

History of the Village of Scandinavia

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In those parts of the world where civilization has existed for hundreds of years there are records of various sorts available, but here in America all recorded history is squeezed into the last 150 years. This is a mind-boggling thought, particularly to anyone who takes time to compare the vast changes of the last century and a half to the apparent inactivity through the thousands of years that preceded it. And so it is with Scandinavia, and all other communities

here in Wisconsin—we wish we could pull back the shades and get a view of what changes were transpiring here 300 or 500 years ago.

We know there were adventurous individuals who plied the fur trading life, missionary-minded explorers and other individuals

who passed through these parts occasionally, but for the most part it seems there were no settlers in central Wisconsin until about 1825. It therefore comes as somewhat of a surprise that our little town, and many others like it, mushroomed from complete wilderness to orderly, established communities in a matter of 20 years, and that this great change occurred during the lifetime of people we remember.

The Village of Scandinavia can rightfully claim to be one of the oldest villages in this part of the State. Its first settlers came in 1850, which was only two years after the first white had settled in Waupaca, and the Township of Scandinavia was officially organized just four years later. The County of Waupaca had been designated and partially surveyed just three years earlier under one of the state's first official acts. In the preceding 20 or 30 years while statehood was being contemplated, the Waupaca area was considered Indian Territory and consequently not available for homesteading and settling.

When the treaty with the Indian Tribes was changed to permit acquisition of land by white men there was an immediate influx, particularly of those interested in logging the vast pine forests of the area. It appears this pine forest was most dense in the area north and east of the

present site of Scandinavia, and the fact that there never was a sawmill in Scandinavia in the early days indicates this was not a heavily forested area. But people came here and settled for other reasons.

First of all, it was on a major North-South Indian Trail, which lent itself to early development of a wagon trail. Second, it was in a wooded valley, between a river and a lake, and was surrounded by several fairly large meadow

areas where Indians or lightning-induced forest fires had occurred many years earlier, thus creating attractive farm sites. A third feature, causing men to stop here, was the fact that the river had water-power potential. A settler named Thomas Knoph saw the potential in this



matter and purchased 80 acres along the river. He then build a dam and grist mill to serve the new settlers in the area, and his log cabin soon became the nucleus of the community. This is how Scandinavia began.

For those interested in preservation of historical buildings such as the Knoph log cabin, it should be comforting to know the building is still in existence. It is the "Log Cabin Museum," located in the Scandinavia Park (or Fair Grounds, as some prefer to call it) and is open to the public on special occasions, such as the Corn Roast in August. Anyone wishing to see the interior at other times may make special arrangements by e-mailing: scandinavia@dwave.net. The cabin was moved to this site in the 1930s after serving 15 years as the public bathhouse at the swimming beach on Silver Lake. In those days the swimming area was at the east end of the lake and was reached by driving out what is now Lake St. I remember it being there and also remember the fine sandy beach and the clear water in the lake.

The matter of selecting a name for the community was settled in 1853, the year before the township was formed, but was actually part of the process of organization. The first settler, Hans Jacob Eliason, wanted to name it Oksom in memory of his family home in Norway. Another

wanted to name it Danger or Eidanger because so many of the settlers had come from Eidanger, Norway. Others objected to these somewhat meaningless names, but agreed that since there were two Danes and Swede in the community it might be all right to pick a more inclusive name, such as Scandinavia, and thus let the rest of the communities roundabout know their ethnic background. (It also was a subtle way of letting non-Scandinavians know they would be minority groups if they moved in here.) Incidentally, one wonders if Oksom would have become "OK Village" or if Danger would have had trouble living up to its name!

The village was platted in 1861, and immediately began thinking of itself as a village. It was not until 1892, when it had to be incorporated to comply with state law, that it officially became a village.

Many stories are told of the hardships of those early days, some sad and some funny. Diseases, accidents, and whiskey took their toll in those days, just as they do today. Stores were built, hotels and restaurants came, a church and a school were makers of real progress. People walked a lot and walking from their homes out in the country to Scandinavia or Ogdensburg to see if they had received mail from relatives in the old country was a frequent occurrence. My grandfather's diary for the years around 1870 makes frequent references to having "walked to Scandinavia this afternoon for groceries and mail." The

Hassvold Hotel located at present 470 North Main Street



Village Hall and Firehouse

Civil War came and went, with the field directly south of the Academy being used for a training ground to teach the Norwegian boys what the English words "Forward march" and "Right face," etc. meant in Norwegian.

