THE WINTER OF 1842-43

On account of the very severe weather, great distress prevailed among the settlers, and great drifts of snow remained until the middle of April. The cabins and stables offered a scanty protection to man and beast. Quite a number of the cattle died from hunger or froze to death. We were very fortunate in living through the season in good health and without loss of any of our animals, but the trials and exposure to the elements were beyond description. One day, when we ventured to the marshland, we found our haystack, our only supply, entirely gone. Roaming Indians had stolen it, and this loss was even more severely felt, as we humans could better accommodate ourselves to reduced rations than the animals. Many a day we had no bread on the table. Coffee made of roasted wheat, slices of potatoes for toast, and a horrible brown syrup, which well deserved the nickname of 'nigger-sweat,' instead of sugar, of such consisted the daily diet for breakfast and other meals. But our hunger was fairly well satisfied, and no absolute lack of food ever existed. On Sundays we joked about the special delicacy of 'winter pancakes,' made of flour without milk or eggs and with very little butter, and yet consumed like the choicest dessert. Our mattresses had long ago been opened, and the straw used for fodder. The dry wheat stalks, which we had used to reinforce the stable walls against the winter's cold, had gone the same way, but at last the budding foliage of the trees began, and this was quickly cut down to feed the starving animals. It took some time before the oxen, exhausted from lack of food, could be used in cultivation.

At the beginning of spring when we were almost destitute, I went to a nearby farmer, who was practically in the same predicament, and for me and for himself he plowed over the last year's potato patch, and we both shared in the few frozen potatoes that had been forgotten or missed in the fall. The burden now became almost unbearable, and I realized that under the weight of poverty even the strongest may succumb. It was the first time in my life that I had wept, for it seemed that life was now entirely void of all hope. But, on my return, my bag of potatoes was removed by helping hands, and an all sacrificing love instilled new courage and hope, while a pair of small, tender arms reached around my neck—and the burden became lighter. During these fateful times our friends, the Schneidau's, had endured equal if not greater suffering. His sickness and their comparatively poorer dwelling made their existence more miserable. They had also had an increase in the family, but the little one, weak from birth, did not remain with them long. Soon the first grave was dug at Pine lake, and Schneidau buried there his own child.

However, spring came, and at last the out-of-doors offered us her riches. Grass and flowers became food for the cattle. The woods were full of wild pigeons again, and flocks of ducks visited the lake. Ellida
was again put in use and aided in stocking the table with fish. A fine, milching cow did well in her way, and the hens layed eggs, which were promptly sold in Milwaukee or were exchanged for other necessities. Both man and beast quickened from starvation and grief and took on a new lease of life.

On the section we occupied our friend Petterson built himself a small cabin and was soon joined by his wife and children. We had learned to respect and love this noble, upright man, and it was with sincere regrets that we saw him move his shoemaker's bench from our attic to his own. But, although he ceased to be a member of the family, he always remained our friend, and never was a neighborly feeling or mutual understanding greater among men.

During the summer the settlement was further increased by several Swedish and over fifty Norwegian families, and thus a little Scandinavia was created on the shores of Pine lake. On the east side were the Swedes, on the west the Norwegians, and omitting occasional misunderstanding, the two nations lived happily together, and I must admit that in my future personal relations and contacts with the Scandinavians of the settlement, I was shown greater affection and more active support from the Norwegians than from my own landsmen.

Of the Swedes who originally settled at Pine lake only three or four families now remained. The majority were there but a short time, migrating to other sections to find a more promising future, more adventures, or perhaps greater disaster. Many changes had, indeed, taken place. Carl had gone to New Orleans where he engaged in selling tobacco and newspapers, and even good old Christine was about to leave us and be married to a Norwegian farmer, who had built a home nearby. The Schneidas had also left for other regions, but before they left an agreement was made that we might occupy their new home, which was more substantial and roomier than our own, at least until such a time as the farm could be sold to better advantage than at present. We planned also, if possible, to sell our farm in order to better arrange our affairs, while I was a student at the seminary at Nashotah.

All land around Pine lake was now claimed or occupied, and closely situated little homes were scattered over the entire oak-meadow region and around the lake shore. Better and more graceful boats than Ellida skimmed the surface of the placid lake. In this small community many interesting events took place, and many intrigues were engaged in, which would have made rich stuff for the imagination of a novelist, yet true to nature, where love is the principal and underlying motive. There were, to be sure, not a great many young people, yet sufficient and slowly increasing in number, but the idyllic life and romantic surroundings made them the more attractive to each other.