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PIONEER DAYS IN WISCONSIN

by

Ingeborg Holdahl Alvstad

We were truly pioneers when we came to Pierce County, Wisconsin, in the spring of 1889. My father bought eighty acres of virgin forest to be transformed into farm land that could produce a living for us. Meanwhile we lived with a bachelor uncle across the road from the new acquisition.

In the winters, devastation of the trees was work number one. Men were kept busy cutting down the finest trees making them into railroad ties, piling, cordwood, and such things. In the spring the branches and rejected parts were gathered in huge piles and burned. Such a waste of what nature had taken perhaps centuries to provide for the benefit of man, birds, and beasts. Eventually some land was cleared of all but the tree stumps. Then farming began. This was called a clearing.


A walking plow was drawn by a team of horses or oxen and steered by a man who knew how to handle it. Plowing was done as close to the stumps as possible. Seeding was done with a little hand machine or strewed. Harvesting was a slow job. The grain was cradled down so it could be tied by hand into bundles. This latter job was for the women to do. I remember watching this done but was too young to be of any help.

After a season or two of this the stumps were removed by dynamiting. An expert at this work was a man we all called Go Pons. He loved the bottle and thus drank a lot and when he indulged he invariably said it was a Go Pons, a good punch. Then the stumps had to be burned.

When the stumps were all cleared away the land could be plowed and disked in straight furrows and seeded and harvested with bigger machinery.

The reaper was used. I remember when my uncle got a binder. One that tied the bundles as the grain was cut. He cut our grain that way too. As time went on the farmers got new binders. The mowers were in use for cutting the hay but where hay was grown amid the stumps men who had become experts with the scythe were hired for the haying season. Domestic hay on virgin land was very heavy and made a lot of tiring work.

Before long I was pressed into service in haying time. We used wooden rakes with long wooden teeth in them. Much bigger than garden rakes.

We had log fences that went like this  and we younger ones had to rake the hay ^{out} of the fence corners and from around the stumps. Then if it had rained, the hay had to be turned to dry the under side. Then when the hay racks came we had to rake the hay together so it could be picked up with pitchforks and piled up on the hay rack. It was hot work as we had to work fast. I should have mentioned that when the hay was dry it was gathered into rounded cocks.

After the grain was cut, the bundles were gathered about eight bundles to a shock. When sufficiently dry these bundles were hauled up, not too far from the barn, and put up in stacks. Several loads-ful to a stack. The stacks far enough apart for the threshing machine to go between them.

Threshing time was funtime. The whole neighborhood exchanged help. Much of the baking was done ahead. The neighbors started coming very early to eat breakfast before going to work. We could count on about twenty men. About ten o'clock they were all served lunch consisting of sandwiches, cookies, cake and coffee. This was brought out to them. At noon they all came in for dinner. Four o'clock was lynch time again and then after that they threshed until dark. You may wonder what so many would find to do. A couple of men would cut the twine on the burlies, another couple of them

pitched the bundles to the machine. One or two pitched the straw away from the machine and piled it up in a stack. Then two or three carried the grain, that had been run into sacks, to the granary where it was dumped into bins. We had to have a goodly number of sacks which had been carefully looked over and patched beforehand. Oh yes, and a couple of men hauled tanks of water for the engine. A goodly pile of wood was provided in advance for the engineer to keep the engine going. We generally had them two or three days before they moved to the next place. Mother always had someone helping her on these busy days.

Oh yes, only a few stacks in each place. At least one set of stacks in the pasture. It provided both food and shelter for the cattle. We children used to play in those big straw stacks. A good place for hide and seek.

Who's complaining of beds nowadays. It was years before we had bed springs. We acquired new beds equipped with wooden slats cross ways, and it was some time before I ever saw a bed spring.

Seeing blue striped ticking takes me back in memory to our mattresses. A mattress cover was made of this material with a generous length opening in the middle. This was filled with new straw soon after threshing time. This lasted for a year until next year's straw was available. What fun we children had when that was done. We were allowed to do the stuffing after emptying the old straw. Care had to be taken to stuff the straw evenly so mother had to do some redistributing when they were returned to the beds. Eventually these gave place to manufactured ones. Likewise as time went on we acquired new bed springs and one iron bedstead. We thought that was really tops at that time.

On persuasion of my children and grandchildren I'm here giving, in writing, some of my earliest experiences as I recall them. Primarily that of an unusual ocean voyage. But first I must state that I was born in a little village in Norway July 26, 1884.

