bend of the Minnesota River and was covered with big timber — large elms that would cut many cords of wood each. This was in July, 1869. There was a French squaw man living near by, and he could talk with the Indians. I made a bargain with him to help me get the land and paid him some money. There were no Indians who wanted the land, but they had been in the habit of putting in small patches of corn on it. I think there were as many as twenty small patches of corn in size about a half acre each on the land. As I stood on the big hill to the south of it and looked at all those corn patches with the large timber as a background, it was quite a

¹⁰ This county was not established until March 6, 1871. In 1869 it was a part of Chippewa County.

¹¹ The Norwegian settlement in the upper Minnesota Valley, of which Steenerson was one of the founders, became very large. From Delhi to Louisburg it stretches for fifty miles along both sides of the Minnesota River, covering large parts of Chippewa, Lac qui Parle, Renville, Swift, and Redwood counties. Taking Montevideo for a center, there are, no doubt, more Norwegian farmers living within a radius of twenty miles than within an equal distance of any other town in America. This settlement is the subject of seven articles by the writer in the *Decorah-Posten* (Decorah, Iowa) for April 2, 9, 16, 23, 30, and May 7 and 14, 1920; they form part of a series entitled, "Norske pionerer og settlementer." — *Hjalmar R. Holand*

sight to see. Each piece of corn was hoed and kept clean by the squaw while the buck was inside his tent, smoking his pipe. For each piece of corn there was a tepee.¹²

Western Minnesota from Redwood Falls westward was entirely uninhabited. There was not a house to be seen. I drove with a yoke of oxen and a lumber wagon to Greenleaf where the land office was located and I took out papers on the land which the Indians were cultivating, as no one of them claimed title to it. The distance to Greenleaf was seventy miles.¹³

I built a shanty on the land and was on good terms with the Indians. But in the fall a half-breed with a big family — his name was Joe La Blan — started to build a shanty in my timber.¹⁴ I told him it was my land and that I had papers for it, and I told him he had better move his shanty to the next claim to the west. He objected. Then I took my oxen down to his shanty and hitched a chain to the corner of his shanty

¹² The Sioux Indians were removed from Minnesota after the outbreak of 1862, but William W. Folwell, in his *Minnesota, The North Star State*, 233 (*American Commonwealths*—Boston, 1908), states that “a small remnant of some twenty-five families of friendlies, many of them Christians, were suffered to remain in Minnesota, because they could not safely live among the heathen people.” The fact that Napeshneeduta (see *post*, n. 15) was one of the Lac qui Parle group indicates that the presence of these Indians in the state in 1869 can be explained in this way.

¹³ One of the seven United States land offices in Minnesota in 1869 was located in this little village in Meeker County. In the following year the land office for this district was moved to Litchfield. United States General Land Office, *Reports*, 1869, p. 236; 1870, p. 290.

¹⁴ The census of the town of Lac qui Parle, Chippewa County, taken in June, 1870, includes the names of Joe La Blane, a trapper forty years old, his wife, Hapanami, and their three children, two sons and a daughter, respectively seventeen, sixteen, and fourteen years of age. The description corresponds with Steenerson's fairly well in all respects except one: according to the census La Blane and his wife were white. Judging from the wife's name, however, she might well have been a squaw. State archives, secretary of state's office, census schedules, 1870. These schedules are now in the custody of the Minnesota Historical Society.

and started the oxen up. They pulled the shanty down. Joe La Blan came out of his tepee near by with a loaded double-barreled shotgun, and threatened to shoot me. I told him, if he shot me there would come many white people to kill him. He stood there with the gun in his hand, and his daughter stood by his side begging him not to shoot. She was a girl of about eighteen years and nearly white. I told him that if he would take the claim to the west of me, I would haul his shanty up to that claim. He stood a while thinking and, after a moment, he said, "All right, I will do so." So I loaded up the logs of his shanty and put them onto my wagon. The logs were only large poles from three to four inches at the top. Joe La Blan was a French half-breed about fifty years old. He had large grey whiskers and might have been taken for a Hebrew.

The breeds and Indians used to roam up and down the Minnesota River Valley for several hundred miles, and when cold weather overtook them they would put up a camp in some thick timber. Joe had no intention of interfering with my right to the claim. When I got him to take a claim, I advised him well, for the next spring some parties came up from Iowa and paid him three hundred dollars and a shotgun for his right.

