Herman B. Dable Family, c. 1893. (Left to Right, Back): Otto (b. 1881), Clara (b. 1879), Eleanor (b. 1877). (Left to Right, front): Agnes (b. 1889), father Herman B. Dable, Marie (b. 1885), Isak (b. 1883), Thea (b. 1891) and mother Anne Marie Kittleson Dable.
Little Norway Collection.
Isak James Dahle's life began much the same as others in rural Wisconsin in the 1880's. He was born February 1, 1883, the grandson of Norwegian immigrant, Onun Bjornson Dahle. Isak's father, Herman, and mother, Anne Marie, were operators of a mercantile business in the small, rural farming community of Mount Vernon, Wisconsin.

When Isak was four years old, he moved with his parents, brother and sisters to Mount Horeb, just a few miles from their former home. Here the family established a prime main street mercantile business. Isak was surrounded with the family's astute business ethics and strong Norwegian traditions. Grandfather Onun wove into the young boy's mind many colorful tales of adventure encountered during his 1849 trip to the California Gold Fields.

From an early age, Isak collected all manner of objects—rocks, stamps, pennants, butterflies, etc. He kept these in cases and organized them systematically, making each collection a research project in itself. His boyhood collecting efforts eventually would take on a much grander scale.

Isak attended the Mount Horeb Lutheran Academy, the Wisconsin Academy of Madison, and graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1904. During Isak's college years, his father was a representative in the United States Congress, directly exposing Isak to the political climate of the time.

Following his college graduation, Isak was associated briefly with a Minneapolis flour company, but he spent the greater part of his life devoted to the life insurance business, first in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and then in Chicago.
Isak possessed a keen intellect and business sense, inherited from his family. He had a magnetic personality, great loyalty to his friends, and a strong determination to succeed in his every endeavor. For these reasons, Isak was very successful in the life insurance business, an occupation which according to his personal diaries was ever present on his mind.

Isak was in business during a unique time in American history, the late nineteen twenties through the early thirties. He rode through the Great Depression, spent hours entertaining clients and guests, and surrounded himself with the business and entertainment notables of the time. He was involved with numerous societies, business clubs, and charities, including the American Scandinavian Foundation, the Norwegian American Society, the Chicago Norske Klub and the Adventurers Club of Chicago.

Isak had a life-long devotion and fondness for his family, especially his mother, Anne. In January, 1926, he escorted her on a first-class tour of Europe. Norway was an important stop on their itinerary, as it gave them
Isak Dable as a young man beginning his Life Insurance career, c. 1910.
Little Norway Collection.
Isak Dable with his mother, Anne, c. 1935.
Little Norway Collection.
View of the Austin Olson Hougan farm—granary/toolsbed in foreground.
Winter, 1927. Isak and his brother, Otto, inspect the Austin Olson Hougan farm, near Mount Horeb, Wisconsin. The buildings include the original springhouse, cattle barn, dugout, horse barn and corn crib. The setting is reminiscent of the farms Isak had seen in Norway, and was soon transformed into "Little Norway."

Little Norway Collection.

The springhouse.

Cattle and sheep barn.
Corncrib horsebarn, foreground.
Cattle and sheep barn, background.

The dugout/ root cellar.
On the left, one of the three residences on the property, originally a weaving room.
Reconstruction Views of Little Norway Buildings.

The Austin Olson Hougan cattle and sheep barn with new windows installed.

Completed cattle and sheep barn with porch and stone chimney added.
Austin Olson Hougan home under reconstruction.

Isak, his mother, and brother Otto in front of the home's newly completed porch.
both an opportunity to visit their ancestral homeland. The landscape and folk architecture that Isak and his mother experienced in Norway remained a vivid and inspiring memory.

On New Year's Day, 1927, while visiting his family in Mount Horeb, Isak’s brother Otto took the Chicago businessman for an auto ride into the country to inspect some property which had recently come up for sale. Located in a picturesque, rugged valley west of Mount Horeb was situated the remains of an early Norwegian immigrant’s home—the Østen Olson Hougan¹ farm, where Otto and Isak had fished and hiked as boys. The family had lived on this farm for more than a half century. Here they had built three different residences for family members and numerous outbuildings. These buildings were surrounded by steep hills, dotted with majestic, mature Norway maples, with a bubbling freshwater spring still flowing in the center of the farmstead.

This setting was so strongly reminiscent of what Isak had seen in Norway that he was determined to acquire the place, and to establish a
Family members gathered at the dining room table, c. 1933.
(Left to Right): Elise Kittleson, Marie Peterson, Joe Green,
Marcelaine Hobson, Anne Dable, Walter Langland, Merk Hobson.
Little Norway Collection.

memorial to Norwegians in America. It would also serve as a summer home, where his family and friends could gather. Isak purchased the dilapidated farm buildings and eighty acres in 1927, and began appointing family members and friends to supervise his project, which he named Little Norway. Hugo Stikheivitz, a Latvian refugee, was hired to be resident caretaker.

Some of the buildings were torn down and rebuilt, while others remained in their original locations. Norwegian carpenters and painters from the area were employed. Their traditional skills gave the place an authentic Norwegian character.
HAVE YOU ANY NORSE ANTIQUES TO SELL?

If so, bring them to Dahle’s Store. Am especially anxious to get old furniture, paintings, dishes, wooden bowls, etc., in fact any Norwegian antiquity that will add to the interest of “Little Norway” (as it is being called)

Isak J. Dahle.

FOR SALE

White Shepherd pups. M. C. Jenson, Mt. Horeb, Wis.

BARN DANCE

There will be a barn dance at the Casper Huber farm, 6 miles east of Blanchardville and 1 mile west of Postville on Saturday night, June 9. A good time assured.

Advertisement for Norwegian Antiques.
Mount Horeb Mail, June 7, 1928.

The original barn was outfitted with a sleeping loft, where traditional Norwegian bunkbeds were built into the corners. The lower level was divided and transformed into a kitchen area and a dining room containing a long table, where Dahle family members could gather when they visited the farm. Seating and sleeping porches were added, and rustic stone fireplaces were built. The exterior trim on all the buildings was painted warm blue. A new springhouse with an enclosed bell tower was placed over the spring on the site of the original.

Isak wrote to family members, requesting heirlooms to furnish the buildings, and placed ads in newspapers seeking to purchase Norwegian immigrant antiques. The family store in Mount Horeb was listed as the place to bring them. Jim Stavrum, an interior decorator from Chicago and friend of Isak’s, spent the summer of 1928 in Norway, gathering antique
furnishings. Crates containing tables, chairs, a clock, tapestries and copper pieces began arriving at the Dahle family store in January, 1929. They created a stir in the community, and were placed on display in the store window for a time.

The entire project began to draw the attention of journalists and the curious alike. Newspaper and magazine stories began to appear, locally and nationally. Family members enjoying the tranquil property soon began accommodating the public. Ongoing construction was often hampered by the number of spectators wishing to view Little Norway. However, work continued as planned. Marsh land was drained, acreage acquired, ponds hand-dredged, thousands of pine trees planted, white picket fences and birchwood bridges constructed. The entire place took on a look and beauty comparable only to Old Norway.

1. Like many Norwegian immigrants, Østen Olson Hougan took a new name in America. He chose to Americanize Østen as Austin and used this as his first name, and according to his obituary no longer used Hougan.