January 1985

Oakland: The First Norwegian-American Seventh-day Adventist Church in America

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OAKLAND: The First Norwegian-American Seventh-day Adventist Church in America

By
Lawrence H. Onsager

The Lemonweir Valley Press
Hauston, Wisconsin

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INTRODUCTION

In December, 1861, several Norwegian families led by Andrew Olsen and Tarel Johnson organized the first Norwegian-American Seventh-day Adventist church in Oakland township, Jefferson County, Wisconsin.¹

The study and questioning which led to the organization of this church began in Norway in the 1840's. The Olsen, Johnson, Loe, and Serns families were all farmers in a rural district of Vest-Agder County, twenty-eight miles northwest of Kristiansand, the county seat, and ice-free seaport in the south of Norway. Andrew Olsen wrote, "my early days were spent in the rural district among the rocks and hills of that Mountainous country, where hard work with economy and frugality is the usual lot of the people."²

Religion in Norway

The families had been instructed from childhood in Lutheran doctrines (the state church of Norway) and were members of the Bjelland parish. Dissatisfied with the lifeless formalities of the state church, they had their interest


in religion stirred by meetings in their homes with Quakers and other lay preachers, and they had come to feel that some of the doctrines of the state church were not in harmony with the Scriptures. At the end of one of these meetings in the fall of 1848, an itinerant Swedish lay minister remembered only as Nyland stated, "if we should strictly follow the Scriptures, we would keep Saturday and not Sunday; for there is no Scripture evidence for keeping Sunday." This was a surprise to the group and led to a great deal of discussion although it did not lead to the observance of the seventh day at the time because of fear of persecution by the state church.

Although during the nineteenth century Norway was practically one hundred percent Lutheran there were two groups of dissenters, the Quakers and the followers of Hans Nielsen Hauge known as Haugeans. Hans Nielsen Hauge, 1771-1824, was a religious protester who wished to substitute a living faith for the formalism in the state church. He stressed personal piety, a spiritual outlook on life, and a simple form of worship. During the period 1796 to 1804, he carried his message of repentance and conversion throughout southern Norway. His message developed a social conflict between officialdom and

1 Ibid.

the religiously awakened common people. In 1804 he set up a printing press in Kristiansand and was arrested. He was finally released in 1814 after payment of a fine and died near Christiania (Oslo) in 1824. Most of the early Norwegian immigrants were from rural Norway and had been deeply influenced by Haugeanism.¹

Quakerism was established in Norway by a small group of sailors captured and imprisoned in England during the war of 1807 where they were converted by the Quakers. Upon their return, small societies were established in Christiania and Stavanger. Both the Quakers and Haugeans were harshly dealt with by the government and the state church.²

Knowledge of the United States

During the 1830's and 1840's the Norwegians gained their knowledge of the United States from the American letters sent back by the first immigrants. These letters were copied, passed among friends and neighbors, and carried from parish to parish by lay preachers, spreading information about the United States throughout southern Norway. Several immigrant guidebooks were published during this period, the most influential being Ole Rynning's True Account of America published


²Theodore C. Blegen, Norwegian Migration to America, 1751 to 1860 (Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1931), pp. 27, 30.
in 1838. Rynning presented the idea that in America every man could worship God as he saw fit.¹

Emigration

The main stream of Norwegian immigration to the United States began in 1836. During the period up to 1850 approximately 19,000 Norwegians emigrated. Geographic factors were very important in this population movement. Three-fourths of Norway cannot be cultivated and most of the remaining one-fourth is suitable only for trees. Political discontent and a strong reaction against the state church contributed to the desire to emigrate.²

Wishing for religious freedom and improved economic conditions, the Olsen, Johnson, Loe, and Serns families decided to emigrate to the United States. The emigrant guidebooks specified a need of provisions for twelve weeks, household utensils, and clothing for the trip. Often an auction was held just before leaving.³

On March 26, 1850, Andrew Olsen, his half-brother Holver Olsen, Ole Hegland Serns, and their families left Kristiansand, Norway. The emigrant guidebooks recommended an early start in spring so that crops could be raised for food the first

¹Blegen, 1931, pp. 64-5, 98-9.

²Carlton C. Qualley, Norwegian Settlement in the United States (Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1938), pp. 4-11.

year and the emigrants would have time to build a house and
prepare for winter. The entire trip took the Olsen and Serns
families thirteen weeks. They spent nine weeks crossing the
Atlantic in the sailing ship *Hermes*. Four weeks were then
spent in making the trip from New York City to Milwaukee,
Wisconsin. They traveled first by steamboat up the winding
Hudson River past numerous farms and then by way of the Erie
Canal to Buffalo. This three hundred mile route passes
through Schenectady, Utica, Syracuse, Palmyra, Rome, and
Rochester. From Buffalo the families went by lake steamer
which were inexpensive but very unseaworthy with frequent
breakdowns of the paddlewheels and other machinery. The
route to Milwaukee went from Lake Erie to Little St. Clair
Lake and the St. Clair river, Lake Huron, the Mackinac Straits,
and Lake Michigan. At Milwaukee they were met by a Norwegian
named Peter Larson, who transported the families by bullock
cart the seventy miles to his home in southern Oakland town-
ship in Jefferson County, which was part of the Norwegian-
American settlement of Koshkonong, Wisconsin. 1

Jefferson County, five hundred and seventy-six square
miles in area, had more forests and swampy areas than the
rolling prairies of Dane County which lies directly to the

