

Chapter One

Immigrants (1860-1890)

John Walstad

When John left Norway as a single young man in 1862, there was no mention in the family lore of a farewell ceremony or tears being shed. He arrived here in the midst of America's Civil War—a time when more cautious emigrants waited out the bloody conflict.¹ (Indeed, he was drafted into the Union Army, but the war ended during his training [3].) John's decision to come at such a perilous time suggests he may have been a bit reckless or that he was not entirely satisfied with the staid family from whence he came.

John's surname of Walstad was derived from "Valstad," the name of the farm owned by his Norwegian ancestors. The farm—located in the rolling hills and woods about 13 miles east of Oslo—had been in the family as far back as the 14th century. [4] In 1830, the 54 acre Valstad farm had been split up, with John's parents Karen and Jacob receiving 29 acres and the main buildings. One of Karen's sisters got the rest.

¹ Norwegian immigrants had a deep-rooted aversion to slavery and believed that the Union Army would eventually win [1]. Over 6,500 of them served in the Union Army, while less than 300 fought for the Confederacy [2].

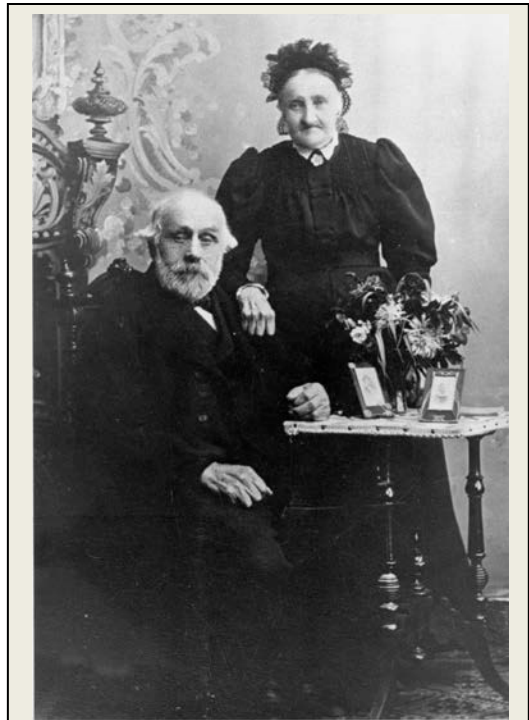
Despite the reduced acreage, Jacob and Karen Valstad appeared to be relatively well off. By 1865, they had more "big ticket items"—2 horses and 8 cows—than neighboring farms. Jacob had planted a smorgasbord of oats, potatoes, rye, barley, and peas. The household consisted of Jacob, wife Karen and three adult unmarried children. [5]

In 1869, the three adults—John's siblings—left Norway and immigrated to America together. Before they sailed, Jacob treated the two daughters to a shopping spree in a jewelry store in downtown Oslo.

One can understand why they emigrated. Circumstances had forced the 1830 division of the centuries-old Valstad farm. Apparently, Jacob and Karen were unwilling

to carve up the land any further. They knew that their 29 acres of rocky, hilly land in a cold climate could not adequately support more than a small household. Most likely, their adult children [Hans (age 39), Dorthea (age 22), and Anna Marie (age 39)] had held off on marriage and starting families. Any grandchildren would have been living on the edge, vulnerable to crop failures, livestock diseases, etc.

Indeed, a looming fear of poverty hung over many of their countrymen. One immigrant, who later became a prosperous Wisconsin farmer, explained (1868) what drove him out of Norway:



Jacob and Karen Valstad were John's parents.

I was my father's oldest son and as such was entitled to inherit a farm that was held to be one of the best in the community, but it was encumbered with a debt of fourteen

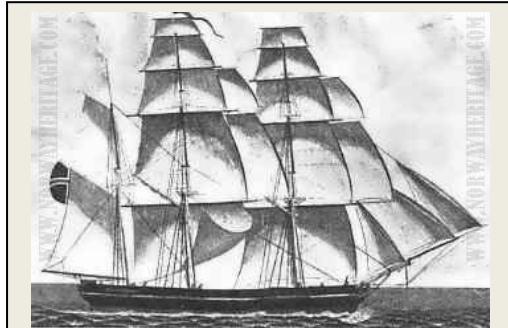
hundred dollars. I worked at home until I was twenty-five years old and consequently was unable to save any money. It was obvious that I would assure myself a hopeless future by taking charge of the farm with its heavy indebtedness, buying out my brothers and sisters in such a fashion that they suffered no injustice, and finally, providing a pension for my father. I noticed with apprehension how one farm after another fell into the hands of the sheriff or other moneylenders. [6]

After four of their children had emigrated, one would have expected Jacob and Karen to remain in Norway where they were comfortable and had family. However in 1872, Jacob (age 64) and Karen (age 73) left Norway to homestead in America. As part of their farewell ceremony, Karen—anticipating that she would never see Norway again—planted an apple tree on the farm she loved.

Maren Grobel

Because of strong headwinds, it took Maren's ship over 6 weeks to cross the Atlantic. She was seasick the entire time.

In 1868—the year she came—most Norwegians took their chances with sailing ships, because ticket prices were 1/3 that of the newer steam ships. Steam ships could reliably make the journey in two weeks. Maren had probably hoped that her ship would have good winds, but that didn't happen. (Sailing ships might take anywhere—depending on the weather—from 25 to 100 days to cross the Atlantic.) [7]



A Bark [7] was the type of ship that brought Maren to the New World. A "bark" has square-rigging on only 2 masts instead of 3, allowing the ship to sail with a smaller crew.