

Johan Reinert Reiersen

The first chapter of Norwegian immigration (1821-1840) its causes and results (1895)

Johan Reinert Reiersen

In 1840 there was, so far as I have been able to learn, only one Norwegian family residing in Texas. Johan Nordboe and his wife and children had settled in Dallas county on a large tract of land in 1838. He founded no settlement. Although this volume was to end with the year 1840, I cannot resist the temptation of giving a brief sketch of when and how the first couple of settlements were formed in that faroff state. The honor of founding the first Norwegian settlement there belongs to Johan Keinert Keiersen.

Johan Reinert Keiersen was born April 17, 1810, in Vestre Moland, Norway, where his father, Ole Keiersen, was a deacon. The father afterwards moved to Holt. Ole Keiersen had seven sons and two daughters, Johan Keinert being the eldest. The boy, being talented, was to have an education, but the means of the deacon were limited, and Keinert had to earn money as a private teacher in Tvedestrand. On account of some youthful indiscretions, he was obliged to leave the university at Christiania, and went to Copenhagen, where he supported himself for several years by translating German and French books, in conjunction with C. F. Gyntelberg.

In Copenhagen he married his wife, Henrietta Walter, and had with her six sons and two daughters. The wife died when her last son was born in Prairieville, Texas, in the beginning of 1851. From Copenhagen, Reiersen went to Hamburg, and after a short stay there, he came back to Norway, where in Christiansand, he began the publication of *Christianmndsposten*, through which he worked for education, freedom of conscience, religious tolerance and the development of public sentiment. He did all he could to promote liberty and independence, and he worked with all his might against the evil of intemperance, and for this reason, some gave him the nickname, "the apostle of temperance." He succeeded in organizing the first temperance society in Christiansand, and he gradually started other similar societies in the neighboring districts, he often criticised the office-holding class, and was always ready to take the part of the poor against the abuse of those in power. The fact that his paper contained information about America, and encouraged people to emigrate, gave offense to many people, for in that time emigration was looked upon as a crime close akin to treason.

Among Reiersen's most bitter enemies, was Adolph Stabell, the editor of *MorgenUadct*, in Christiania, the leading paper in Norway; but Mrs. Elise Wserenskjold testifies that she has heard Stabell say that Reiersen was the most competent editor in Norway. One of Reiersen's friends, Christian Groggaard, a son of the Eidsvoldsmau, Rev. Hans Jacob Groggaard, proposed when it was known that Reiersen had decided to emigrate, that he should be induced, first to make a journey alone, and find out what localities in America were best suited for Norwegian emigrants. For this purpose, Groggaard, Mr. Wserenskjold, and others, agreed to furnish him the sum of \$300. Reiersen accepted this offer, although the amount was not sufficient to pay his expenses. In the summer of 1843, he left Norway by way of Havre, in Franco, for New Orleans, whence he proceeded to Illinois and Wisconsin. After visiting the Norwegian settlements, he wrote a book, the ;ruthfulness of which was attested by Hans Gasman and Rev. Unonius and many others, and sent it to Norway. On this journey, we find him writing a long letter to Hans Gasman in Pine Lake, December 16, 1843. Later on, he went to Texas, which was at that time an independent republic. In a letter written by Reiersen, and dated Cincinnati, March 19, 1844, it appears that from Natchitoches, in Louisiana, he had gone by stage to San Augustine, in Texas, and thence to Austin, the capital.

Congress was in session there at the time, and Reiersen was presented to the governor, Sam Houston, who took a deep interest in getting Norwegian emigrants to choose Texas for their new home. After a sojourn of six days in Austin, he traveled through the towns of Bastrop and Reutersville, to the town of Washington, on the Brazos river, and then proceeded to Houston and Galveston, where he arrived March 7, whence he took a steamer to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he wrote the letter above referred to. After his return to Norway, he published his famous book, the *Pathfinder* (*Veiviseren*), of which one copy was given to each one of those who had contributed to the fund of \$300. Before departing from Norway, he began in company with his brother Christian, to publish *Norway and America*, of which three volumes appeared. In April, 1845, Reiersen went with a ship from Lillesand, in company with C. Groggaard and S. Nielson, to Havre, where they met Reiersen's father, his oldest sister Gina, and his brother Gerhard, who had arrived by a vessel from Arendal. From Havre they sailed in two different American ships to New Orleans. In New Orleans the father, Ole Keiersen, bought a land certificate on 1,446 acres of land in

Texas, and from the Texan consul, in New Orleans, they received a letter of recommendation to Dr. Starn in Nacogdoches, the oldest town in Texas. From New Orleans, they went by steamer to Natchitoches, whence John Keinert Eeierson, his father and sister, Gina, proceeded to Nacogdoches; but G. Eeierson, Groggaard, and Nielson continued their journey to Shreveport, and thence to Marshall. They arrived in Nacogdoches, the fourth of July, and as there was a celebration in honor of the day, they were invited, and received much attention. In Nacogdoches, Reierson found a German merchant, by name Hoya, and a Slesvigian, by name G. Bondis, also a merchant, and these were very kind to him as well as to the Norwegians, who came in later years. Hoya went with Reierson to Dr. Starn, who in turn went with him to the landoffice, to look up the certificate which his father had bought, and offered to find a surveyor on whom he could depend.

