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Palestine Settlement

One morning early in September of 1854, Nils Olsen Naes came to Lisbon, Illinois. Business brought him to this little Norwegian community. He was a book agent: Bibles and Biblical literature were his specialties.

Mr. Naes had only a meager amount of success in Lisbon. He found the residents of the community interested in his books, but financially unable to make purchases. Moreover, a mantle of gloom and uncertainty hung low over the immigrant settlement.

Many families had spent several years in Illinois. Others had only recently moved there from their native homes in Norway. All had come to America in the hope of obtaining cheap government land and establishing permanent homes in the new world. Upon arriving in Illinois, many of the immigrants were dismayed to learn that there was no more cheap land available. Some of them had succeeded in renting small farm places; others had to work for the more fortunate possessors of real estate. Most of them were unhappy. Fathers questioned the wisdom of their decision to leave the old homes; mothers shed silent tears as

they went about the work of making homes out of makeshift houses.

After he had been in Lisbon a short time, Naes learned the reasons for the feeling of despair so general in the community.

"If it's land you want", he said, "why don't you go to Iowa? I came from there not long ago and know there's plenty of land to be had at \$1.25 per acre."

This caused a great stir among the land-hungry Norwegians. They plied the Bible salesman with question after question. Yes, it was good land, he maintained, fine prairies with plenty of timber along the streams.

After obtaining as much information as they could from the itinerant book agent, the leaders of the community called a mass meeting. At this gathering the prospects of moving to Iowa were considered from every angle. It was finally agreed that the idea was worth further investigation. As a result, a committee composed of Osmund Sheldahl, Ole Fatland, Osmund Johnson, and Ole Apland was delegated to go to Iowa to survey the situation.

On September 25, 1854, the four men left Lisbon for central Iowa. About a month later they returned to report that they had secured tracts of land for the colony in Polk and Story counties.

It was good land, declared Sheldahl, fully as good as they had expected. The book agent had not deceived them.

Preparations for the migration to Iowa began at once, although it was not feasible to consider moving until spring. There was much to be done, but sturdy bodies were encouraged to great efforts by the rosy prospects that lay ahead. The men were engaged in setting their affairs in order and getting their property ready for the journey. Many wagons had to be constructed; others were in need of repairs. Coverings for the wagons had to be fashioned and horses feet made ready for the long arduous journey. The women and children worked with a new vigor at their tasks, which seemed to have new meaning. Toil and fatigue had a purpose. Spinning wheels and looms worked overtime that winter in the little Illinois community.

By May 16, 1855, the preparations were completed and the "word went forth that all those wishing to emigrate to Iowa should congregate at Holdeman's Prairie" west of Lisbon on the following day. On May 17th, the Norwegian national holiday, the loaded wagons rumbled away to the west.

One hundred and six persons made the journey. In this group were twenty-one families, five, young,

unattached men, and one widow. Twenty-four covered wagons and one spring wagon drawn by horses and oxen conveyed the party of pioneers to their new homes.

On June 7th they reached their destination, directly southeast of the present town of Huxley. During the course of that summer the men were busy building shelters for their families, and makeshift barns for their livestock. The construction work progressed rapidly. All members of the colony entered upon their tasks with the enthusiasm that only the prospects of home ownership can engender.

Encouraging reports filtered back to Lisbon and by the first of October another company of immigrants from Illinois had taken up their residence in the community, called Palestine, probably in reference to the Biblical "promised land" that flowed with milk and honey. This second contingent, like the children of Israel, encountered many hardships on their exodus. Cold, rainy weather ruined the roads and made wagon travel slow and uncomfortable. They were six weeks on the way. Many were sick. Gunder Madskaar died and was buried at Iowa Center.

A devotion among the people of the community to the Lutheranism of their fatherland and a sincere belief in the advantages of formal education

led to the organization of a church and, later, a school. In fact, before the first band left Lisbon in May, 1855, a church congregation had been organized. Each Sunday while they were traveling west, these God-fearing pioneers halted their wagons to participate in church services led by their pastor, Ole Anfinson.

The first meeting of the congregation held on Iowa soil was conducted in the center of a ring of covered wagons. Several Sundays later, Ole Fatland invited the group to his farm where a hay shed provided shelter for the meeting.

It was not until August, 1866, a year after the war, that the Palestine Church was finally completed. Plans had been laid for its construction in December, 1860, but the war caused an abrupt halt to be called to all such activity in the community. Throughout the years that followed, the Palestine Church became not only the religious but also the geographic and social center of the community.

Many of the families that moved from Lisbon to central Iowa had children of school age. It is not surprising, then, to note that very soon after their arrival the residents of the Palestine community organized a school. At first they were hampered by the lack of a building, but by the summer of 1857 a schoolhouse had been erected. Pop-

ular subscription of funds and coöperation in the actual work of construction made the project possible.

After the Civil War the community grew and prospered. By the turn of the century, it had become one of the principal settlements of Norwegian-Americans in central Iowa. All of which might not have happened had it not been for the wanderings of a loquacious book agent.

JAMES A. STORING