CHAPTER I.
The First Norwegian Settlements in America.

In reviewing briefly the first few settlements that lead up to our own community we omit all the early explorations and discoveries of the Vikings, such as Lief Erickson's 1000 A.D., Jens Munk's in 1619 as well as the numerous Norsemen with the Dutch at New Amsterdam in 1613, and others in smaller numbers at various times.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century there was in Norway considerable strain between the state church officials and the plain people, as well as between the aristocracy and the lower classes. There was no mutual feeling of sympathy among the various classes, religious tolerance was a thing unheard of and unknown. An example of this may be cited in the case of Hans Nilson Hauge, a layman who was imprisoned for ten years (1804-1814) for preaching the Truth from place to place. In other instances children from dissenters of the church were taken and forcibly baptized, people were even fined for not attending communion, showing the autocracy, of those in power.

Along in 1820 there were around Stavanger some dissenters of the Church known as Friends or Quakers. Like the Huguenots of France and the Puritans of England in previous times, these Quakers did not find living very pleasant and as a result they were instrumental in sending Cleng Peerson and Knute Eide to America in 1821, with a view of finding a suitable place to establish a colony in the new world.
After three years of absence, Cleng Peerson returned, bringing with him reports that brot about the organization of the Sloop party which was composed of 52 people who left Norway on board the ship "Restaurationen" July the 4th, 1825. The leader of this party was undoubtedly Lars Larson Jeilene, a Quaker, but it would not be correct to infer that they were all of that denomination, in fact it is known that they were not, as that form of religion has had no influence on immigration from Norway later on. It may be safe to assume that the predominating issues of the day could be summed up in the one word "BREAD."

That first little ship, after a perilous journey, aroused a great deal of excitement on arriving safely across the turbulent waters of the mighty Atlantic to New York. From here most of the immigrants under the leadership of Cleng Peerson founded the first Norwegian settlement in this country at Kendal, Orleans County, N. Y. This settlement was however, not destined to reach any great prominence as far as the Norwegian immigration was concerned. It was in a heavily timbered region which was hard to clear. About eight years later Cleng Peerson again made an inspection tour thru the various states, walking hundreds of miles thru a comparative wilderness and finally selected a site a short distance west of Chicago, at Fox River, La Salle County, Illinois, as a more promising place for a Norwegian settlement.

It is hard to grasp the full meaning and significance of all the difficulties that had to be encountered nearly a hundred years ago. The means of communication and transportation were so entirely different, there being no railroads nor even wagon roads for the travelers. The stage coach came out to Chicago twice a
month from the East, the knowledge of the other parts of the country being almost nothing, all was new and unexplored.

In the Sloop party there was a scholar by the name of Gjert Hovland who wrote some lengthy and interesting letters back to Norway in the year 1831, describing the conditions of living in the New World. These letters were copied by the hundreds in the Old Country and passed from man to man, who read and re-read them, the contents forming the chief topic of discussion wherever people chanced to meet.

Such was the feeling in Norway when in 1835 Knut Slogsvig, a member of the Sloop party, visited his Fatherland after living ten years in America. Excitement ran high when this news spread and people came to see and speak with a man who had really been to America and returned alive. He was the hero of the day. When Knut Slogsvig returned to America in 1836, the two ships “Norden” and “Den Norske Klippe” could not accommodate all those desiring to go with him; consequently two more ships were fitted out in 1837. In the meantime the opposition to the migration from Norway had not remained idle. The clergy and aristocrats united in placing barriers in the path of the emigrants.

When Knut Slogsvig landed in New York with his newly acquired bride and 160 other passengers, he immediately set out for the Fox River settlement, La Salle County, Ill. Most of the arrivals of 1837 were also bound for Fox River but on arriving at Chicago for various ascribed reasons they turned some miles to the south and founded the unfortunate Beaver Creek settlement. The location of this settlement was picked during the dry fall months and looked promising enough until the spring rains proved that it was founded upon a marsh and was very
unhealthy. The poor immigrants having invested all their money in land and buildings tried to stay, but thru the summer malarial fever broke out and caused 14 or 15 deaths among which was a bright student, Ole Rynning, who the previous winter, while on a sick bed, had written a book which was later published in Norway, and which did much to stimulate Norwegian emigration. Most of the remaining settlers fled to the Fox River settlement.

One of the survivors, Ole Knudson Natestad, came to Clinton, Rock County, Wisconsin, on July 1st, 1838. He may safely be said to be the first Norwegian settler in Wisconsin and the founder of the fourth Norwegian settlement in the United States, the so-called Jefferson Prairie. In 1839 the second Wisconsin settlement was founded by immigrants direct from Norway. Their destination was also Fox River but at Milwaukee they were induced to take land some fifteen miles southwest from that place. This became the noted Muskego settlement, the first settlers being the Luraas Brothers, Even Hegg and some forty others.