1Andrew Olsen, p. 16: *Jefferson County (Wisconsin)
east. The Rock river is the largest river and Jefferson is the county seat. Lake Koshkonong lies in the southwestern part of the county.\(^1\)

**The Koshkonong Settlement**

The Koshkonong Prairie settlement had been established in 1840 and took its name from Koshkonong Lake and Creek. Koshkonong was an Ojibway word meaning shut-in-with-fog and had been the name applied to a Winnebago Indian village located on Lake Koshkonong. The most important and prosperous of the Wisconsin Norwegian-American settlements, its name was applied to a general region that extended a considerable distance from Lake Koshkonong and included the southeastern portion of Dane County, the southwestern part of Jefferson County, and the northern part of Rock County. The region actually consisted of smaller settlements separated by short distances from each other. By 1850 Koshkonong had a population of 2,670 Norwegians.\(^2\)

Since the Olsen and Serns families went directly to Koshkonong, prior arrangements must have been made. The Koshkonong settlement was well-known in Norway. An 1845 immigrant wrote that prior to immigration he received a

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\(^{1}\)Dietrichson, p. 62.

\(^{2}\)Blegen, 1931, p. 141; Qualley, p. 52; Dietrichson, p. 52.
letter from a friend giving a glowing report of the Koshkonong area:

They told of the fertility of the soil, the low prices of land, and the good chances for employment. In a letter which I received from Ivor Hove, he wrote that he received thirty-five bushels of wheat per acre and that the grass was so high that it was possible in a single day to cut enough for the winter's provision for a cow. . .
The America fever grew worse with each letter that came from the land of wonders. 1

Making a New Home

Andrew Olsen bought a farm of two hundred and forty acres a little more than a mile from the Peter Larson farm and began the task of clearing and improving it. The first Olsen home was a log cabin, but harvests were good and cattle raising successful and soon there was enough money to build a large frame house. Ole Serns purchased eighty acres nearby for one hundred dollars on July 11, 1850. The hard work of making a new home, learning English, and otherwise adjusting to a new culture gave the three families little time for their spiritual life. 2

In 1854 the families of Soren Loe and Tarel Johnson moved to Oakland to be near their relatives. Berte Olsen, Andrew's wife, was the sister of Soren Loe and Tarel Johnson's second wife Todne. The Loes and Johnsons had emigrated in the spring of 1849 and settled in the Fox River Norwegian-American settle-

1 Blegen, 1931, p. 147.

ment about ten or twelve miles from Ottawa, Illinois.¹

The Fox River settlement, founded in 1834, was the second Norwegian-American settlement founded in the United States. It was named for a local stream in LaSalle County, Illinois. The terrain is rolling prairie with tree-lined river banks. By 1850 there were two hundred and twenty-one families for a total population of 1,252 in the settlement.²

Seventh-day Methodists

According to Andrew Olsen, the families began their Christian experience in America some time after settling in Oakland when Christian B. Willerup invited them to a series of Methodist evangelistic meetings in Cambridge, Wisconsin, five miles from the Olsen home. Finding Methodism to be a partial answer to their spiritual questions, the Olsen, Johnson, Serns and Loe families soon became members of the Willerup Methodist Church in Cambridge.³

Organized in April 1851, with fifty-two charter members, by Christian B. Willerup, a Danish-American missionary supported by the Methodist Home Missionary society, the Willerup Methodist Church was the first Scandinavian Methodist church in the world. Willerup, baptized Christian Edward

¹Halswick, p. 2; "The Serns family from late 1500 to 1850, Fleskaasen, Leipsland, Norway to America," p. 19, C. Burton Clark Heritage Room, Loma Linda University.

²Qualley, p. 29; Dietrichson, p. 117.

³Andrew Olsen, p. 16.
Balthor Willerup, was born in Copenhagen in 1815 and arrived in the United States at an early age. He became a teacher in Savannah, Georgia, at age seventeen and was converted to Methodism prior to 1838. Willerup settled in Pennsylvania where he became a member of the traveling ministry and in 1850 he was sent to Wisconsin to work among the Scandinavians. Finding the Scandinavian population of Milwaukee too small, he set out on horseback to minister to the Norwegians in the Koshkonong area.¹

When recording his first impressions of the Norwegian settlements, Willerup wrote:

I left Milwaukee for a trip out into the country toward the west. When I got out on the prairie to visit families, it was exactly as if I were in Norway. I heard no other language than the Norwegian— their dress, conduct, customs, and the like were just what they were in Norway. Since I found no church, I preached in private homes out in the prairie.²

Meetings were held in a log school house or settlers' cabins in the Cambridge vicinity with people walking as far as five or six miles even in stormy weather to attend services. Soon after organizing the church, Willerup began to plan a stone church forty-four by sixty-four feet. To pay for this church, farmers mortgaged their farms and Willerup contributed most of his mission allowance. The church was dedicated on July 21, 1852. Willerup used the church in


²Blegen, 1940, p. 119.
Cambridge as a base while founding other Norwegian Methodist churches in Wisconsin until 1856 when he was transferred to Racine, Wisconsin.\(^1\)

Joining the Methodist Church renewed the interest of the four families in the study of the Scriptures and the Sabbath question again occupied their thoughts. At first they consoled themselves with the thought that the Methodist minister, who seemed possessed by the Holy Spirit, would surely know if the keeping of Sunday was not right. After much soul searching, they decided to study the Scriptures pertaining to this matter themselves. They began this investigation in the autumn of 1854.\(^2\)