The next summer I lived on my claim in a small log shanty. All the Indian families, numbering perhaps fifty to sixty, lived in tepees on Joe La Blan's land. He was my neighbor. One night, I remember, I woke up in the night. I heard some noise outside. I was alone. I got up and peeped out of the door and there I saw all the Indians gathered around my shanty. It was dark. I thought my end had come and that they had come to murder me. I asked one who could speak English what was the matter. He answered and said that they had heard some noise across the Lac qui Parle River, and that they thought it was the Chippewa Indians on the war

path after them. My neighbors were Dakota or Sioux. They stood and moved around for a while until daylight, and no Chippewa Indians could be seen. So they went back to their tepees, which were only about eighty rods from my shanty. They had been mistaken, I think.

Along in the latter part of the summer the old chief Napashniduta died. He was a good Indian, something over ninety years old. I was at the funeral. He was placed in a rough box of boards, and I helped to load it onto my wagon and hauled him to the top of the hill, where a grave was dug, and the coffin was placed in the grave. His pipe, hatchet, and other things that belonged to him were thrown into the grave. Those standing around took it coolly and no tears were shed. Thus ended the career of Napashniduta.¹⁵

In the fall I was to pay for my preëmption claim and get a deed from the government on my holdings. It took nearly three hundred dollars and it was not an easy thing to raise so much money. I had been offered \$160 for my nice young well-broken yoke of oxen, but I wanted \$175. The time drew near when I had to raise the money. My neighbor was going to drive a herd to Minneapolis, so I sent my oxen with him. He came back and gave me only \$80. He said that was all he got. I felt sorry for those young red and white spotted oxen,

¹⁵ Napeshneeduta was the first full-blooded Dakota man to join a Christian church. He was baptized at Lac qui Parle on February 21, 1840, when he took the name of Joseph Napeshnee. Some years later he removed to Little Crow's village below Fort Snelling. During the Sioux Outbreak of 1862 he was friendly to the whites and in the following spring he was engaged as a government scout. Finally he returned to Lac qui Parle, where he lived, respected for his piety and industry by whites and Indians alike, until his death in July, 1870. For nearly ten years he was a ruling elder of the Presbyterian Church. Frederick W. Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians*, part 2, p. 27 (Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletins*, no. 30—Washington, 1910); Thomas S. Williamson, "Napehshneedoota: The First Male Dakota Convert to Christianity," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3: 188-191 (St. Paul, 1880).

they were so gentle and well-broken. They had drawn me in a prairie schooner clear across the state. Well, I had raised some potatoes that I sold, and I managed to scratch up enough to pay the government, and I received papers on the land. It was a valuable piece of land, about one hundred acres of timber, which could be sold to prairie settlers for forty to fifty dollars per acre. I sold some for cash, but buyers did not come as readily as I expected. I proceeded to survey the land out into lots of from three to five acres. The prairie on both sides of the river was taken up by this time by settlers, and there was some demand for timber. I sold a few lots to the settlers. There happened to be a man in the village of Lac qui Parle, who had a little frame building in which he was running a saloon. One day he stumped me for a trade in timber lots. After some bargaining we made the deal. He was to get the deed of some timber lots and I was to get his building in town, with the stock of liquor in running order.

Well, the time passed along. I sold whiskey by the drink, pint, quart, and gallon. Along in the winter came a half-breed from St. Paul. He had driven up by team — there was no railroad at that time¹⁶ — and he was going to Big Stone Lake, he said, to buy scrip from the Indians.¹⁷ His name was Bill

¹⁶ The village of Lac qui Parle is still without a railroad. The railroad entered the county at the extreme southeast corner in 1884. Lycurgus R. Moyer and Ole G. Dale, eds., *History of Chippewa and Lac qui Parle Counties, Minnesota*, 1: 477 (Indianapolis, 1916).

¹⁷ Under the provisions of a law passed by Congress in 1854, scrip which entitled the holder to appropriate about 480 acres of land not already occupied or surveyed was issued to Sioux half-breeds. Land thus located was to replace each individual's share of the reservation which at an earlier time had been set aside for the half-breeds near Lake Pepin, and which now was thrown open for settlement. A provision in the law "that 'no transfer or conveyance of any of said certificates or scrip shall be valid' was easily circumvented, and they proved to be convenient vehicles for the transfer of valuable lands from government to private ownership, in advance of surveys." *United States Statutes at Large*, 10: 304; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1: 324, 482-486 (St. Paul, 1921).