My home was in a valley with mountains all around. This valley was somewhat near the center of the part of the country where it is the widest, that is in the southern portion. Scattered around in the valley were the school-house, the church, and a combination store and post office and many farm homes. The name of this area and post office was Skrautvaal. It still has that name. It is in a section called Valdres. Valdres is divided into two parts equivalent to our counties. These are Nordre or North Aurdal and Sondre or South Aurdal. Valdres is a favorite tourist attraction because of its favorable summer climate, its beautiful rivers and deep fjords, and its numerous mountains. So the top soil won't wash away the mountains are covered with trees. To tell you how valuable these trees are I can say that Norway has a law that forbids cutting down a tree unless another one is planted to take its place. A very good law.

I was one of a big family so when I was still a very little girl three of my older brothers, Bendix, Soren and Olaf, and my oldest sister Sigrid came to America. Bendix in 1887, the three others in 1888. When I was four-and-a-half years old the decision was made for the rest of the family to migrate to America also.

The first thing I can remember was a trip home from Grandma Gladheim's. That was a jingle bell sleigh ride over the snow and I remember just how the ride wound around the curves and down into the valley where our home was.

My next recollection is getting ready to leave home. I can only imagine what that meant to my parents, but four-and-a-half year old Ingeborg put up a real battle when she was awakened in the wee hours and upholstered so as to keep her warm for the very long ride ahead. We went to Christiania, the capital of Norway, and a seaport. Many years later the name was changed to Oslo.

Mother dressed us all warmly. She put a big warm hood on my head. It wasn't mine so I fought it vigorously. But the climax that made me fight and howl more was a pair of heavy wool socks that were pulled on over my shoes and on my legs. We didn't have modern snow suits and overboots in those days.

My tears and fighting spirit were soon dispelled when we children were packed down in the back of the sleigh under warm blankets. All I had to do all day, between naps, that is, was to watch the telegraph poles run past us, or so it seemed to me. That memory still fascinates me.

I recall no stops along the way. Not even for eating, or feeding and resting the horses. As night came, though, we stopped at a farm home along the way. There were two houses. In one of these lived the retired grandparents. As soon as our sleigh came to a stop the families streamed out to meet us. The nice grandmother gathered me into her arms and carried me into her home and made a big fuss over me. I was seated in a chair between the two nice people and they plied me with food, all I could eat. After a while they took me to the other house where I rejoined my family. How often I've thought of these kind people and how they did all they could to make me happy. I recall nothing about the other people there or how long we remained with them.

I've heard it said that we stayed for some time in Christiania waiting for our ship to leave. However, of this I have absolutely no recollection. I don't recall how or when we boarded the ship and only a few incidents while we were there. We were a family of emigrants eight in number and had our own food supply with us. That was the custom in those times. The ship of course had to furnish water to drink. Also coffee, at least for breakfast. This I remember because Mother didn't like the coffee and so didn't drink hers. She said it was made from chicory, a coffee substitute. She let me drink some of hers and I liked it because it was sweetened. I'm sure I would share Mother's opinion of it now.

The customary way now to travel by boat from Norway to the United States is by crossing the North Sea and for the passengers to land at Hull on the east coast of England, then cross the island by train to Liverpool, on the west coast, there to embark on a different ship for the longer ocean journey. Because we were so many young children it had been considered advisable to take a longer all-sea route which is now no longer used. This I learned as I heard our experiences discussed from time to time later.

we
Apparently the ship, an old one, was not too reliable. When/were somewhere in the mid Atlantic it sprang a leak and every effort was made to mend it. Three engines were kept busy pumping the water out. One engineer was killed at the pumps.

From here on a chain of experiences imprinted themselves on my memory and have not been forgotten. I might add here that my mother was not well and could not cope with all of us all the time. I evidently was the most irreplaceable one. My two older sisters, Bessie and Anna, could help Mother watch little brother Thorbjorn. Thus Father was frequently compelled to take main charge. That no doubt accounts for my wider range of experiences. Father had me by the hand, on deck, when the funeral of the dead engineer took place. This I recall distinctly. Men were lined up along the ship's railing. The dead man, wrapped in a sheet or canvas, was strapped to a board and laid on supports at one end of the deck. Hymn books were passed and a song sung. After a short service the corpse was tossed overboard into the sea. The solemnity of the occasion was very impressive, even to little me.