During the latter part of 1854, Soren Loe and Tarel Johnson made the acquaintance of Gustaf Mellberg, who urged them to keep the Sabbath. Mellberg, a Swede living two miles away in Koshkonong township, Jefferson County, Wisconsin, had become a Seventh-day Adventist after his arrival in the United States. He may have been converted in June of 1854 by James White, who wrote Mellberg, "we shall never forget the season when we wept together by the roadside on parting last June."\(^3\)

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\(^1\)Andersen, pp. 42-3, 120.
\(^2\)Andrew Olsen, p. 16.
\(^3\)Advent Review and Sabbath Herald 6(Feb. 20, 1855):185.
On January 22, 1855, Mellberg wrote James White expressing a desire to translate a Sabbath tract of sixteen pages for the Norwegians in his area because he had had several short conversations with four of them about the Sabbath and had three of them convinced to keep the Sabbath. He indicated that Elisha S. Sheffield, an Adventist minister, had collected five dollars toward the printing costs. Unfortunately, Mellberg became involved with the age-to-come controversy advocated by J. M. Stephenson and D. P. Hall, two Adventist ministers in Wisconsin, and did not follow through with his work among the Norwegians. The believers of the age-to-come were a minority group of defectors from Seventh-day Adventism who held that probation would continue after the Second Advent and sinners would receive a second chance. In 1855 Stephenson and Hall joined the Messenger party, another group of dissidents led by H. S. Case and C. P. Russell and named for their paper called the *Messenger of Truth*. By 1858 this group had scattered because of internal disagreements and lack of financial support.¹

The Johnson and Serns families began to observe the Sabbath during the latter part of 1854. About Easter of

¹Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, 1966 ed., s.v. "Messenger party." In March 1858, J. H. Waggoner, an Adventist minister, reported that in a meeting in Koshkonong, Mellberg confessed his errors and again set up his family altar. He expressed his deep interest in the Norwegians and Waggoner left some books to be distributed among them as some of the young people read English. *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 11(March 25, 1858); 149.
1855, Andrew and Berte Olsen and Soren and Bertha Loe kept their first Sabbath at the home of Andrew Olsen. For some reason the Johnson and Serns families did not attend these meetings.¹

Realizing that they would meet opposition, they agreed to give up the seventh day as the Sabbath if Pastor Willerup could convince them that Sunday was the Sabbath. When the expected visit came, Willerup brought two associates along. Andrew Olsen stated that, "their efforts only confirmed us the more in the truth; for we saw that they could produce no evidence from the Scriptures that the keeping of Sunday was ordained of the Lord."²

Willerup wished to keep these families as members of his church. He, therefore, proposed a compromise to them saying that they could "keep their Jewish Sabbath, if they would keep the Christian Sabbath also."³ This compromise worked for a while. The four families talked to their associates in the Methodist church and by 1858 four other families had joined them in keeping the Sabbath for a total of eight families. Because their beliefs agreed with the Methodists in all but the Sabbath, people began to call them Seventh-day Methodists.⁴

¹Andrew Olsen, p. 156; Mahlon E. Olsen, pp. 346-7; Halswick, p. 3.
²Andrew Olsen, p. 16.
³Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald, 6(Feb. 20, 1855): 183.
⁴Andrew Olsen, p. 16.
Seventh-day Adventists

Prior to 1858, the families had no connection with the Seventh-day Adventists. But in the early spring of 1858, several of the younger members of this company of Sabbath keepers, who understood English, attended meetings held by Elisha S. Sheffield, a Seventh-day Adventist minister, on the subject of baptism and immersion. This caused a lively discussion and when all but a few accepted baptism by immersion there was the first real break with the Methodists. The Methodist Church disfellowshipped them for heresy. Soren and Bertha Loe and one other unidentified couple gave up the Sabbath because of their belief in infant baptism.¹

Acceptance of baptism by immersion opened the way for the Advent message to be preached in the community. Waterman Phelps, a Seventh-day Adventist minister who lived near Hebron, Jefferson County, Wisconsin, went to Oakland and began holding meetings in April, 1858. It was difficult because he did not speak Norwegian and there was no interpreter. Those that understood a few words would whisper them to their neighbors. Phelps was a powerful speaker and held many stirring meetings.²


As a result of these meetings the first baptisms took place in May of 1858 when Andrew and Berte Olsen and one other unknown person were baptized. Later in the month, six were baptized one Sabbath and five the next for a total of fourteen. Further baptisms followed and in the last week of December, 1858, several young people, including Ole A. Olsen the son of Andrew Olsen, followed their parents' example and were baptized. The work in Oakland advanced rapidly. Meetings were held that winter in both Koshkonong and Oakland townships. A number of Americans joined the group and services were held in both English and Norwegian. By March of 1859, the number of baptized Sabbath keepers had reached over twenty.¹

J. M. Stephenson and D. P. Hall, mentioned previously, held meetings in the neighborhood and visited the church members at their homes advocating their age-to-come theories. Francis Johnson, son of Tarel Johnson, confessed in March, 1859, that:

I fought that which I now consider truth, and embraced the theory of the future age. I became worldly-minded, and I might say dead; but thank God, I was not plucked up by the roots. I spoke hard words against the gift of prophecy which had been manifested in the church, and against the Review. I feel to confess all my wrongs to my brethren and friends, and ask their forgiveness. I have confessed my faults to the Lord, and I believe that he has forgiven my sins.²

¹Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald 12(June 3, 1858): 20-21; ¹³(March 17, 1859):134; Andrew Olsen, p. 16; Mahlon E. Olsen, p. 347.

²Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald 13(March 17, 1859): 134.
According to John G. Matteson, the Oakland church was not seriously affected by these theories.¹

By 1858 the Messenger party, of which Stephenson and Hall were members, had lost most of its support. Early in 1858, James White reported:

Not one of the eighteen messengers of which they once boasted as being with them is now bearing a public testimony, and not one place of regular meeting of our knowledge among them.²

However, age-to-come Adventists did remain a factor in Jefferson County. In 1890 they had a church of thirty-six members meeting in a rented hall. At that time, the Oakland church was the only Seventh-day Adventist church in the county and had a membership of thirty-eight.³

Organization

Church organization was a serious problem for the early Sabbath keeping Adventists. Coming out of Babylon or separating from the organized churches of the day was considered one of the marks of those expecting the soon return of Christ. Roswell F. Cottrell, a pioneer Adventist minister, opposed organization because "to 'make us a name' and to have any legal organization would be to become part of Babylon; legal incorporation would be union of church and state."⁴

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⁴SDA Encyclopedia, p. 931.
At a conference held in Battle Creek, April 26-29, 1861, the following recommendations were made: (1) organization of local churches, (2) organization of state or district conferences and (3) the holding of general conferences. The problems which led to the move to give the church a legal name and corporate existence were (1) who was to hold church property, (2) selection and support of ministers, and (3) controlling fanaticism and offshoot movements.¹

The subject of church organization at Oakland came up after a conference had been held in September of 1861 at Avon, Wisconsin, where it was voted to accept the suggestion made at Battle Creek for church and conference organization. There was a great struggle at Oakland during which all the arguments for and against organization were presented. In December all of the Norwegians and one American couple decided to organize. They included Andrew and Berte Olsen, Olo A. Olsen, Holver and Orna Olsen, Susannah Olsen, Tarel and Todne Johnson, Inger Serns, Andrew Serns, Sern and Sarah Serns, Christian and Inger (Serns) Thompson, and Mr. and Mrs. Samuel A. Bragg. Elders Isaac Sanborn and William S. Ingraham, the two leading Seventh-day Adventist ministers in Wisconsin, officiated. Samuel A. Bragg was chosen as church elder. Waterman Phelps and all the other Americans drew back from organization. This was

¹SDA Encyclopedia, pp. 929-30, 932.
attributed to the fact that some held age-to-come views and that some, including Waterman Phelps, were addicted to tobacco, the use of which would not be allowed after organization.¹

Before leaving Oakland, Waterman Phelps gave the following testimony:

I wish to say to the Norwegian brethren, that I am thankful and indebted to them for what they have done for me, since I started to preach among them, and I'll add for their benefit, that in benevolence, meekness, and righteousness, they rank above most people that I have known and lived among. God bless them!²

William S. Ingraham reported to James White from Monroe, Wisconsin, on April 15, 1862, that:

I have just returned from Oakland. We had a good meeting there. Three more joined the church. Probably Bro. Phelps is beyond the reach of the truth. He is going into the future age delusion.³

The First Church Building

Until 1864 the church members met in private homes or the neighborhood school house, but in that year Andrew Olsen donated a plot of land which was the highest point in the community, a pleasant, low hill overlooking the surrounding countryside. The plot was large enough for both a church and cemetery. The church was completed the same year.

¹Historical Sketches, p. 58; Matteson, ["Life"], pp. 210-11; Mahlon E. Olsen, pp. 347-8.

²Halswick, p. 5.

³Advent Review and Sabbath Herald 16(April 22, 1862): 168.
(Nearly a century later when church members talked of expansion, an oral tradition was recalled that Ellen G. White had said that this church would be standing when the Lord came. Because of this tradition it was decided to leave the west wall of the original church standing and expand to the east.)

A Scandinavian Minister

The Norwegian church members were anxious to find a minister who spoke Norwegian. They felt their prayers were answered when John G. Matteson, a Danish Adventist from Poysippi, Wisconsin, visited them in the summer of 1864. Matteson had become a Seventh-day Adventist in 1863 and was to spend the remainder of his life preaching to the Scandinavians both in the United States and in Scandinavia. He met several times with the Oakland church members and promised to come back in October to hold a series of revival meetings.

Matteson was as pleased to contact the Oakland church members as they were to contact him as evidenced by his statement:

When I began working among Adventists I met with little encouragement, except among a few Norwegian Sabbathkeepers, the Olsen and Johnson

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families in Oakland, Wisconsin. They were at the time the only Scandinavians who observed the seventh-day Sabbath.¹

The Adventists at Oakland desired that Matteson live near them, so Andrew Olsen built a cabin in 1865 hoping to induce him to move to the area. In the meantime Matteson had heard of Scandinavian settlements in southern Minnesota. Eager to extend his work to them he left his wife with friends near the Mackford church in Green Lake County, Wisconsin. She had little means and was dependent on the generosity of the church members. In mid-November Mrs. Matteson and her two daughters received a message from Andrew Olsen that a two room cabin had been completed for their use while her husband was away. She felt that this was a providential offer. Her housing was drafty and primitive and she expected the birth of her third child within a matter of weeks. Taking an open horse-drawn sled she made the two day trip with great difficulty. On the second day she was caught in a severe snow storm but managed to struggle on until she reached the Olsen farm.²

