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## AN OLD SETTLERS' STORY OF PIONEER LIFE IN MINNESOTA

Edward Bjerkan was born near Trondhjem, Norway, November 5, 1844. He worked on his father's farm until he started training in the Norwegian army. He had trained there for one year when he received a pass to America. He came to America in 1869.

At that time there was no railroad to Sauk Centre from St. Cloud. He took the train as far as St. Cloud, and from there he traveled in the stage coach to Sauk Centre. He worked in Sauk Centre for three years. He had no special job but was a jack-of-all trades. His father came to America about one and one-half years later. The government was giving out homesteads then. His father applied for one hundred and sixty acres about nine miles north of Sauk Centre. A negro had a claim on this land; and in order to get it, he had to wait a certain number of years. The negro never again claimed it, so it was given to Edward Bjerkan's father. His father lived there a few years until he died; then the land was claimed by Edward Bjerkan. He built a house containing only one room. This house was made of logs with plaster between the logs to prevent the cold from getting in. Later his sister came over from Norway with her husband. They stayed with Bjerkan; and because the house was small, another room had to be added.

There were very few settlers around there at that time. What is now known as the Little Sauk Vicinity was not settled at all. It was surrounded by heavy timber, and in order to get around at all he had to have an ax with him to make a path. He tells about a family who took a homestead. When they came to look it over they decided on a place for the house. The timber was so heavy that they had to make places and marks where they had gone so that they would find the place again.

In 1873 Bjerkan was married to Greenhild Bilsnig, who came over from Norway that year. He sent her ticket to her from America.

There were many wild animals here at that time. He says that it never surprised him to see large timber wolves or great bears strolling along in the woods. There were also many birds that are never seen around here nor elsewhere, now. There were a great number of deer. He says that when he used to go hunting he often saw a mother deer with her two fawns, but he never had the heart to kill them. They used to be so tame that he could go up to them and pet them any time he wanted to. There was a certain deer who used to come to the window of his cabin just at breakfast time every morning. When the window was open it looked in and made motions, until Mrs. Bjerkan gave it something to eat.

Mr. Thompson had a homestead to the west of Bjerkan's farm. There was no wire, like now, for making fences. There were no settlers to the south of their farms, so they tied bells to their stock and let them go wherever they pleased. Between Bjerkan's and Thompson's farm stood a log fence. This was not firmly built; so that if anything should happen to jar it somewhat, it would fall down. Mr. Thompson had an old cow that was bound to be on Bjerkan's farm, so all she would have to do would be to give the fence a push and down it would fall.

Many Indians could be seen around that vicinity. Many times he would look out of the window and see an Indian woman with her papoose. They would place their faces close to the window and look in. They sometimes got something to eat from Bjerkan. He bought different things from them which they had made. They had some of the most beautiful beaded ornaments to sell.

A neighbor of Bjerkan's who lived north of his place had a pair of oxen. One day one of them disappeared. When he could not find it, he suspected the Indians of stealing it. He searched for a long time until he thought he saw it lying dead. He did not go closer to investigate but furious, gathered up a group of neighbors who armed themselves. Then they started out, expecting to punish the Indian for killing the ox. They came closer to what seemed to them to be the ox and were very much surprised. They found that it was a large white stone. After that they were more careful in their suspicion of the Indians.

At that time there were many who came over from the old country to America to make their living. Bjerkan used to buy tickets here in America and send them to different people in Norway. To pay this back they used to work for Bjerkan until it was payed for. They really indentured servants. The men used to clear the woods, and the ladies worked in the house for Mrs. Bjerkan.

Horses were not used at that time. Mr. Bjerkan had cattle on his farm so he selected two oxen and trained them. He called them Tom and Jerry. They were so stubborn at times that he could not make them do a thing. Othertimes, however, they worked very willingly.

Sauk Centre was a very small village at that time. When he wanted anything special from town, he had to go to St. Cloud. He used to take his oxen and haul a load of wood to St. Cloud where he would exchange it for groceries. St. Cloud was the county seat; so when any business was necessary, it had to be done there.

However, there were a few stores in Sauk Centre; Mrs. Bjerkan used to sell butter and eggs, receiving three and four cents a dozen for eggs, and five and six cents a pound for butter. If they put their butter in a form or mold, they received one cent more to the

pound. Mrs. Bjerkan used a mold which is still in their old house. In exchange for their produce sometimes, they paid two and three cents a yard for calico. When they wanted woolen cloth, they would spin it in their own homes. Mrs. Bjerkan used to card and spin wool that was taken from the sheep raised on their farm. She spun cloth and made clothes for Mr. Bjerkan and herself. She spun woolen yarn and knit stockings, which were sold in Sauk Centre for twenty and twenty-five cents a pair.

They cleared their land of woods, and then they raised grain. However, the greatest portion of it was used for pasture.

They had a great number of people staying with them. Some Norwegian workmen and sometimes the Parochial school teachers stayed with them. The English school started sometime after they settled here--about two miles and a quarter north of their home.

The only road near his farm was between neighbors. There was just a wagon path, the trees being cleared out. About a mile north of his place is a river called "The Little Sauk River." There was no bridge across it; so in order to get on the other side of it, they had to walk around about twelve miles. Later a couple of logs were placed across, but when one wanted to cross with team one must "go around by the mill."

The only road was the road between farms. But in the summers of 1879-1880 after the grain had gotten started, a far worse thing prevailed. A sort of plague came. Suddenly there came a cloud over the sun so that it seemed to darken. Investigating they found out that it was grasshoppers. There were so many that one could not see the sun. They stayed that summer and almost totally destroyed the grain. They ate the leaves of the potatoes, and it seemed as if they were

not to have any potatoes that year. Many of the settlers did not think it worth while to cut the grain. However, Bjerkan used a scythe and gathered up as much as possible, saving enough for seed the next year.

The climate must have been a lot different from what it is now. Bjerkan told a story that shows that. Once in the later part of May he was digging a ditch a short distance from his house. It was quite cold, and suddenly there came a snow storm. It was a real blizzard, and he had quite a time to find his way back to the house. They seemed to have later springs and later winters. Another time he related that they had such warm weather during Christmas time. They had an unusually late fall. There was a field close by the house. Just for curiosity's sake Bjerkan hitched up his team of oxen and went down to plow. He said that the plow went just as easily as if it were in September, the usual time for plowing.

In the fall of 1908 Mrs. Bjerkan died. Mr. Bjerkan felt that he was not able to live alone and tend to the farm so my folks bought the place, he being my mother's uncle. He stayed with us until spring of 1925 when he went to the hospital at Fergus Falls. He lived but a short time, dying June 7, 1925.

We still are using the old log house that he built. However, after his building on a number of rooms, we built on a separate room for him in which he stayed. We have several of his old belongings--an old shirt which his wife made. She carded, spun, and made cloth from wool, and then made the shirt. We also have a set of steel knives and forks which were presented to him on his wedding by Overland, who was the first photographer in Sauk Centre.

I miss my great uncle a great deal. I enjoyed his story telling especially.

--Olga Pederson