

EARLY IMMIGRANT SETTLEMENTS NEAR OLDHAM, SOUTH DAKOTA

by

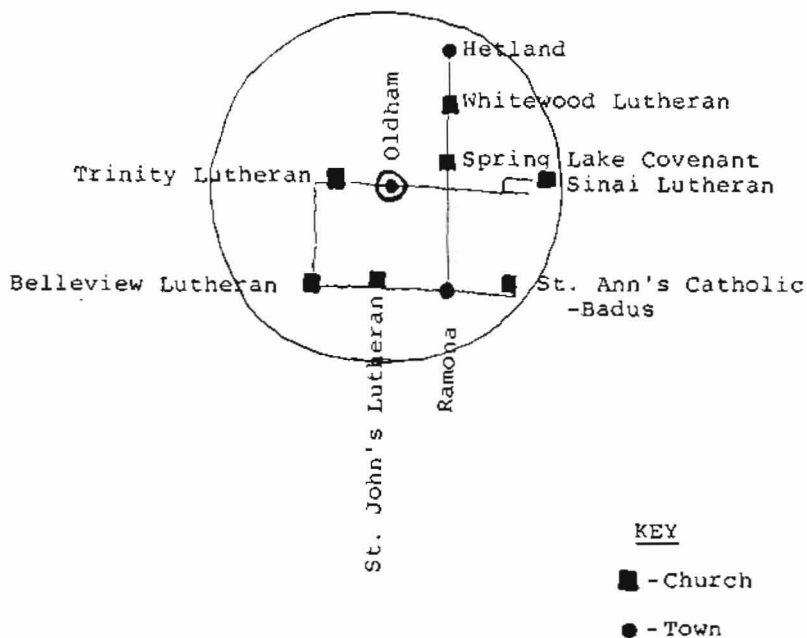
Emil Loriks

The early settlement of immigrants from Europe in the Dakota Territory about a century ago is a most interesting study. The free homestead was the big attraction in the early days of the Dakota Territory. By the terms of the Homestead Act, a person could secure a quarter section of land by agreement to make improvements, establish a home on the land, and plow ten acres of sod for farming. About one half of the immigrants who came to the Territory were from states to the east such as Minnesota and Wisconsin; and about half of the early settlers were immigrants from Europe. In a way they were all immigrants or descendants of immigrants from European nations.

If you draw a circle on a map of South Dakota with Oldham as the center, you will encircle seven rural churches, each of which was a center for pioneer families and homesteaders. They came here from Switzerland, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. These settlers have been frugal, thrifty and hard working people, and have contributed mightily to making our country the great food producing nation of the world.

EARLY PIONEERS AROUND OLDHAM

Emil Loriks



It was only natural for these early pioneers to locate in settlements of their respective nationalities, to facilitate communication and to preserve some of their heritage and culture. There was something these settlements all had in common, and that was to build a school in their settlement for the education of their children so they could master the English language and enter the mainstream of life in this new land. Also a church congregation was established early after settlement, and it became the center of community life and religious worship. These rural churches stand today as sentinels on the prairies from the dawn of Dakota history, many of them celebrating their centennials in recent years.

The first settlement to establish in this area was probably the Swiss settlement at Lake Badus. These Swiss had come to Stillwater, Minnesota in the early seventies. They heard the call of the free homestead in the Dakota Territory, and came to explore the possibilities for settlement in 1877. They found a lake east of Ramona and were impressed by the surrounding area, so they proceeded to file for homesteads on land around the lake which they named Lake Badus, in memory of a village in Switzerland from which many had come. These Swiss pioneers went back to Minnesota for the winter but came back with their families and their belongings the next spring to settle permanently in Dakota Territory.

These Swiss immigrants, like all immigrant settlements in this area, were looking to the future for their families and their children. The first community project after they were established was to build a school to educate their children. At first the school served a dual purpose. On Sundays it was used as the center for religious services until about 1884 when St. Ann's Catholic Church was constructed. Of course, they also had to have a store and a post office immediately. Joseph Muggli opened the first store. He was also the first postmaster of Badus, receiving his commission from Washington, D.C., May 15, 1879.