The water kept filling into the hold of the ship faster than it could be pumped out so the ship began to list more and more. It became obvious that the ship was doomed to go down and that within a short time. The S.O.S. at that time was the hoisting of a white flag, in hopes some seafaring vessel would see us and come to our rescue. To our good fortune we were spied by a Portuguese transport ship carrying live cattle. This ship was then anchored about a mile from the one we were on and came to our rescue in life boats. I distinctly remember how badly our ship was listing that day. We were all gathered to the highest point of the deck and looked across the water towards our hoped for rescuers. According to custom it was children first. While I was being prepared for my egress I watched men climbing down ladders. I presume my father and older brothers went down this way. I was let down in a basket all by myself. (There had to be haste and no attempt was made to keep members of a family together.) After a seemingly long boat ride, about a mile, I was out on board the life boat which had in the meantime been cleared of its live cargo of cattle and been readied for us.

what a hubbub on board. No one having any definite place to go. Parents hunting for their children and children trying to find their parents. I don't know how long I wandered around by myself in the ever increasing crowd. I remember being jostled around in a dense crowd of people almost smothering me, as most of them seemed to be grownups and reared up way over my head. Finally someone picked me up and set me on a long table where I sat, tired and not daring to move. It seemed an endless time of waiting until my father came and found me and took me with him. I don't know how long it took for us all to get reunited. Of course most of our baggage was saved so we had no changes of clothing.

This boat was not prepared to feed us for any length of time so took us to its nearest Portuguese port. That was one of the Azores. There Ingeborg enjoyed some limited freedom. I have a vivid recollection of the long pier where the only thing that registered with me was piles and piles of fresh carrots, so rich looking in their green and gold. The morning after our arrival we were still near the water. I found a path leading down to the water, and was it ever inviting to follow it. It was slightly down hill and every time I got almost to the water some strong hand pulled me up again. To my disappointment, of course.

The boat was not big enough to carry all of us passengers all the way to the United States. One hundred single men had to remain behind to follow later in another boat. All the rest of us were taken to Philadelphia.

There was a long enough interim before our train for the West was to leave, so Mother gathered her brood and found a private nook which she improvised into a beauty parlor and gave us children the once over, thoroughly fine-combing our hair and tidying us up the best she could, considering the circumstances. That is my only recollection of Philadelphia.

By this time I must have become accustomed to quick changes. Not one thing of the long, tiresome journey westward has been retained in my memory. Our destination was Ellsworth, Wisconsin, by way of St. Paul, Minnesota. Our arrival was overdue and our ship had been reported to be lost at sea, according to the newspapers. When our rescue was later reported some people along the way came out to see what they could see as our train passed through the towns. This was especially the case in River Falls, Wisconsin. Our train was a slow-moving local and here a kind-hearted woman brought a dress for whomever it might fit. I became the owner and thus reached our destination owning a second dress.

But nothing of this had registered with me. I woke up in a bed the next morning at my uncle Nels Holdahl's home about eight miles northeast of Ellsworth. Uncle Nels had come to Ellsworth to meet us. Dr. Woodworth, an Ellsworth doctor, had notified Uncle Nels that he had learned we would be on the train that evening. I don't remember that ride but I had many similar rides throughout the next several years. A big lumber wagon drawn by two farm horses. It took a long time to travel a few miles on a dark night with such a rig.

Now we had almost reached our destination. But not quite. We had three miles further to go to Uncle Soren's. He was Father's youngest brother and a bachelor.

Before I tell you any more of my life in Wisconsin I'll have to mention an incident from our ocean travel. A baby girl was born who was named Missouri

Atlanta. Named, of course, from the ship on which she was born and the vast ocean which almost became her grave.

Uncle Soren lived on a farm in a log house which became our home for a time. This was in the township of Gilman in Pierce County. Compared with modern times we had neither comfort nor conveniences but it was home and we had many enjoyments and interesting experiences. In June a little sister joined the already large family. She was named Tilla Mabel, the first one in our big family to be given a middle name, thus accepting that American custom.

This was timber country. The farm was about half cleared for cultivation but many stumps remained in the yard. It was fun to hunt for eggs and the nests were hard to find when the grass grew tall around the stumps and along the fences. One day the hired man cut the grass around the stumps and a mother hen sitting on a clutch of eggs lost her head. Mother told us children to destroy the eggs because they were spoiled. This was hard for us to do because they looked so nice. We carried them all away and destroyed them excepting one nice shiny one which I slipped into my dress pocket. You may guess what happened before very long. That was something I never forgot. I had to clean out the pocket and wash it myself and was scolded for my disobedience besides.

Soon Father bought eighty acres of timber land across the road from Uncle Soren's. That meant lots of work clearing some of the land for cultivation and for a home site. The soil was rich and the tame hay grew both tall and rank. This hay had to be cut with a hand scythe and we children had the job of raking it away from the stumps and fences and piling it up into hay cocks. We used wooden rakes with wooden tines. These were about twice as big as our modern garden rakes. It was just too bad when we got careless and broke some of the tines. Father had to whittle new ones to replace them. We also had to rake together the hay that couldn't be gathered up with the three-tined forks when the men hauled in the hay, pitching it on big hay racks and hauling it into the barn or putting it in big stacks near the barn.

