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FREE

150-Year-Old Farm

By Meghann Hanson

When the Braaten family migrated to the Kenyon, Minnesota, area from Norway over one-hundred and fifty years ago, because of space limitations, only the most valuable of personal belongings accompanied them on their long journey across the Atlantic. In mid-May of 1856, Ole and Ambjorg Braaten set out with their five young children (ages two to thirteen). They left behind a log cabin that had been in the family for several generations. Leaving the home was a difficult decision, but hard times had struck Scandinavia; the Braatens felt the move was necessary for a better life.

After boarding a ship in Drammen, a port village near Oslo, during unexpected harsh weather, the Braatens and other passengers had to wait several days before setting sail. Because of rough seas, another delay occurred in Hull, England, where the boat docked for nearly a week. Finally, all set sail for a nine-week journey to an unfamiliar land, hoping to reach America in early August.

With conditions extremely poor, many fell ill to the unsanitary, tight quarters. Luckily, the Braatens safely reached the east coast of the United States, where the next focus was the trek to Minnesota, where a parcel of land waited for them. They knew the terrain of Minnesota was similar to that of Norway.



The Braaten family. From left, top: Arthur, Amanda and Marie. Center: Herman, Ann and Thelma. Front: Timon, Joseph and Christine.

Below: The farm near Kenyon, Minnesota, has been in the Braaten family for over one hundred and fifty years.



The Braatens traveled across the ocean to find a better life

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**Celebrating the
one hundred
and fiftieth year
of the farm's
existence are
(from left):
Neil, Luke,
Jim, Arvella,
Roberta, Terry
and Krista.**

Traveling by train most of the way, the mode of transportation altered once the Braaten's reached the Mississippi River. Soon they took to the waterway and landed in Hastings, Minnesota. The rest of the journey for Ole, Amgjorg and their children was by foot. An excerpt from ten-year-old Ole Olsen Braaten's journal reads:

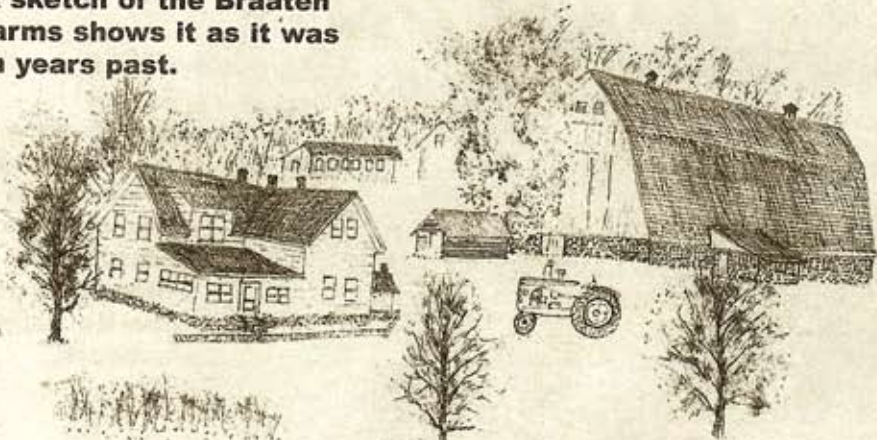
"The western part of Goodhue County . . . was for the most part settled the year before we came, so there was not much land to choose from. The lucky ones had a little to get started out-with, but most of us were short of money. Father had only \$50 left For this money he bought a cow for \$40; a flour sack, an ax, and a shovel for the rest. With winter at the door, the outlook was bleak. Three weeks later Father found 120 acres of land, where he built our home. Little Cannon River flows through the land, and the fish we caught there were our main sustenance for that first winter

"We were in daily contact with Indians,

but they were a friendly tribe of Chippewas. Father traded them a rifle. Right after that they had killed three deer and decorated the rifle with three silk ribbons. We traded several things with them, and often were given venison. Usually they came by our house in the evening, carrying a deer. They had their winter camp a half-mile into the woods. It was very good hunting ground for them here . . . the landscape was magnificent. You could call it 'Norwegian.' There was an abundance of wild grapes, plums, choke cherries, gooseberries, and other fruit."

Times continued to be difficult for the Braatens, yet they were hopeful for better days in America. Through hard work and determination, they made a life for themselves and their family. Ole and Amgjorg's courage created a solid foundation for future generations. What began as a small homestead in the late 1800s continued to prosper.

A sketch of the Braaten farms shows it as it was in years past.



Throughout the years, the family flourished. Many generations have passed through the acreage surrounding the farm. Another interesting story, aside from the descriptive account of the Braaten's journey to America, comes several decades later.