In the autumn they went out to look for land, and they located where we now have the settlement called Brownsboro, and this was the beginning of the first Norwegian settlement in Texas. They gave it the name of Normandy, but this was afterwards changed for some reason or other, to Brownsboro. After helping his father to buy the necessary cattle, and getting an American to build a log house for his family, Reierson went to New Orleans to meet his wife and children, his mother and his sister Gina, who had come by another ship from Christiansand to Havre, and thence on to New Orleans. Of this journey, Oscar Reierson, who is a son of J. R. Reierson, and now cashier of a bank in Key West, Florida, writes: "My mother with myself, John, Carl, Christian and infant daughter Henriette, took sailing vessel from Christiansand late in the summer of 1845, proceeding to Havre de Grace, France, with grandmother and Gina. At Havre we remained ten days, and then boarded the sailing vessel "Magnolia"; with a number of other Norwegian families bound for New Orleans, Louisiana. On the voyage, little Henriette died, and was consigned to the waves. "We took lodging in New Orleans, remaining there several months. The Groggaards, too, were there. After a time, uncle Larson came there from Shreveport, and later, father. We proceeded to Shreveport, up Eed river on a very small steamboat. Water wTas very low and no pasnge over the falls at Alexandria.

A week was spent before they succeeded in winding our little boat over the falls by havrsers fastened to trees up the river bank, and the capstan worked on the boat. Slowly we went up the river. Seven miles above Natchitoches, a little after dark, the boat ran on a snag. We all got in a canebrake. The boat was lost: wet provisions were fished out of the boat s cargo, diving for which to attach a rope or hook to barrel or bales, father was nearly drowned, being hauled up unconscious after having gone down successfully several times. No chance to get away, until rain above slmi ild swell the river, so that boats rouM am-em!. This lasted two weeks, during wbirli, ninthly river water was our only drink, and we were exposed to rains, etc. All our movable effects except some light boxes or trunks, were lost in the wreck. At Shreveport, our means being slender, we lived in a cabin, we boys all down with diarrhoea, and I with measles in addition.

For weeks I was not able to turn in bed. A Dr. Black was in attendance. I was delirious much of the time. One evening, Dr. Black, with other physicians examined me with father and mother at the bedside. They decided that I could not live through the night, that I was already dying, my extremities growing cold. This was in the winter of 1846. Now it is 1894, and I am not dead yet, and I have had but little faith in the medical art since that time. The doctors left. Father heated bricks and rocks which were rolled in carpets and blankets. These were piled up around me, and in this way my life was doubtless saved. I remember this as distinctly as if it had occurred but yesterday. Later we moved, for a time, to a better house on the Bayou above the town, where boarders were taken. Here Carl died. It was spring (1846), when Carl and I a few days before his death, were out picking flowers, and my wrist was Dislocated by a rail falling on it. Sometime after that we were hauled in a wagon with our little plunder into Texas, some three miles from what became later the town of Mount Enterprise, in Eush county. Charles Vincent had a little country store, and we lived in a Gin House. Father had met Vincent in Shreveport and had been helped by him. We children were fearfully weak, but we recuperated at the Gin House, where we got an abundance of buttermilk.

We were there for some time before we were hauled up to father s house in the Brownsboro settlement in 1846. Grandmother and Gina, with Lasson, left us when we got to Shreve port."; I reproduce the above letter, partly because it bears directly on the life of Johan E. Eeierfeon, and partly because it shows us vividly, what troubles and difficulties our early Norwegian immigrants had to contend with. Eeierson s experiences are a fair sample. A few Norwegians and a Danish family were added to the Brownsboro settlement about Christmas, 1846, and settled near the Eeiersons; but the next year, 1847, they all became sick and some of them died. About New Year's, 1848, Eeierson, with his family, moved to Four Mile Prairie, and there he founded the little town of Prairieville. After the death of his first wife, he married the widow of his brother Christian. maiden name was Ouline Jacobine Orbek,

and she was a daughter of a merchant in Lillesand, in Norway. By his second wife he had no children. Of his children by his first wife, three are living, viz. : 1. Oscar, the writer of the above letter. 2. John, who owns a large hotel in Kaufman, Texas; and 3. Christian, who lives in Indian Territory. The first two married American wives. Johan Keinert Reiersen died at Prairieville, September 6, 1864, and there his widow still resides. For these facts in regard to the founder of the first Norwegian settlement in Texas, I am mainly indebted to that intelligent and kind old lady, Elise Wserenskjold.