Quinn.¹⁸ He had seventeen hundred dollars in cash in his pocket book. He came into my saloon often and treated the crowd, no matter how many there were or how few. He would throw a five-dollar bill on the counter and did not want any change. When I gave him change back, he would throw it on the dirty floor and tramp on it. So I learned after a while to please him and never gave him change, but slipped the bill into the money drawer and set up the drinks. This pleased him entirely.

One day he started to drive to Big Stone Lake. He drove along on the ice of Lac qui Parle Lake. Some miles out he came to a lot of fishermen, who were fishing through the ice. He had a good time there for awhile, drinking whiskey and talking. And there he lost his pocket book with the seventeen hundred dollars in it. But, luckily, one of the fishermen found it in the snow and gave it back to the owner.

So he proceeded on to Big Stone Lake and in about a week or ten days he was back again. He brought his son and his son's sweetheart with him. They were pretty good-looking half-breed Indians. He said he had caught them wild on an island in Big Stone Lake and wanted to "buckle them up" and marry them. So he bought ten gallons of whiskey and ten gallons of cherry brandy. I was invited to the wedding, which was held at the house of a French squaw man, who lived down the river a few miles. The next thing was to send for a justice of the peace to "buckle them up," as he said. A New England Yankee was sent for. His name was Mr. Stowell, and he performed the ceremony. But Mr. Quinn was in such a hurry that he sang out between drinks, "buckle them

¹⁸ William L. Quinn was a well-known scout, trader, and Indian interpreter. Following the Sioux Outbreak he was employed as a government scout, and he served in this capacity until 1870. It is possible that he was sent to Big Stone Lake by parties in St. Paul who were interested in securing scrip. Accounts of Quinn's career appear in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* for April 29, 1894, and for March 7, 1906.

up, buckle them up," and then again he would jig and laugh. Well, after it was done Quinn said he was so glad that they were "buckled up." We had a good time at the wedding. Some were drinking, some dancing, and others talking. It was a sort of cosmopolitan gathering. There were Dakota Indians talking with the lady of the house around the cook stove. There were the squaw man and old Bushma talking French. There were Fritz and Rosenbaum talking German. There were Ole Olson and John Johnson talking Norwegian. They were all enjoying a trot sling and a conversation between themselves, while Bill Quinn was dancing with a glass in his hand, to the music of the violin played by the half-breed, Joe Laframboise.¹⁹ A more pleasant and jolly time I have never enjoyed.

In the spring I sold out my business — building, lot, and all — and secured some land on the prairie and proceeded to build and open a prairie farm. I was a single man and lived alone in a log house which I had erected. I had no stock that first winter and had plenty of time to read. I subscribed for a paper by the name of *Dagslyset* published by Markus Thrane in Chicago.²⁰ It was an eye-opener to me. It was a free-

¹⁹ Joseph Laframboise is best known for his activities during the Sioux Massacre of 1862. Accompanied by an Indian, John Other Day, he informed the white people living at and about the Yellow Medicine Agency of their danger, and, subsequently, he was responsible for the rescue of numerous pioneer settlers in the upper Minnesota Valley. In 1863 he was a member of the Sibley expedition against the Sioux. *Sketches Historical and Descriptive of the Monuments and Tablets Erected by the Minnesota Valley Historical Society in Renville and Redwood Counties*, 68-71 (Morton, Minnesota, 1902).

²⁰ Markus Thrane was the leader of the labor and socialist movement which followed the revolution of 1848 in Norway. The movement was suppressed by the government and in 1854 the leaders were imprisoned, Thrane remaining in confinement for four years. Several years after his release he came to America, where he continued to disseminate his revolutionary ideas by means of a series of publications. In the *New World*, however, he focused his attacks upon the church rather than the state. All of his work as an author and publisher was done at Chicago. *Dagsly-*

thought paper and hit the nail on the head every time. I also sent for several books of the liberal kind, such as the writings of Darwin, Spencer, and Ingersoll. After long study I moved out of the orthodox faith and into the faith of Robert Ingersoll, and I must say that it seemed a great relief to get rid of the fear of hell and damnation. It took a long time to free myself of the superstitions which had been instilled into me, but I gradually did so, and I felt like a bird getting out of a cage or a slave set free. I felt better and slept better, for it is horrible to think that some people's souls are tortured in eternity without end. After I changed my faith the world seemed different to me; and today, after forty years without an orthodox faith, I feel assured of a peaceful sleep in all future eternity.