Transportation by railroad was not available until 1881 when the Chicago and Northwestern came through Brookings and Volga. My father was a foreman with a crew of Scandinavian immigrants who laid the rails through Brookings and on to what is now the state capitol city of Pierre. Before the coming of rail service, these Swiss immigrants had to travel to Sioux Falls for groceries. They had to haul lumber from some point in Minnesota by horse and wagon, and that took a week, so many sod houses were built.

The Badus settlement was confronted with all the hardships and hazards of frontier life. Prairie fires were a constant threat to the homesteaders on the prairies. The Swiss settlement at Badus had a big prairie fire ravage their area in October, 1879. The women and children sought refuge by wading into the waters of Lake Badus while the men were fighting to contain the fire. Frame buildings were destroyed and heavy losses incurred; but the sod houses fortunately escaped destruction. In October of the following year came the biggest snowstorm of the century, leaving drifts so deep that in some cases they had to dig tunnels to the barn and well.

The first farm implement acquired in the early settlements was the single bottom walking plow pulled by a team of horses or oxen, the farmer walking behind holding the handles to guide the plow. It took about sixteen miles of walking in behind the furrow behind the plow to turn over one acre of sod. This plow cost about \$24 then. Later came the two bottom gang plow, mounted on wheels and pulled by five or six horses. A seat was provided so the operator could ride while driving the horses.

The machine age was in the offing, and the first threshing machines were run by horse power. It took twelve horses to furnish the power needed. The grain operator did not have a self feeder in those days so it took three persons to provide the feeding process--two handcutters and one man to feed the grain evenly into the cylinder.

The Swiss were a hardy people and solved the problems of heating their homes and cooking by burning twisted hay. Sometimes they also burned dry cowships. Often the Swiss had to grind wheat in the coffee mills to make gruel.

The Swiss were a happy people and provided their own entertainment. The Badus band was organized in the '80s and by 1911 they had good baseball teams. I knew a Swiss farmer, Tony Mantheis, whose family was referred to as "Mantheis's Meadowlarks." They furnished the music at many meetings I attended. Sad to say, Tony was killed in a tractor accident and the family has since scattered.

The Swiss made an impact on the city of Madison in later years. Dr. Muggli was an outstanding doctor and Martin Berther was in the banking business. I was fortunate when I registered to attend Madison State Normal in 1911 to get a room at the Berther home.

In 1879, seven German immigrant families settled west of Ramona, and like the Swiss settlement east of Ramona at Badus, they also built a school to educate their children. In 1882 these German settlers organized St. John's Lutheran congregation and built their church building in 1892.

Although the settlement was German, two different kinds of German were spoken, High and Low German. The Low German speaking children learned High German from a book called the Febel. It seems unbelievable that some of the children spoke Low German at home, High German at church, and English in the school.

Gilman Station, six miles west of Ramona, was the center of this German settlement, and had a post office and a school. The post office was later moved to Ramona when the Milwaukee Railroad came through in 1893, but the school remained and became the first independent school district in the area. By 1903 there were forty-three German families as taxpayers in the district.

A German Lutheran Congregation was organized in 1882 at the Gottfried Reidel home where services were held. The first church building was erected in 1892 and later replaced by a

new brick structure in 1857 that stands on the same location. In church, men sat on the right side of the aisle while women and children sat on the left side. The small one room rural schools are gone and now most children attend Ramona school. The church is known as St. John's Lutheran Church, and celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1982.

Many of the descendants of this German settlement still live in this community, but others are scattered throughout the nation.

The Lake Sinai community was an outstanding settlement of Norwegian immigrants arriving in the late seventies to homestead in Lake Sinai Township in the southwest corner of Brookings County. They faced the same hardships as the Swiss and German settlements east and west of Ramona. Isolation and lack of transportation, persistent danger of prairie fires in the late summer, and fierce winter blizzards such as occurred in 1880 and 1888 were grim realities faced by the early pioneers. Many of them lived in sod houses for lumber was almost unavailable until the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad came through Volga and lumber handling facilities were established there.