The famous Koshkonong settlement in eastern Dane County was founded in 1840 and settled mostly by the overflow of the Fox River settlement and a few representatives from Jefferson Prairie.

The following decade of years found the Norwegians scattered in various small settlements thruout Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, and Texas. While many went direct from Norway to other places most of the immigrants came thru one or the other of these settlements as a port to their future homes. The main requirements that the settlers looked for were
Sixty Years of Perry Congregation

water, timber, and grass land for hay. The open prairie lands were shunned at first as a desert, as well as being considered too exposed to the elements to ever be occupied by settlers:

The hardships of the early pioneers can hardly be overestimated, isolated into a comparative wilderness one hundred miles from market with very little to sell, and even if a few bushels of wheat were laboriously raised it brot probably only twenty-five cents a bushel; add to this the rumors of Indian massacres, sicknesses, as was the case at Muskego in 1849 when that grim reaper of DEATH thru the agency of cholera carried away its people by the score. It surely took strong hearts and determined minds to hold out against these trying periods. Add again to all this the lack of a spiritual adviser and the Holy Sacraments, their children growing up without baptism and education, the picture is not a bright one, but their bridges were burned behind them and their only alternative was to stay and make the best of their situation.

To Ole Olsen Hetletvedt belongs the honor of being the first lay-minister to expound the Gospel to his countrymen in the New World. He was a well educated school-master from the Old Country and a member of the Sloop party in 1825. There is hardly any doubt that he preached on the Sloop and again at Kendal. We find him again in 1837 as the first to gather the settlers at Fox River for a “Samling.” As a lay-preacher and agent for the American Bible Society he traveled extensively in the settlements of the Northwest.

Elling Eielson came to America in 1839 and made his home mostly at Fox River and partly at Muskego. He had traveled extensively in the Old Country as a lay-preacher of the Hauge
type and continued the same among most of the early settlements of this country. In 1842 he arranged the upstairs of his dwelling house at Fox River as a meeting place and preached there until the congregation built a church.

He was ordained as a minister by the Rev. F. A. Hoffman, Oct. 3rd, 1843.

Claus L. Clausen was a Dane who had intended to go to South Africa as a missionary, but thru the influence of Tollef O. Bache of Norway he decided to follow the Norwegian emigration to America as a teacher, and arrived at Muskego in August, 1843. He soon discovered that they needed a preacher more than a teacher, so he was examined and found to have the required qualifications, thus it came about that he was ordained by a German Lutheran minister, the Rev. L. F. E. Krause, Oct. 18th, 1843, and received a call from the Muskego congregation. The same fall they decided to build a church, and until it was ready services, including confirmations, were held in Even Hegg’s barn. This Muskego church was the first to be erected by the Norwegians in America, altho it was not dedicated until March 13th, 1845. This same Church, after standing for more than half a century on that site was transferred to St. Anthony Park where it now stands as a relic along the side of our Theological Seminary.

Rev. J. W. C. Dietrichson was the first minister educated at the University of Norway and regularly ordained by the Norwegian
Bishop to come and work among and organize the newly settled immigrants. He was a man of firm and convincing manners, authority was imprinted in his very character. He arrived at Muskego in August, 1844, and stayed with Rev. Clausen with whom he worked in harmony and good understanding.

Rev. J. W. C. Dietrichson preached his first sermon at East Koshkonong in Amund Anderson's barn August 30th, 1844, and at West Koshkonong under a big oak tree September 2nd of the same year. The East Koshkonong Church was organized October 10th, 1844 in the now town of Christiana and was built of logs, 36 x 28. It was dedicated January 31st, 1845. The West Koshkonong Church of the now town of Pleasant Springs was organized October 13th, 1844, built of the same material and size as the EAST church, and dedicated December 19th, 1844, by the Reverends Dietrichson and Clausen.

The lot of these early ministers and teachers was not an easy one, besides the primitive mode of living, the small house accommodations, the long distances of almost impassable roads, the crude mode of transportation, and probably the worst of all the way the immigrants were separated into factions and sects. Surely the early settlers were like sheep without a shepherd.

Rev. Claus L. Clausen can truly be considered the pioneer among the Norwegian ministers. He shared all the toils and
privations of the early settlers at Muskego and the surrounding country, and when immigration again moved westward he took up the frontier life and founded the St. Ansgar settlement in Iowa. When the horrible civil war shook our country he again showed his patriotism, love, and faith by enlisting as chaplain of that famous Norwegian Regiment, the 15th Wisconsin. He was the first president of the Norwegian Synod in 1850 and again held the same office in the Norwegian Conference of 1868.

Rev. Dietrichson’s first stay in America was only nine months but he returned in 1846 to Koshkonong and served these congregations for the rest of his stay in this country, until June, 1850, when he was relieved by Rev. Adolph C. Preus who had been called as his successor from Norway.