When he returned in January 1866, Matteson arranged to purchase from Andrew Olsen one acre of land located across the road from the church. During the spring and summer of


²Chilson, "Matteson," p. 46.
1866 the church members aided Matteson in building a small
frame house. Eventually he purchased an additional twenty
acres as pasture for three cows and some sheep.¹

The Matteson family remained in Oakland for eleven
years. In his autobiography Matteson stated:

We never lived in a more quiet and peaceable
place. The climate was healthful, the children
could run about the field and grove, and they
grew up as happy and healthy as any children I
have ever seen. It was a great loss to them,
healthwise and otherwise, that they had to move
away from our home in Oakland.²

The Matteson home became a farm house after he and
his family were sent as missionaries to Scandinavia in 1877.
In 1937 the old parsonage was owned by Clarence Larson, a
relative of Andrew Olsen, and today the house is the home
of a church elder, Gene Anderson.³

Internal Problems

Even before he had settled in Oakland the church members
had brought a problem to Matteson, asking for his help in
choosing a new church elder because their present one was
not satisfactory. It wasn't just that Samuel Bragg didn't
speak Norwegian, for he lived six miles away in Cambridge and
was much too busy with own affairs to provide adequate lead-

¹Matteson, ["Life,"] p. 206.
²Ibid., p. 207-8.
³Kenneth Wade to Lawrence W. Onsager, Fort Atkinson,
Wisconsin, 29 January 1979, Personal Files of Lawrence W.
Onsager, Yucaipa, California.
ership for the church. An unfortunate episode which brought the problem to a head occurred shortly after Matteson first visited Oakland. A young American, who impressed Samuel Bragg, the local elder, and several others with his speaking ability, had been asked by Bragg to become the assistant elder. Not all of the church members were as impressed with the young man. John Matteson described him as:

A powerful man to preach. He had a gift of imitating other preachers, and a splendid memory. Besides this he had a voice as strong as a donkey's and a face as brazen as a lion's. These are good qualities in a preacher, except the last named, which I did not like at all. He laughed when he talked about his sermons and prayers, and anything pertaining to religion just the same as he did when he talked of any worldly concern. I could not discover the least reverence or godly fear in him.

It was the last year of the Civil War and at Bragg's urging the church helped the young man raise three hundred dollars to hire a substitute for the Civil War draft.\(^2\)

The Seventh-day Adventist church took the position during the Civil War that Adventists should not resist the draft but neither should they bear arms. When congress passed the nation's first conscription law on March 3, 1863, two exemptions were provided. A man could either provide a substitute or purchase an exemption for three hundred dollars. Because most Adventists had difficulty raising three hundred dollars, the church members were encouraged

\(^1\) Matteson, ["Life,"] p. 213.
\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 211-213.
to share the financial burden. The Oakland church followed this church policy when they helped the young man raise the money for his exemption. Shortly after that he borrowed additional money from several church members and fled to Canada where they later discovered he posed as a Presbyterian minister.¹

Bragg had refused to step down from his position as elder, but the above incident caused him to lose support and Matteson counseled the church members to replace him. Matteson felt that "the fact that a person wants to retain an office contrary to the wishes of the majority of the brethren is in itself evidence that he is not a suitable man for the place."² After a bitter fight, the church voted to replace Bragg with Andrew Olsen. Olsen then held the position of head elder for more than twenty years until age prevented him from fulfilling his duties adequately.³

Matteson's Dream

While in Oakland, Matteson reported a markable dream he had about James and Ellen White in July 1867. This was a time when the Whites were being severely criticized by some members of the church and the letter he wrote to them reporting the dream was a great encouragement. In his dream

¹(Ibid., pp. 211-213); Richard Schwarz, Light Bearers to the Remnant (Mountain View, California; Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1979), pp. 99-100.

²Matteson, ["Life,"] p. 212.

³Andrew Olsen, p. 17.
Matteson saw:

I was in a large house where there was a pulpit somewhat like those we use in our meetinghouses. On it stood many lamps which were burning. These lamps needed a constant supply of oil, and quite a number of us were engaged in carrying oil and filling them. Elder White and his companion were busily engaged, and I noticed that Mrs. White poured in more oil than any other. Then Elder White went to a door which opened into a warehouse, where there were many barrels of oil. He opened the door and went in, and Mrs. White followed. Just then a company of men came along, with a great quantity of black stuff that looked like soot, and heaped it all upon Elder and Mrs. White, completely covering them with it. I felt grieved, and looked anxiously to see the end of these things. I could see Elder and Mrs. White both working hard to get out from under the soot, and after a long struggle they came out as bright as ever, and the evil men and soot disappeared. Then Elder and Mrs. White engaged more heartily than ever in supplying the lamps with oil, but Mrs. White still had the precedence.

I dreamed that the following was the interpretation:

The lamps represented the remnant people. The oil was the truth and heavenly love, of which God's people need a constant supply. The people engaged in supplying lamps were the servants of God laboring in the harvest. Who the evil company were in particular I could not tell, but they were men moved upon by the devil, who directed their evil influence specially against Elder and Mrs. White. The latter were in great distress for a season, but were at last delivered by the grace of God and their own earnest effort. Then finally the power of God rested upon them and they acted a prominent part in the proclamation of the last message of mercy. But Mrs. White had a richer supply of heavenly wisdom and love than the rest.¹

Unfortunately no reply by either James or Ellen White has been located.

