

## **Ole Nelson's arduous trek to Solano**

**By Sabine Goerke-Shrode**

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The Vacaville Museum recently received a wonderful family history chronicling Ole Ansok Nelson's life from his native Norway to his farm in Lagoon Valley.

Born in 1864 as the oldest of four boys, Ole Ansok grew up in western Norway, on a small farm high above a fjord. In 1883, his father Nils vanished in a fierce storm while out fishing for cod. Nils' widow, Marta, and her four sons, Ole, 19, J'rgen, 17, Karl, 11, and young Nils, a toddler, struggled to keep the farm going.

Unfortunately, Nils had signed a note for a friend's loan. When the friend defaulted, the creditors turned to Marta. Rather than lose everything, the family decided to auction off all of its belongings, including the family Bible, in order to keep the land.

Farms were scattered, and social contacts only took place on Sundays after church services. In this kind of setting, Ole met and later married Anne Marie Ringstad, whose father owned Nygaren farm. As Anne Marie would inherit Nygaren, it was decided that the young couple would take over the farm immediately. Ole's younger brother, J'rgen, would take over the Ansok farm.

Ole was required to pay out Anne Marie's two younger sisters. Money was short, and reports filtered back of the wonderful opportunities America had to offer.

Friends of Ole, Lars Berge and his sister Elisabeth, Nils Uren, and J'rgen and Ole Elias Overo, had been sending letters describing the favorable climate, the high wages and the small Norwegian colony in their new hometown, Santa Barbara. Finally in 1886, Ole set out for California to make his fortune.

Once he arrived in Santa Barbara, he worked on a local farm, earning \$1.25 a day and saving most of it. By the fall of 1887, he was close to his goal of returning home, when the news reached him that Anne Marie had died.

Not only had he lost his wife, but also her farm. His family's farm now belonged to his brother J'rgen. Going back to Norway without owning land meant a life as a hired hand - a crofter.

Ole decided to stay in America. Together with his friends Lars and Nils, he began to look into buying land. In the meantime, Lars had gone back to Norway and brought his

future wife, Karen Gjerde, and female friends Lina Ness and Petrine Fj'rstad, back.

The young people all worked as farm workers and housemaids, until in 1890 they were able to purchase 650 acres in the Conejo Valley, on a 700-foot-high plateau above the Oxnard Plain.

They had the land surveyed into five parcels of roughly equal value. Ole, Lars, Nils, J'rgen and Ole Elias put slips of paper in a hat and drew lots. Ole's lot was No. 3, containing 97.03 acres.

The land was remote and much of it was not choice. The men knew that they needed help: they needed to get married. Ole Ansok proposed to Elisabeth Berge, Lars' sister. They married on April 26, 1890. Lars Bergen married Petrine Fj'rstad, and J'rgen Over' married Lina Ness.

At the time, they also decided to Americanize their names. Each man took the name of his father and added "son" or "sen." Thus, Ole Ansok became Ole Nilson, which eventually became Nelson, Lars Berge became Lars Pederson, Nils Uren changed to Nils Olsen, J'rgen Over' became George Hanson, and Ole Elias changed to O. Anderson.

Ole and Elizabeth were the first couple to move onto the land. Ole built a small redwood shanty as their first home. Elizabeth later remembered: "If they knew in Norway the house we lived in, they wouldn't think much of it."

Lina recalled: "We were in a strange country far away from relatives and friends, but we were all Norwegians who as a friendly group helped each other if anything was needed. We had all come out in the world to try our luck ... and now our first dwelling was that shanty which we used for a kitchen ..."

During that first winter, Lina and J'rgen/George lost their first little house to a tornado that struck in the middle of the night. "First thing we knew, we were under open sky and felt raindrops! ... J'rgen ... came crawling over to where I was and threw his arms around me."

Next morning, they and their friends had to gather their belongings strewn throughout the area. "A great deal of our dishes and cups had been broken in pieces, but we couldn't do anything about that. A lot of duck eggs and chicken eggs were in a jug, so for breakfast the next morning we had plenty of cracked eggs." They quickly rebuilt in a different location.

After clearing the land of nettles, greasewood, sagebrush and volcanic rock, they grew

hay as their main cash crop, and bred and raised horses. Barley became another crop. Everything was dry-farmed, relying solely on the annual rainfall.

Two very steep roads connected the Conejo Valley to the Oxnard Plain. To drive the fully loaded wagons down, the driver had to immobilize the wagon by wedging a tree branch through the spokes of the rear wheel. The horses would then drag the wagon down the steep grade.

One day, George Hanson's wagon had the brake improperly set. The wagon accelerated into the horses, and they spooked. George tried to jump off, but fell underneath the wagon. Lina remembered: "He lay under the load until they (Ole Nilson and Lars Pederson) came and pulled the sacks off him. He was still alive, but he got a broken spine. They helped and got a wagon empty and got J'rgen (George) laid on the wagon and drove home with him in that position. He looked as if he were dead when they came with him." George would spend a year bedridden.

The Norwegian group decided to build a new and safer road. They spent two years constructing it. The county provided \$60, which they used for dynamite to blast away the rock. Ole was responsible for this job. He enjoyed this work, and on one occasion, nearly blew himself up. When he emerged unhurt, one of his friends remarked: "The only way Ole will ever get hurt, and be killed, is if he hangs himself."

The road still exists today and is known as the Norwegian Grade.

In 1900, O. Anderson sold his land to the Hansons and returned to Norway. By now, the four couples had started their families.

Ole and Elizabeth had three children, Harry, then age 7; Mabel, 6; and Alma, 3. The Pedersons had four children, and the Olsens had 10 children. All the children were home-schooled, just as their parents had been back in Norway.

According to Karen Pederson, those early years, though filled with hard work, were the happiest of her life.

And then everything fell apart. Drought struck the area and harvest after harvest failed. A mysterious disease, possibly typhoid fever, spread from their one well. George Hanson died first. A year later, Lars Pederson died from the same disease. The Olsen family lost seven of its ten children.

Ole and Elizabeth realized that it was time to move on. Ole went north on horseback. He had heard of a place called Suisun, in Solano County. When he arrived near Fairfield, he saw a 135-acre piece of land for sale, with the best barley crop on it he had

ever seen. He bought the property and brought his whole family up to their new home.

Many residents of the Vacaville community carry fond memories of Eleanor and Harry Nelson. Harry Nelson was Ole and Elizabeth Nelson's oldest son. It seems difficult to reconcile Harry's elegant tuxedo in the museum's "Common Threads" exhibit with the scrubby barefoot boy growing up on this remote farm.

The next column will explore the Nelson family's farming history in Solano County.

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