I next got into politics and ran for sheriff of Chippewa County and was elected.²¹ The country was on the frontier and horse thieves and bank robbers were plentiful in those early days. At one time I with a posse of men chased two horse thieves. They had stolen four fine horses. We were in hot pursuit after them and caught them in the timber on the Minnesota River. They refused to surrender. We fired on them and after a long battle both of them were shot and died. Two of my men were wounded and I got a bullet through my left arm but none of us was wounded seriously.

set (The Light of Day), the free-thought monthly which so profoundly influenced Steenerson, Thrane founded in 1869, and it appeared intermittently until 1875. He also published from 1865 to 1866 *Den Norske Amerikaner* (The Norwegian-American), the predecessor of *Skandinaven* (The Scandinavian), and in the late seventies he edited *Den Nye Tid* (The New Age). His *Wisconsin-Biblen*, a satiric attack in Biblical form on the Norwegian-American clergy, passed through numerous editions. He died in 1890. An excellent sketch of Thrane and his work appears in an article by Johannes B. Wist, entitled "Pressen efter borgerkrigen," which is published in that author's *Norsk-Amerikanernes Festskrift 1914*, 91-93 (Decorah, Iowa, 1914).

²¹ Steenerson was elected in 1876 and he resigned on July 18, 1877. Moyer and Dale, *Chippewa and La qui Parle Counties*, 1 : 194.

In the year 1876 swarms of grasshoppers appeared in the country. They were flying in the air so thick sometimes that you could not see the sun on a clear day. The fences were lined with them. They devoured the grass and crops of all descriptions.²² The machine companies had sold many implements to the settlers, but many of the settlers left their farms never to come back, for starvation stared them in the face. So I was ordered by the agents of the machine companies to gather up the seeders, mowers, reapers, etc., and haul them into Montevideo, the county seat. I had enough machinery to cover an acre or two for sale. I had a sale now and then, but there were no bidders except the agents themselves, who bid them in for the company. In a year or two the country straightened out again, crops were raised, and the people prospered again.

By this time I was looking around for a better half. I happened to have a summons to be served. On the trip, I happened to drop into a house on the prairie, where a beautiful girl was sitting on the sofa. I talked some with the old folks and took a glance at the girl now and then. The old man had just sold a farm in southern Minnesota and had arrived a few weeks before. He had taken a claim there several miles from any neighbors. The nearest railroad was seventy-five miles away. I went often afterwards to see the girl and she came to be my wife. We raised a big family of boys and girls.²³

I next traded off my prairie farm for a general store with several thousand dollars worth of stock. I ran along and did

²² Rocky Mountain locusts first appeared in Minnesota in large numbers in 1873. Swarms of these insects continued each summer to devour the crops, especially in the southwestern counties of the state, until 1877, when, during the months of June and July, they disappeared. Folwell, *Minnesota*, 290, 304-307.

²³ Before her marriage, which took place in 1876, Mrs. Steenerson was Miss Maria Anderson, the daughter of Sivert Anderson. The family had previously lived in Goodhue County.

a big business, but later closed out the store. I ran a large peddling wagon along the new line that was being built from Montevideo to Aberdeen.²⁴ One day I struck a camp west of where Milbank now stands. There I found my friend Wilson. He was peddling whiskey. It was Sunday and the crew was taking a rest and a spree. Wilson had two full whiskey barrels on his wagon. The boys had taken one wheel off the wagon and sunk it in the middle of the lake close by, and there Wilson was and could not get anywhere, and the railroad graders were having a big time with his stock of whiskey. The whiskey was passed around in dippers and cups. Mr. Wilson drank with them and seemed to enjoy it. South Dakota was then a trackless prairie without a farm or village in those parts.

In 1871 a party set out in prairie schooners for the Red River Valley. There were nine covered wagons. Some of the members of the party had families. We aimed to take up land on the Red River with timber on it. The first two or three days went along all right. When we came to Elbow Lake late one evening, we unhitched the oxen close by the lake.²⁵ Grazing was good. There had been a fence constructed and there were some chips lying by the road. We picked them together and made a little camp fire for cooking. As we were standing by the fire, along came a man that owned the fence.