¹Christian, pp. 128-129.
The Church School

A church school was conducted at Oakland for many years. The first teacher was Hettie Huntington of Green Bay, Wisconsin, who arrived from Battle Creek College in January 1899. There were eight pupils and for a time the school was held in the church and later in a private home. The following year the number of students increased to ten. They were Ada Ainsley (Holmes), Maggie Gherke (Fenner), Alta, Alvin, Clarence, Clayton, and Emmett Larsen, Joe and William Marshall, and Loyal Serns. Hettie remembered:

We had only a wood heater, which did poor service. No textbooks. We searched our arithmetic problems out of the Bible. For readers we used the Gospel Primer, Christ's Object Lessons, and whatever we could find. Our only blackboard was about three feet by four feet. And no busy work excepting as we would cut up picture post cards for puzzles, or cut out letters and paste them on small cardboard squares for jumbled words. There was nothing to buy not even crayolas.

I received twelve dollars per month wages, and boarded around, from two to four weeks at a place. Our needs were few, our lives simple. We were in the country, four miles from a post office, and once a week—usually on Saturday night one farmer would hitch up a horse to go after the neighborhood mail, which was the event of the week.1

Miss Huntington married Henry A. Olsen, a nephew of Andrew Olsen, in August 1900 and became a member of the community. She continued to teach for a total of five years but her wages were reduced to ten dollars a month because it was felt that her husband could help contribute

to her support. Four other young teachers followed her pattern and married into the community. Three of them married the Larsen brothers, Emmett, Alvin, and Clarence, grandnephews of Andrew Olsen. The fourth, Laura Antisdel, married Joe Marshall.¹

**Contribution to Worldwide Adventism**

The Oakland church served as a center from which evangelistic work spread among the Scandinavians in the United States and Europe. The first minister, John G. Matteson, was provided with a base of operation for spreading the Advent message to Scandinavians throughout the Middle West for eleven years before he was sent to Europe to continue his work among the Scandinavians there.²

Eleven children from the families of the pioneer members of the Oakland church became church workers. This was in many cases the result of the influence of their homes. John G. Matteson witnessed this:

> Our brethren in Oakland took great pains to make their children useful. They had to work diligently on the farm when they did not attend school. They had a very good English day school and a good Sabbath-school.³

Martin M. Olsen, son of Andrew, reminisced, "for my parents the most important goal was not to work hard and

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²Matteson, ["Life,"] p. 207; SDA Encyclopedia, pp. 760-761.

³Matteson, ["Life,"] p. 215
get rich. The most important question to them was: How can we bring up our children for the Lord?"\(^1\) His mother was always concerned that they did not come under poor influences at school. Morning and evening worship was always conducted. The beginning of the Sabbath, Friday evening worship, was a delight. Martin remembered that "once in the middle of the week my brother E. G. and I were some distance away from home and one said to the other, 'I wish we had Friday night twice a week.' We thought there was too much time between each."\(^2\)

The Andrew Olsen family contributed six children to church work. The oldest son, Ole Andres, attended Milton College in Wisconsin and Battle Creek College in Michigan for a total of two years. Ordained to the ministry in 1873, he was president of the Wisconsin (1874-76, 1880-81), Dakota (1882-3), Minnesota (1883-5), and Iowa (1884-85) conferences before going overseas to serve as president of the Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish conferences. In 1888 he was elected president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. During his administration, 1888 to 1897, there was a tremendous growth of the church and its institutions not only in the United States but also in Europe, Africa, Asia, South America, and the Pacific Islands. He continued to serve the

\(^1\)M. M. Olsen, pp. 2-3.
\(^2\)M. M. Olsen, p. 6.
church until the day of his death. In 1897-8, he was in South Africa, then he was president of the European Union until 1901 when he became president of the British Union. In 1905 he became president of the Australasian Union. He was made secretary of the North American Foreign Department of the General Conference in 1909 and in 1913 he became vice-president of the North American Division and secretary of the North American Foreign Department. He held these two offices until his death in 1915 at the age of 69.¹

Andrew's second son, Andrew D., received his ministerial license in 1876 and was ordained in 1880. He served as president of the Dakota (1883-1887) and Minnesota (1888-1889) conferences. He died in 1890 of pulmonary consumption at the age of thirty-eight.²

Martin M. Olsen received his ministerial license when he was twenty-two and served as a minister for ten years in Michigan and Dakota Territory. In 1889 he was sent to Denmark were he remained until his death in 1940. He served the church as a teacher, minister, editor, and conference president.³

Edward Gunder Olsen was educated at Battle Creek College, received his ministerial license in 1879 and was ordained in 1881. He was a missionary to Norway and Den-

²Martin M. Olsen, p. 10; Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald 67(September 9, 1890): 559.
³Martin M. Olsen, pp. 15, 20.
mark for seven years, president of the Iowa conference (1893-1896) and church pastor in Wisconsin, South Dakota, Colorado and Iowa. He died in 1931 at Mason City, Iowa.¹

A fifth son of Andrew Olsen, Albert J., was in the Bible and canvassing work and eventually became a publishing department secretary. He worked in the states of Alabama, Wisconsin, and Michigan.²