Schools and churches came soon as the Lake Sinai settlement was firmly established. Two Lutheran Churches were built but in later years were merged into one church with 525 members total. The Lake Sinai settlement kept abreast with progress in farming by their close relationship with the College of Agriculture at nearby Brookings.

This settlement developed one of the outstanding bands in the region, and were often invited to play in other areas. They averaged 35 or more members and they were the band invited to furnish the music on the occasion of the dedication of Sylvan Theatre at South Dakota State University. Their baseball teams were among the best, sometimes winning the championship of Brookings County.

Then came 1907, an important year in history. The Dakota Central Railroad was building a railroad from Sioux Falls to Watertown. How the Lake Sinai community was able to influence the Dakota Central Railroad to route their lines through the center of Lake Sinai Township and establish there a depot and the town of Sinai is a story in itself. Effective organization of a big drive to raise thousands of dollars for the railroad right-of-way undoubtedly was a big factor in the decision, since alternative routes had also been surveyed and this route bi-passed the City of Brookings. The town of Sinai quickly emerged with a depot, three grain elevators, lumber yard, bank, and post office. Many other businesses followed, such as a hotel, harness shop, blacksmith shop, livery barn, cafe, and carpenter shop.

A most interesting and comprehensive history of the Sinai community has been prepared and published by the Sinai Historical Committee. It tells the story of each and every family that lived in the Lake Sinai community. The immensity of this project is unbelievable. One wonders if such a

project has ever been attempted and accomplished in any other community.

I have given you a brief history of three early immigrant settlements, started by homesteaders within the fifteen mile radius of Oldham: the Swiss and the Germans to the South, and the Norwegian settlement to the east. The four remaining settlements are all of Scandinavian origin, three of them mainly of Norwegian and Danish nationalities, and one small Swedish settlement.

Seven rural churches were the center of these seven settlements. All but two of them still conduct regular services, and the two churches that closed still meet on special occasions.

I was born in the Swedish settlement northeast of Oldham in 1895. My father, Carl Gustaf Loriks, was one of the immigrants from Sweden who came to Dakota Territory with the laying of tracks for the Chicago and Northwest Railroad. He came to our shores as an immigrant in 1879, became foreman of a crew of Scandinavian immigrants building the railroad tracks from Minnesota westward through Brookings, Huron and onto Pierre, South Dakota. He noticed that the grass grew shorter as they moved west, so the rail workers came back to the Hetland area to homestead because the grass grew taller there. Quite a number of them settled south of Hetland. My father homesteaded 8 miles south of Hetland, and planted 10 acres of trees and cultivated the same for a timber-claim to another quarter section of land. My grandmother filed for a homestead across the road and that's where my farm is. We bought some adjoining quarters so we had six quarter sections in a block, and sometimes farmed as many as eight quarters.

I was of the first generation born here and can well remember the busy seasons of the year. We had to harness 24 horses every morning. We produced our own power on the farm but had to hire a couple of men the year around. Our farm was located in the center of Spring Lake Township, and the immediate neighborhood was settled by Swedish immigrants in the early days. The Spring Lake Church was built in 1892. Services prior to that were held in the Spring Lake School #8 or in homes. Services and Sunday School were conducted in the Swedish language. Like the German Church mentioned, the men sat on the right side of the aisle in church and women and children sat on the left side, an old custom, later abandoned.

I entered country school at age five and could not speak a word of English, but that came easily because the alphabet is the same except for three extra letters at the end of the Swedish alphabet. This was the year 1900.

Seems that all my classmates of that era have forgotten their Swedish, however, I can still translate Swedish into English or vice versa. By the time of World War I, the English language had taken over. The change was inevitable!

I registered at Madison State Normal in 1911 and went from there to the University of Nebraska and graduated in absentia in 1917 because I volunteered for flying in World War

I, a week before graduation. I felt it was my duty, to serve my country, and I believe that was true of all the descendants of the early immigrant pioneers of this area, the Swiss, the Germans, and the Scandinavians. The European immigrants who helped develop our great country become the breadbasket of the world, also helped to defend our freedom and liberty in war!