²⁴ The Hastings and Dakota division of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad reached Montevideo in 1878; it was extended to Ortonville in 1879; and it was completed to Aberdeen in July, 1881. Minnesota Railroad Commissioner, *Annual Reports*, 1878, p. 13; 1879, p. 9; George W. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2: 1207 (Chicago, 1915).

²⁵ This lake is several miles northwest of the town of the same name in Grant County. The town was not established until 1874. One of the trails regularly used by traders who traveled between Pembina and St. Paul, via St. Cloud, passed Elbow Lake. Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names: Their Origin and Historic Significance*, 214, 217 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17—St. Paul, 1920).

The man raised his hand up in the air with a big butcher knife in it, and was in the act of plunging it into me, but suddenly my companion, who was standing by me, hit him over the arm with the whipstock with the result that the knife fell out of his hand to the ground. The man then retreated and went to Fergus Falls, some thirty-five miles, and had all nine of us arrested the next day and taken into Fergus Falls. We were then fined seven dollars a piece, which was costs and all. Although we had done nothing, it was cheaper to pay than to monkey with a lawsuit. Fergus Falls was about a year old and without a railroad.²⁶ The man that gave us the trouble was a one-eyed man by the name of Brown.

Well, after the rumpus that we had had, we proceeded along down the Red River on the Minnesota side. There were no settlers except now and then a stopping place for the stage which was running along the Red River.²⁷ These were about thirty or forty miles apart. At Georgetown the stage road crossed the river over to the Dakota side, but we went right ahead down on the Minnesota side of the Red River without any road whatever. When we came to the Wild Rice River we felled some trees across the river and made a kind of a bridge, so as to get our teams and wagons across. We proceeded further down the river a few miles and then the cara-

²⁶ Fergus Falls was located and named in 1856, but the first permanent settlers did not arrive until ten years later. The platting of the town in 1870 was followed by a general influx of settlers. The first railroad reached Fergus Falls in 1879. John W. Mason, ed., *History of Otter Tail County, Minnesota*, 1: 281, 480-489 (Indianapolis, 1916).

²⁷ The stage began running over this route some twelve years before Steenerson's journey. In 1859 the Minnesota Stage Company was organized by J. C. Burbank, Russel Blakeley, and their associates, for the purpose of instituting stage service between St. Cloud and Fort Abercrombie. The line was extended in the following year to Georgetown, and in 1871 to Winnipeg. *History of the Red River Valley, Past and Present*, 1: 570 (Chicago, 1909); Russell Blakeley, "Opening of the Red River of the North to Commerce and Civilization," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8: 50, 63, 64 (St. Paul, 1898).

van stopped, and we each located on a claim about a half a mile to a mile apart in the edge of the timber that skirted the river. Some of those parties are living on the same lands today. Some of them have passed away to the unknown land from which no one comes back to tell us anything.²⁸

²⁸ This group of settlers and another group which had arrived a week earlier combined to form the nucleus of the population of Polk County, for, although the county was established in 1858, no permanent settlers located there previous to June, 1871. All the settlers who arrived at this time were induced to seek homes in Polk County by Levi Steenerson, a brother of Knute. They located on lands south of the Sand Hill River, in what are now Hubbard and Vineland townships. The fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of this settlement was celebrated by the pioneers of the region on June 8, 1921. See *post*, p. 195.

Steenerson selected a homestead in Vineland township near the present village of Climax, but he soon abandoned it and returned to Chippewa County. His residence there was again interrupted in 1877 by a brief sojourn in Fargo, North Dakota, where he ran a hotel. After about two years he again went back to Chippewa County, but he was not satisfied to remain there for long. He was a wanderer by nature, constantly in search of new frontiers and new occupations. During the last forty years of his life Steenerson lived in several places in Minnesota, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Oklahoma. A period of nearly twenty years was spent on a farm near Upham, North Dakota. His vocation varied with his residence, and he was occupied at different times as a newspaper publisher, a merchant, a real estate dealer, and a farmer. In the fall of 1920 his habitual restlessness led him to go to San Diego, California, for the winter, and there he died on February 12, 1921. The information for the foregoing sketch was furnished by Mr. Elias Steenerson of Crookston.



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