The youngest daughter, Anna, married Frank Armitage, a minister. They went as missionaries to Solusi Mission, South Africa, in 1898 where she died of malaria that same year.³

Two of Tarel F. Johnson's sons became ministers. Ole Andres attended one year at the Seventh-day Baptist college in Milton, Wisconsin, four years at Battle Creek College, and one year in New York City studying Greek and Hebrew. He was ordained to the ministry in 1876. He served as a church pastor and evangelist in Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Montana. He was president of the Wisconsin Conference (1894-1896). In 1900 he became president of the Norwegian conference where he remained seven years. He taught in the Scandinavian department at Union College (1891-93, 1897-99) and at Walla Walla College (1908-1922). He authored The Bible Textbook. Ole died at Loma Linda, California, in 1923.⁴

²Advent Review and Sabbath Herald 67(October 14, 1890):639; Olsen, Martin M., p. 10.
⁴Ibid., 100(March 22, 1923): 22.
Henry R. Johnson was a minister in Wisconsin, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan. He taught at Union College and the Danish-Norwegian Seminary at Hutchinson, Minnesota. He died in 1933 at Luck, Wisconsin.¹

The Serns family contributed two sons of Sern Serns, son of Ole Hegland Serns, to the ministry. Mahlon H. was a pastor-evangelist in Wisconsin. Arthur Eugene was a minister until 1925 when he took medicine at the College of Medical Evangelists in Loma Linda, California. He practiced in Santa Barbara, California, and died there in 1957.²

Oakland Today

Presently the Oakland, Wisconsin, Seventh-day Adventist church remains a small country church with forty-seven members. The pastor serves a district consisting of Fort Atkinson (31), Oakland (47), Watertown (69), and Wisconsin Academy (200). There is no longer a local church school.³

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¹Advent Review and Sabbath Herald 110(June 22, 1933): 22.

²Alumni Journal, College of Medical Evangelists 28(May 1957): 36.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

One of the oldest continuously published church papers in America, it is useful for reports of evangelistic series, letters about religious experiences, and obituaries of many Seventh-day Adventist workers and laymen.

Alumni Journal, College of Medical Evangelists. May 1957.
Useful for obituaries of medical doctors.

The only general history available on Scandinavian Methodists.

Volume one of a social history of Norwegian immigration to the United States during the central decades of the nineteenth century. Considered a model study of an immigrant people, it has excellent background material on religious motives for immigration.

Volume two of a social history of Norwegian immigration to the United States. This is the story of how the immigrants became Americans.

The best account available of the life of John G. Matteson.

A history of Seventh-day Adventism in Wisconsin. It includes chapters on the Andrew Olsen family and John G. Matteson.

The only general history of Adventists of Scandinavian descent available. He includes material on the Oakland Church and John G. Matteson. The author was a Scandinavian who worked with many of the people in the book but he does not give sources for his information.


A travel narrative about his first year in America and his Koshkonong Parish Journal for the years 1844 to 1850. It is an excellent record of American frontier conditions and Norwegian-American experience. Useful for the description of his trip to America and his description of the Koshkonong settlement.


A well-written short biographical sketch.


A brief account that includes the later history of the Oakland church.


A series of short biographies of Danish-Norwegian SDA ministers. Chapter one deals with the Oakland church and chapter two with John G. Matteson. The author knew many of them personally but he gives no sources for his information.


John G. Matteson wrote the chapter entitled the "Scandinavian Mission." In it he gives a brief history of the Oakland church.

Useful as a source of obituaries and news notes in columns variously titled "Southwestern Oakland" or "Oakland-Sumner."

Matteson, John G. "Life." Unpublished manuscript, C. Burton Clark Heritage Room, University Library, Loma Linda University.

Matteson's autobiography. A good source for the history of the Oakland church and the early work among the Scandinavians. It was translated into Danish and published as Matteson's Liv in 1908.


An autobiographical sketch used as his obituary in which he explains how and why he and his family and friends became Adventists. The best account available.


A reminiscence written by Oakland's first church school teacher.


A chapter is devoted to the work among the Scandinavians and includes a brief history of the Oakland church. The author was the grandson of Andrew Olsen and the son of O. A. Olsen.


Translation of "minder og Erfaringer" by Dyre Dyreson. The author was the son of Andrew Olsen. A good source of information on the Olsen family.


A typical county history. Very poor for history of Oakland township. Has some good material on church history in the county.
A solidly documented narrative history of the dispersion and settlement of Norwegian immigrants in the Middle West from 1834 to about 1885. Useful for general information about the Koshkonong, Wisconsin, and Fox River, Illinois, Norwegian settlements.

The latest and best general history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

"The Serns Family from late 1500 to 1850, Fleskaasen, Leipsland, Norway to America." Unpublished manuscript, C. Burton Clark Heritage Room, University Library, Loma Linda University.
A genealogy of the Serns family useful in determining relationships of various family members and dates of immigration.

Useful for background information on the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The writer was pastor of the Oakland church at the time the letter was written. Useful for present history and for a copy of the Serns genealogy.