Located on part of the one hundred and fifty-seven acres is an "old, dilapidated log cabin," explained Jim Braaten, current resident of the farm. This structure is not the original home, nor owned by any of the Braaten family, although it is still "very old." Before Jim's father, Joe, passed away in 1972, people occasionally stopped to visit the old homestead. One day, four women from an antique store in Owatonna came calling. "They asked my father if they could snoop around by the log cabin. He wasn't too sure, but said yes anyway."

Discovering nothing but some trinkets and dusty picture frames, the women inquired if they could purchase their findings. "My



The Bergslien original chalk drawing was in this condition when Diane Carlson discovered it in an antique store.

dad sold them everything for three dollars." The ladies were on their way, although this would not be the last time the Braatens heard about the items found near the cabin. No one could have imagined what would eventually transpire.

After the ladies cleaned the picture frames (which were ornate, unique ones made by a Norwegian craftsman), they were displayed with a price tag of only three dollars. By

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• Cannon Falls



A PBS crew from Chicago filmed for a documentary about the discovery of the Bergslien artwork.

coincidence, one day a woman from the Owatonna area, Diane Carlson, came into the store looking for Norwegian picture frames to compliment her Scandinavian artwork. After purchasing one that came from the Braaten farm for three dollars, Diane went home pleased with her find.

Much to her surprise, underneath the glass lay hidden a seventeen by twenty-three-inch chalk illustration of two Nordic warriors skiing down a mountain slope, battle-axes and spears in hand, with a baby strapped to one of the men's chests. Diane wondered what the drawing meant. None the less, "The drawing was beautiful and intriguing, so I proudly hung the piece on the wall," Carlson said.

As years passed, Diane often thought of the picture and wondered if there was significance to the two skiers and baby. Several years later, in 1973, she acquired information that solved the mystery.

While reading a book titled *The Skier's Digest* from her neighbor, a line stood out that proved to be extremely helpful. The sentence stated, "Skis were used in 1206 to carry the infant Norwegian Prince Haakon across a snow-covered mountain range to save him from rebel factions that were trying to claim the throne in the wake of the king's recent death."

Astounded by the information, Diane called the Oslo National Gallery of Art and the American Swedish Institute to confirm her findings. With a faint signature matching the signature on oil paintings by the same artist, Knud Larsen Bergslien, Diane knew she was on to something big. She traveled to Lillehammer, Norway, to do more research. The scene in the original Bergslien chalk drawing depicted a famous legend from Norway's post-Viking history. Diane discovered annual cross-country ski races, called Birkebeinerrennets, are held in five countries to commemorate the great escape. She was told that the skiers are required to carry backpacks that weigh approximately the same as the little prince.

Thrilled by the revelation, Diane could not believe that her three-dollar purchase was a historical, well-known piece of art. "I had in my possession a priceless piece of history," Carlson recalled.

The story does not end here. Diane found out the original chalk drawing, that has been reproduced thousands of times, became the official theme of the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer. She was asked by the game's officials to

include the artwork of the Birkebeiners in a "100 Years of Glory" traveling exhibit. The piece, insured for \$100,000, was shipped to Atlanta for the beginning of the exhibit.

Diane received upsetting news in June of 1996. The original Bergslien drawing had been missing for two years, without Diane's knowledge. No one admitted to the disappearance; the most valuable piece in the exhibit had vanished.

She regrets her decision to accommodate the Olympics and share the drawing with the world. Chances of recovering the piece are not favorable. A settlement was later reached for one quarter of a million dollars.

Diane has continued a quest to find the missing artwork, along with solving the mystery of how such a significant piece that played an important role in Norwegian history found its way to a farm in rural Minnesota. Diane wrote,

"In 1856, Ole Olsen Braaten was ten years old when his family immigrated from Aal, Norway. It was a nine-week ocean voyage from Hull, England to America and then to Kenyon, Minnesota. Another family, the Ole Pedersen Kvelpruds, also immigrated to the Kenyon area at about the same time. Sadly, Mr. Kvelprud was killed in an accident shortly after the birth of a daughter, Ambjorg. It is not known what happened to her mother; however, Ambjorg was left without parents in a strange new land. The Norwegian community was close-knit and took care of its own during these difficult times. The Braatens took Ambjorg in and raised her as their own daughter. She eventually married the Braaten's son, Sven.

"I find it amazing that Ambjorg's cousin, Knut Torkelson Kvelprud, was an art student of Knud Larsen Bergslien in Christiania (Oslo) from 1883-1884. Because Knut's father had spent time in America (1873-1876), it is likely that he, too, visited the Braatens. Could this be the missing link to the drawing's four-thousand-mile journey from Norway to America? The Scandinavian people are a gracious and appreciative group. I surmise that it was quite possible that the Kvelpruds were so grateful to the Braatens for taking care of their orphaned Ambjorg that Knut bought the drawing from his teacher, Bergslien, and gave it to the Braatens as a thank you gift. After all, the image represented a scene that would bring fond memories to those who had left their homeland."