Much of the timber that was cut in the winter time was made into railroad ties and pilings. These were hauled to Beldenville or The Mines and sold to shippers. A lot of the trees were good straight-grained oak which were especially valuable for barrel staves. A man named Peter Fossum was a specialist in hewing staves. He with a couple of helpers stayed with us in some of the cold winter weeks doing this work. It was very cold and there was much snow. Instead of boots like men use now they wore pacs to keep their feet warm. These were made from old home-knit socks with several layers of patches on them. Every evening they had to repair these pacs and add more patches where necessary. What do you think of that kind of evening recreation?

Our second winter in Wisconsin we children came down with measles. For the rest of the brood it was only a passing incident. I didn't fare so well. The memory of it would have been transient if I hadn't developed pneumonia, called lung fever in those days. The house was small and too much cold air entered the house as the men came home for supper one evening. The stove cutters were there. I became very ill and my life was despaired of. Dr. Johnson attended me. He lived in Martell, four miles away. He had a driver and they traveled in a road cart or a light buggy. When there was snow they used a sleigh.

That spring I started school. A new schoolhouse had been built a couple of years before. Even according to modern standards that was a very nice schoolhouse, in District No. 2 in the Town of Gilman, Pierce County, Wisconsin. We had only seven months of school a year with no school in the coldest winter months. The following winter my brother Olaf taught me to read Norwegian.

There were many children attending our school so we had lots of fun. The enrollment was about seventy but attendance was not compulsory so the average attendance was perhaps one-half of that. After a couple of years we had only men teachers. They joined us in our games at recess. Some of our favorite games were last couple out, pull away, and steal sticks. That way we got lots of exercise in the fresh air.

One dry summer the creeks and water holes dried up and we had to drive the cattle to the river to water them every day. That was our, the children's, job. We joined forces with our cousins, Inga and Almer Skrutvold, half a mile away through the woods. We drove the cattle through the woods and along the highway more than a mile and a half each way. We allowed the cattle lots of time to drink and to wade around in the river and refresh themselves. Meanwhile we children had our fun, too, playing in the water, hunting for clams, fish, crabs and pretty shells. That way we were all rested for the return trip home.

In the spring the whole country-side was abloom with the most gorgeous wild flowers. We children picked them by the handful and there was always more. Perhaps the most gorgeous were the trilliums. Then there were the Indian Moccasin, the tiger lily, the wild columbine, the spring beauty, anemones, blue bells and ever so many more. We played by the hour gathering very tall dandelions and making chains from the stems.

In July the raspberries were ripe and we went about a mile into cut-over timber to gather them. Mother canned many quarts of these berries for our winter sauce. There were no fruit orchards around us so that was almost the extent of our fresh fruit. About Thanksgiving time cattle were driven to Ellsworth to be marketed. Then Father would invariably bring home a barrel of apples. Our fruit otherwise was the dehydrated kind. We used lots of prunes, dried apples and big luscious raisins. Also peaches.

In the fall we had lots of fun picking and eating thorn-apples. These apples were rosy red and about the size of big cherries. They were meaty like apples but had seed resembling those in grapes. They were slow eating but we enjoyed them.

Our school year was short, four months in the fall and three months in the spring. But ever since my brother Olaf had taught me to read Norwegian I was hungry for learning. The work in school proved easy and I soon became an avid reader. I still think back to the many interesting things I learned from library books. I read Norwegian as well as English so I seldom lacked for reading entertainment. We got our mail in Martell, four miles away. I sometimes read the continued stories while on the road. Mostly we walked to Martell and carried produce, butter and eggs, in exchange for groceries.

It wasn't until I was grown up that we got our R.F.D. and the mail was placed in a mail-box half a mile away. The first few years it came via Spring Valley but later via Beldenville. When we got the R.F.D. we could subscribe to a daily newspaper. We had for years been getting the "Reform" and "Skandinaven" in Norwegian and Uncle Soren was getting the weekly "St. Paul Pioneer Press." So there was always mail to get when someone went to town.

We had a hired man one winter who supplied me with some interesting books in Norwegian. At one of the schoolhouses about three miles away there was a lending library and Knut Strom would walk over one evening a week to exchange books.

I frequently had to miss school and stay home to help Mother with the work. Finally I went to school one year in Spring Valley where I completed the eighth grade. By this time we had horses and a buggy so I frequently got home to spend the weekends.

But here I've been getting way ahead of myself. We did get a new home built across the road from Uncle Soren's. It began to be occupied in December 1891 when brother Albert was born. Sister Isabelle was born some years later.

So many things transpired throughout these years it is impossible to mention them all in one short narrative. By the time I had finished the eighth grade I was a big girl, so here you've got the highlights of my life as I was growing up.

-Finis-