



Frances Densmore Papers

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Reminiscences of Mrs. A. F. Andersen

Mrs. A. F. Andersen came to Minnesota in 1862, her family being one of the few which made the journey in a covered wagon, drawn by oxen.

Before describing her interesting journey it should be stated that her father, Ole Wilson, came from Larvik, near Christiana, and her mother, Hannah Axelson, came from the city of Christiana. It was the custom in Norway for a man to learn a trade by being an apprentice, and her father worked seven years as an apprentice to a shoemaker, receiving a diploma at the end of that time. On coming to America he went to Milwaukee and then located in Janesville, Wisconsin, where he plied his trade of making shoes. There he met and married Hannah Axelson and they made their home in Portage City. He was in the shoe business there for a time but developed lung trouble and moved down to his brother's farm in Rio, Columbia County, Wisconsin. There he heard of the marvellous climate of Minnesota and its beneficial effect upon those afflicted with his ailment. This led to the family's migration to the west.

Mrs. Andersen (Ellen Matilda Wilson) was born at Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, on November 7, 1847, and was fourteen years of age when the family made its memorable journey. She was the oldest of four children, the youngest being a boy.

Her father wanted to come to Minnesota and look over the country before bringing his family, but there was no railroad beyond LaCrosse and the boats were not coming up the river as it was winter. His idea was that he would like to take up a homestead in the northern part of the State. Then came a chance to

make the trip by wagon with two families that were coming to Mantorville, and he decided to come with them as far as they could travel together, then go to St. Paul and make his inquiries about homesteads farther north.

The three families started together, each in a covered wagon drawn by a team of oxen. The other cattle were driven. The party started in May and reached Minnesota the last of June or early in July. No mishap occurred and they had fine weather for the whole trip. They camped at night, sleeping on mattresses in the back of the wagons, or spreading their bedding on the ground and sleeping under the stars. She does not remember crossing the Mississippi river, but recalls crossing a bridge that must have spanned the river. She remembers it because it had no railing and her mother was afraid the oxen would go off. They passed through one large town but she does not think it was LaCrosse.

When they reached Wanamingo the other two families proceeded to Mantorville and the Wilson stayed to visit friends. Harvest was in progress and help was scarce, so the Wilsons went into the fields to help gather in the crop. There were immense fields of wheat and oats, and no machinery for harvesting. The men cut the grain with cradles, and behind them came the women, one raking the grain into piles and a woman behind her tying it into bundles, while other women followed and piled the bundles into shocks. Those were busy days in the harvest fields.

The wheat was stacked until the threshers came. Sometimes it stayed in the stacks until Christmas or even later. She thinks the farmers owned a threshing outfit together, as it took a long time for it to make the rounds.

Their friends raised sheep and sent the wool to Cannon Falls to be carded. The women spun yarn for knitting, and finer yarn for use in weaving. Some had looms in their houses and wove excellent cloth.

During the harvest season the Indian trouble began and the news spread throughout the region. Mrs. Andersen remembers that she was returning from a neighbor's when a man met her and said, "Have you heard the news? The Indians are coming and killing people." She said "No," and he continued, "Go home and tell your father."

When she told her father about it he did not think there was any cause to worry, so they went to bed. Not long afterward a man knocked at their door and cried "Hurry, hurry, The Indians are coming and everyone else is going to Red Wing." Her father got up and the first thing he did was to collect all the weapons and put them in the house. He gathered up the pitchforks and everything of that sort. Her mother gathered some clothing together and after a while they started to walk to Red Wing, a distance of about 30 miles. It was still dark when they started. The road was full of people walking to Red Wing.

After a while they met a team coming back and a man said "It was only a scare." Some men had been hunting in a grove not far away. The shots had been heard, and the people thought the Indians were coming, starting the panic.

Mrs. Andersen said that when they reached home in the morning her father said to her, "Let's go to the neighbors and milk their cows and turn them out to feed." So she and her father went to a neighbor's house. These neighbors had a "cooling shelf" above the back door and on it was the butter they intended to take to town

the next day. The butter was melting and running down. The house was in confusion, with everything scattered around. Her father milked the cows and turned them out and together they fixed up the house as well as they could. They did the same for the cows at another neighbor's but that house was not in as much disorder as the other.

After this trouble her mother would not go farther north and the family came to Red Wing to make their home.

The block on Fifth Street between Plum and Potter Streets had a fence all around it and was divided into two lots. The Wilsons lived on the Plum Street corner and Dr. Parks (father of Mrs. S. B. Foot) lived on the Potter Street end of the block. The Wilsons had a big garden back of the house and raised all sorts of vegetables. ✓ The Ives and Graves families lived opposite, on the north side of Fifth Street. There were no sidewalks.