Norwegian immigrant contributions to America's making (1921)

Further stimulus to the emigration fever was given by three little booklets concerning the United States. These were Ole Nattestad's "Dagbog" or "Diary" and Ole Rynning's "Truthful Statements About America" (Sandferdig Beretning om Amerika), both published in Christiania in 1837 and Johan Reiersen's "Guide (Veiviser) for Norwegian Emigrants," published in 1844. The former works dealt mainly with Illinois and Wisconsin, while the latter, although somewhat general, commended Texas for which Reiersen was an enthusiastic boomer.

History of the Norwegian people in America (1922)

Johan R. Reiersen, for example, settled in Texas in 1847. He wrote a book, "Veiviseren" (The Pathfinder), in which he specifically warns immigrants against Muskego.

In 1843, according to Reiersen's "Veiviser," the settlement had between thirty and forty families, 200 to 300 souls. In 1856 the number had dwindled down to 56; in 1885, to 31 ; in 1920 there were only twenty-seven foreign-born Norwegians in that county.

Henderson County

The first one to do that was Johan Reinert Reiersen who left Norway in 1843 by way of Havre for New Orleans. From New Orleans he proceeded north to Illinois and Wisconsin and then down to Texas. There he had gone to Austin, the capital, and had been presented to the governor, who was anxious to get Norwegians to occupy the Texan prairies. He returned to Norway, published in 1843 his famous book, "Veiviseren," rounded up his family and a few others, and set sail again for America. He located in Henderson County and called the colony Normandy, but it was later changed to Brownsboro. He died at Prairieville, Tex., Sept. 6., 1864, but his widow was still living there in 1895. One of his sons was then a hotel keeper at Kaufman, Tex. ; another son was a bank cashier at Key West, Fla. (b) Kaufman County Prairieville, founded in 1847 by Reiersen, is the second Norwegian settlement in Texas. It was known also as Four Mile Prairie. One of the most remarkable Norwegians in Texas was Mrs. Elise Wa^renskjold. She came to Four Mile Prairie in 1847 as Mrs. Foyen, then married Waerenskjold in 1848 and lived with him until he was assassinated on account of his antislavery views. She had been an editor in Norway and wrote many articles for the Norwegian press from her far western home. The}' give much first hand reliable information about pioneer life. She organized a temperance society in her community ; also a Lutberan congregation, taught school and prevailed on her husband to preach until a trained pastor could be secured. Through her Rev. Ellinp- Eielsen made a missionary journey to Texas in 1849 and Emil Frederichsen was called as minister of the Gospel at Four Mile Norwegian Lutheran Congregation, 1854-1857.

Reiersen was a very competent editor who had explored the Norwegian settlements and had chosen Texas as his home. His book is, as it aims to be, a pathfinder for the immigrant. He advises to keep away from Wisconsin.

Reiersen J. R.

"Veiviser for Norske Emigranter til de Forenede Nordamerikanske Stater og Texas"

Pathfinder for Norwegian Emigrants

A history of Norwegian immigration to the United States (1909) Flom

Another writer of immigration literature whose writings were widely distributed and had considerable influence was Johan Reinert Reiersen. He came to America in 1843, but returned to Norway soon after. In America he had written a book, *Veiviseren*, 60 which he published in Norway and was read far and wide. This book contains a fund of information regarding the different settlements, as Racine County, Wisconsin, La Salle County, Illinois, and Lee County, Iowa, and others, all of which Reiersen had himself visited. Reiersen became the founder of the first Norwegian settlement in Texas in 1847-48. Of the events leading up to this, *Billed-Magazin for 1870* gives a circumstantial account, pages 58-60, 66-67, and 75-76. Reiersen's book seems to have been a leading factor in promoting emigration from Valdres. Among the earliest to leave this region were Nils Hanson Fjeld and family of South Aurdal, Valdres, who emigrated in 1847. He says, page 236 of *Billed-Magazin for 1870*, that before him only two or three single men had gone to America from that region. The "Americafever" had not yet taken hold of the people, "many would not give credence to mere hearsay, but after a while a couple copies of Reiersen's book about Texas came to the district. 'Now we have the printed word to go by,' it was said, and many of the doubters soon were converted to the orthodox faith in the land of promise beyond the great ocean." And as a result, many began to emigrate. As early as 1848, emigration from Valdres on a considerable scale was already in progress.