The railroad came to Scandinavia in 1871, and all the business places grew and prospered. Potatoes became a major crop because they could now be gotten to market. Wheat had diminished in popularity as the fertility of the soil diminished, and dairying became more dependable as a source of income.

Scandinavia grew and prospered, while the smaller communities such as Iola, Northland, and Benson's Corner (together with many others whose names have long since been forgotten) seemed doomed to mediocrity. Little did they suspect that Iola would eventually have a railroad too, and that after it had grown larger than Scandinavia they would both lose that wonderful,

indispensable, and exciting, "Iron Horse." The brave pioneers of 1870 would have been horrified to learn railroads would have been made obsolete by paved roads, automobiles, trucks and airplanes within the short span of 100 years! And this would all happen in a land which had seen nothing change in the last 2,000 years except possibly that the oxen and horses had replaced birch bark canoes!

Whatever the reason, Scandinavia never got its population over 300, and the census figure is still in that neighborhood today. There were times when it seemed expansion was just around the corner. The busy blacksmith shops, the hardware dealer's yard full of McCormick

Deering farm equipment, the Dodge Auto Agency in the building where Johnson Construction was located (now the Wood Model Shop), the wind powered carpentry shop which stood where Lillie Leppen's home is, and most of all the Academy, which lent culture and opportunity for greater things to everyone in the community. All these things unified the people, but the thing that did the most for them was the free enterprise system of this new country. Most of them had come from European countries where the Cotter System prevailed, always passing property to the oldest son and letting younger members of each family become second rate. Here they could all have equal opportunity, and they



Scandinavia Grist Mill

were eager to take advantage of it!

Going back in history again, it is interesting to review the history of the church in this community. It was probably typical of many similar communities, but had some unique features. Itinerant missionary preachers from Europe served the area for a few years, but in 1854 Scandinavia became the home of one of these preachers, namely Rev. O.F. Duus, and the village became the home of the Mother Church to all the surrounding communities. Some of these were Oshkosh, Winchester, Farmington, New Hope, Northland, Hitterdal, Stevens Point, and Iola. Each of them eventually organized congregations of their own and many grew greater than Scandinavia in membership numbers, but Scandinavia is proud of the fact that it had the opportunity to serve them until they were able to go it alone. The local cemetery was started by Rev. Duus when his young wife died and was buried in the front yard of the parsonage. This also must have been a factor in choosing the land directly across the road on which to build the church, which served as the Mother Church referred to above, for over 50 years.

One of the most indelible marks left by the church was that left by the Lutheran Academy, build in 1893, and its successor, Central Wisconsin College, build in 1919. Between the two, they functioned 40 years, providing secondary education to the youth of the area and surrounding communities for 100 miles in every direction. Unfortunately, in 1932 it fell victim to the Depression and the American infatuation with bigger and better things. But it left the mark on the community, and that mark is still evident today. Over 2000 students were enrolled during the 40 years the school was in existence, and although many went out to make homes elsewhere,

some have stayed or returned, and their nostalgic memories prompt them to be a credit to the unselfish founders and workers who gave so much of their lives to keep the doors of the Academy and the college open.

By the turn of the century the village boasted two hotels, two dry goods stores, a drug store, two blacksmith shops, a wagon and carpentry shop, a post office, a barber shop, two restaurants, a shoemaker shop, a harness shop, a watchmaker, a Lutheran Academy, a creamery which won a gold medal for the excellence of its butter at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a mill which could grind everyone's feed and flour, a depot, a livery stable, and a funeral director.

Many homes in the village took in students from the Academy, giving them board and room in exchange for part-time work, and thus introduced their families more directly to the art, drama, athletics, etc., that went on at the college.

Today, despite the village's failure to grow to the size once predicted, its 300 inhabitants have many things to be proud of. It has a good highway connections in all four directions, all its streets are paved, it has a sanitary sewer system, a post office, a fine bank, it is part of the Iola-Scandinavia School system which has excelled in many areas, it has an active church with over 500 members, two taverns, a beauty parlor, an antique store, a convenience store, and a large potato packing plant which does a multi-million dollar business. There is ample room for growth without fear of over crowding, polluting or losing our small-town character.

We trust the future holds many happy surprises for those who continue to live in and near Scandinavia! Thank you!

Railroad depot looking west.