Good source for current information on the Oakland church.
APPENDIX A

THE ORIGINAL MEMBERS OF THE OAKLAND SEVENTH-DAY METHODISTS AND THE CHARTER MEMBERS OF THE OAKLAND SDA CHURCH

The original records of the Oakland Seventh-day Adventist Church are no longer in existence. Wishing to determine the names of as many of the original members of the Sabbath-keeping company of Seventh-day Methodists as possible, I obtained a list of the older tombstones in the Oakland SDA Church Cemetery. Using the death dates given, a search was made of the backfiles of the Jefferson County Union newspaper and the Review and Herald for as many obituaries as possible. In some cases the obituary definitely mentioned that the individual was a charter member of the Oakland SDA Church. Supplementing the obituaries with the other historical sources used in writing this paper and data obtained from Gerhard Naeseth, a librarian at the University of Wisconsin, Madison who is trying to trace every Norwegian immigrant arriving in the United States prior to 1851, I have compiled the following lists.

The Sabbath-keeping Company of Seventh-day Methodists

Andrew and Berte Olsen
Susannah Olsen, mother of Andrew
Holvor and Orra Olsen
Tarel and Todne Johnson
Ole and Inger Serns
Andrew Serns
Sern and Sarah Serns
Christian and Inger (Serns) Thompson
Soren and Bertha Loe
One unidentified couple
Charter Members of the Oakland SDA Church, December, 1861:
Known or presumed

Mr. and Mrs. Samuel A. Bragg
Andrew and Berte Olsen
Ole A. Olsen
Holvor and Oorra Olsen
Tarel and Todne Johnson
Ole and Inger Serns
Andrew Serns
Sern and Sarah Serns
Christian and Inger (Serns) Thompson

Other possible members: Sarah Olsen, Andrew's daughter, was 13, the Serns family had five other children who were old enough to be members. Tarel Johnson had a number of children by his first wife who might also have been members.

For later members of the church a number of sources are available. The cemetery records, a couple of articles on the history of the church, and the Jefferson County Union newspaper are just a few of the possibilities. The Jefferson County Union ran a local news column in the 1890's called "Southwest Oakland" which gives a very interesting diary-like account of the comings and goings of the various Adventists in the area. The 1890 Federal Church Census lists one Adventist church with 38 members in the county.
1862 Plat Map of Oakland Township. The Olsen, Johnson and Sorenson farms are marked.
Town of Oakland

1. Oakland Seventh-day Adventist Church and Cemetery

2. Cambridge, Wisconsin
Oakland Seventh-day Adventist Church

John G. Matteson, first pastor of the Oakland Church.

Anna Sieverson Matteson, wife of John G. Matteson.
The Olsen family in 1879 at their mother’s funeral

Sarah Cash, dau. of Andrew Olsen, at age 92. She is standing by Elder Matteson’s old desk.
Todne and Tarel Johns

Ole A. Johnson

Henry R. Johnson
Oakland School, 1899, Hettie Huntington

Oakland Church, 1970
First Church of Its Kind in the World

The Oakland church of Seventh Day Adventists shown at the upper left is much the same today as when it was first built in 1864, as far as outward appearance goes. It is the first church of its kind in the world. The founder of 76 years ago rest peacefully in the cemetery at the side of the church, which is located on route 1, Fort Atkinson.

Three schoolma'ams who turned to matrons are shown in the upper right picture. All of them formerly were teachers in the Oakland Seventh Day Adventist church school, but they married local boys and settled permanently in the community. From left to right, they are Mrs. Emmett Larsen, Mrs. Clarence Larsen, and Mrs. Henry A. Olsen. A fourth member of the teacher-matron quartet, Mrs. Alvin Larsen, failed to respond to the photographer’s invitation.

This historic picture of four generations shows from top to bottom: Andrew Olsen, founder of the Oakland Seventh Day Adventist church; his daughter, Mrs. J. E. Cash; a grand daughter, Mrs. George Klement, Lincoln, Neb.; and a great-grandson, Harold Klement, now principal of a Seventh Day Adventist academy in the west. Olsen and Mrs. Cash rest in the cemetery by the Oakland church.

The Oakland Seventh Day Adventist church in the world was organized 76 years ago this month, not in Norway, but in Oakland township, Jefferson county, Wisconsin.

The first Norwegian Seventh Day Adventist church in the world was organized 76 years ago this month, not in Norway, but in Oakland township, Jefferson county, Wisconsin.

The pioneer farmers who were the charter members are now resting in the cemetery in the gently sloping church yard, but their grandsons and granddaughters still "carry on."

The first meeting of Scandinavian Sabbath keepers was held in the home of Andrew Olson, in Oakland, near the close of the year 1854, but it was not until December, 1861, that they organized as a Seventh Day Adventist church, that meeting also in the same home. In 1864, the church was built on ground donated by Andrew Olsen, on the highest place in the community, a pleasant, low hill, overlooking the country round about. Shortly thereafter, the same bountiful enthusiast donated the ground across the road from the church for a parsonage and it is said that he also shouldered the cost of the first log cabin that housed the first local preacher, Elder John G. Matteson, who later secured the deed to the parsonage in order to build a larger home.

Parsonage Now Farm Home

The old parsonage is now the farm home of Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Larsen, devout members of the church. Emmett Larsen, a brother of Clarence Larsen, resides on an old Andrew Olsen farm. Another brother, Alvin, is on a farm right next to the church. The Larsens are all related to Andrew Olsen. Henry A. Olsen, an uncle of the Larsens, is on a farm at the end of the road that goes past the church.
Ole Sørenson Hegland Serns 1806-1857

Inger Annen’sdatter Reindal Sørenson Serns
1804-1897