The women of the Presbyterian Church had the pleasant custom of calling upon new residents and seeing whether there were children of Sunday School age. The Wilsons were Lutherans, but there was no Lutheran Church in Red Wing, and when the Presbyterian women called they went to the Presbyterian Church and the children attended that Sunday School. She was a member of that church until she was married. Her husband was a Methodist, and then she took her letter to that church. In naming the Presbyterian ladies she mentioned first Mrs. M. B. Lewis, whose gracious manner is remembered by so many of our older residents, she named also Mrs. J. W. Hancock, Mrs. McCord, Mrs. S. S. Grannis, Mrs. James Lawther and Mrs. Childs.

Then came the Civil War but Mrs. Andersen does not remember the departure of the soldiers. She recalls many details of the

town and its daily life. Calico was .50 a yard and muslin .75 while thread was .15 a spool, so they made as much clothing at home as they could. The women wore cotton petticoats quilted in stripes or figures, and over these they wore a "balmoral petticoat" which was white with a bright border. Sometimes, when walking, they would lift up their skirt daintily to show this balmoral petticoat. Shoes were mostly made to order. Women wore gaiters laced up the inside and made of morocco leather, which was the finest for the purpose. Men wore high boots.

The making of bread was a major industry in the household. The women in town went to the brewery and bought a penny's worth of yeast which was just enough for one baking, but in the country they used potato yeast, started from brewery yeast and kept from one baking to another. Some women used to stir cornmeal into yeast and let it dry, making yeast cakes. Her mother did that.

The making of soap was another important industry, and her father made about a barrel of soft soap each year. He had a large barrel of ashes, tipped so that water poured in at the top would drain out at the bottom, making lye. The grease was saved in the kitchen and the soap was boiled out of doors, in a big kettle. Her father made from a half to a whole barrel of soap at a time. Her mother tried to make hard soap. It was said this could be done by adding salt to soft soap and she tried it, but it was not very good.

People used to buy a half or a quarter of beef for winter use, buying it from the farmers and keeping it frozen. One of the first meat markets was run by Mr. Bracher, father of C. C. Bracher, who is in the same business at the present time.

The fuel was chiefly hard wood, brought from Wisconsin, the teams crossing the ice in winter.

The farmers back in the county took their grain to Gaylord's mill to be ground into flour, or brought it to Red Wing for sale. Few had horses and the grain was hauled by oxen, the string of teams sometimes being a mile long. The wagons were loaded in the afternoon and the men started in the evening, driving all night and arriving at Trout Brook about daylight. This was the regular stopping place where they rested their oxen and had their own breakfast. Then they hitched up and completed the trip to town.

A. A. Andersen lived in the country where his parents were farmers. Ellen Wilson taught school in the Belvidere District and there met Mr. Andersen, their marriage taking place on April 24th, 1870. He had bought some land and they lived there three years, but they wanted to get to Red Wing and moved to this city in 1874. Mr. Andersen was employed by E. W. Brooks in the McCormick Harvester business, continuing in Mr. Brooks' employ for many years and then becoming collector for the Company. Friends urged him to run for sheriff but the Harvester Company did not want to lose him, and sent him to Illinois to demonstrate machines. The next year, however, the people insisted and he was elected sheriff in 1886, serving in that office for eight years. They wanted him to run for the office again but he refused as he had purchased Horace Rich's hardware store on Main Street in Red Wing, which he owned for years. At that time Mr. Andersen was appointed State Food and Dairy Commissioner for the State of Minnesota, being appointed by Governor Clough. He held this office for two years, and soon afterward he sold his hardware business and retired.

Mr. Andersen had always wanted to return to his early home in

Norway and this wish was fulfilled in 1906. He and his wife, accompanied by his daughter, Grace, took a long European trip to Sweden, Germany, France and England. Mr. Andersen died in 1932.

Eight children were born to Mr. and Mrs. Andersen -- Arthur A., Josephine W., Frederick A., Clara E., Frederick E., Floyd W., Grace M., and Clarence W. Five are living at the present time. Arthur A., and Dr. F. E. Andersen live in Red Wing, and Floyd W. Andersen lives in Kalispell, Montana. Josephine W. married Dr. Wells T. Howard and lives in Long Beach, California. Grace M. took training as a nurse at the Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis and specialized in giving anaesthetics. During the war she served as a nurse at Camp Pike, and was sent to Germany for a year's service, doing her special line of work. She married Dr. George D. Wells and is living in Bell, California.

Mrs. A. F. Andersen now resides in one of the old houses of Red Wing, the house having been built in 1858 by Abraham Howe. At the age of 87 she does not wear glasses and her hearing is excellent. She reads and crochets in moderation and is interested in all that [MS. illegible].