

Excerpt from the English translation of Ole Rynning's *True Account of America for the Information and help of Peasant and Commoner written by a Norwegian Who Arrived there in the Month of June, 1837* © Nasjonalbiblioteket, avdeling Oslo - Norsk-am. sml.

What in general is the nature of the country, and for what reason do so many people go there, and expect to make a living?

The *United States* is a very large country, more than twenty times as large as all Norway. The greater part of the land is flat and arable; but, as its extent is so great, there is also a great difference with respect to the mildness of the weather and the fertility of the soil. In the most eastern and northern states the climate and soil are not better than in the southern part of Norway. In the western states, on the contrary, the soil is generally so rich that it produces every kind of grain without the use of manure; and in the southern states even sugar, rice, tobacco, cotton, and many products which require much heat, are grown.

It is a general belief among the common people in Norway that America was well populated some years ago, and that a plague -- almost like the black death -- has left the country desolate of people. As a result they are of the opinion that those who emigrate to America will find cultivated farms, houses, clothes, and furniture ready for them, everything in the condition in which it was left by the former owners. This is a false supposition. (I will not deny, however, that far back in time the United States may have been populated by another and more civilized race than the savage Indians who now are commonly regarded as the first inhabitants of the country. I have, in fact, seen old burial mounds here, which resemble the Norwegian barrows; and Americans have told me that by digging in such mounds there have been found both human bones of exceptional size, and various weapons and implements of iron, which give evidence of a higher civilization than that of the Indians. It is also significant that the Indians themselves do not know the origin of these mounds.) When the country was first discovered, this part of America was inhabited only by certain savage nations that lived by hunting. The old inhabitants were pressed back more and more, inasmuch as they would not accustom themselves to a regular life and to industry; but as yet the greater part of the land has not begun to be cultivated and settled by civilized peoples.

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In what part of the country have the Norwegians settled? What is the most convenient and cheapest way to reach them?

Norwegians are to be found scattered about in many places in the United States. One may meet a few Norwegians in New York, Rochester, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New Orleans, yet I know of only four or five places where several Norwegians have settled together, and these places are as follows. The first company of Norwegian immigrants, as I have already said, settled in (1) Murray Town, Orleans County, New York State, in 1825. Only two or three families remain there now; the others have moved farther into the country, where they have settled in (2) La Salle County, Illinois State, by the Fox River, about one and one-half Norwegian miles northeast from the city of Ottawa, and eleven or twelve miles west of Chicago. From sixteen to twenty families of Norwegians live there. This colony was established in 1834. (3) White County, Indiana State, about ten Norwegian miles south of Lake Michigan, on the Tippecanoe River. There are living in this place as yet only two Norwegians from Drammen, who together own nearly eleven hundred acres of land; but in the vicinity good land still remains unoccupied. A number of Norwegians from Stavanger settled in (4) Shelby County, Missouri State, in the spring of 1837. I do not know how many families live there. A large number of those who came over last summer settled in (5) Iroquois County, Illinois State, on the Beaver and Iroquois rivers. At this place there are now eleven or twelve families.

Usually the Norwegians prefer to seek a place where they can expect to find fellow-countrymen; but it is always difficult to get good unoccupied land in the vicinity of those who immigrated one or two years earlier.

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6. What is the nature of the land where the Norwegians have settled? What does good land cost? What are the prices of cattle and of provisions? How high are wages?

In the western regions, where all the Norwegian immigrants now go, the land is very flat and low. I had imagined that thick woods would cover that part of the land which had not yet begun to be cleared; but I found it quite different. One can go two or three miles over natural meadows, which are overgrown with the most luxuriant grass, without finding a single tree. These natural meadows are called prairies.

... The prairies are a great boon to the settlers. It costs them nothing to pasture their cattle and to gather fodder for the winter. In less than two days a capable laborer can cut and rake enough fodder for one cow. Still the prairie grass is not considered so good as tame hay of timothy and clover. The soil on the prairies is usually rich, and free from stones and roots. In order to break a field, therefore, only a strong plow and four or five yoke of oxen are needed; with these a man can plough up one or two acres of prairie a day. Without being manured, the soil produces corn, wheat, buckwheat, oats, potatoes, turnips, carrots, melons, and other things that make up the produce of the land. Corn is considered the most profitable crop, and yields from twelve to twenty-four barrels an acre. Oats and a large part of the corn are fed only to horses and cattle. As food for people wheat flour is most used. Barley and rye grow well in some places, and thrive; but I have not yet seen any of these grains. Barley, like oats, is used only for fodder. Beer is not to be found, and most of the milk is given to calves and hogs. For breakfast and supper coffee or tea is always served, but at other times only cold water is drunk. According to the price of beer in Chicago, a barrel would cost about twenty dollars.

It is natural that a country which is so sparsely populated should have a great abundance of wild animals. The Indians, who were the former inhabitants, lived entirely by hunting. If a settler is furnished with a good rifle and knows how to use it, he does not have to buy meat the first two years. A good rifle costs from fifteen to twenty dollars. The chief wild animals are deer, prairie chickens, turkeys, ducks, and wild geese. Wild bees are also found. The rivers abound with fish and turtles.

Illinois and the other western states are well adapted for fruit culture. ... Illinois lacks sufficient forests for its extensive prairies. The grass on the prairies burns up every year, and thereby hinders the growth of young trees. Prolific woods are found only along the rivers.

... The summer in Illinois is much warmer than in Norway. On some days the heat in Norway may be just as intense as it ever is in Illinois or Missouri; but in these states the weather is clearer and brighter. It very seldom rains for a whole day until the end of summer; but when it does rain the downpour is violent and usually accompanied by thunder and lightning. The winter lasts from November until the end of March, at which time the ground usually begins to grow green. February is the coldest month. I have heard many Norwegians declare that they have never felt the cold worse in Norway than in

America. Nevertheless, the cattle are generally kept out of doors during the whole winter, and the houses of Americans are not much better than a barn in Norway.

Wages are also very different in different places, and correspond closely with the prices of other commodities. In this Vicinity a capable workman can earn from one-half to one dollar a day in winter, and almost twice as much in summer. Yearly wages are from one hundred and fifty to two hundred dollars. A servant girl gets from one to two dollars a week, and has no outside work except to milk the cows. In Wisconsin Territory daily wages are from three to five dollars; in New Orleans and Texas wages are also very high, but in Missouri, again, they are lower. At Beaver Creek we can now get men to break prairie for us at two dollars an acre, provided that we furnish board. For fencing ten acres with the simplest kind of fencing we figure on two thousand rails. In an average woods a good workman can split a hundred or a hundred and fifty rails a day. From one-half to one dollar is charged for splitting a hundred rails. Four thousand rails are required to fence in forty acres; and for one hundred and sixty acres eight thousand rails are needed, all figuring being based upon the simplest kind of fence.

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7. What kind of religion is to be found in America? Is there any kind of order or government in the land, or can every one do as he pleases?

Among the common people in Norway it has been a general belief that pure heathenism prevails in America, or, still worse, that there is no religion. This is not the case. Every one can believe as he wishes, and worship God in the manner which he believes to be right, but he must not persecute any one for holding another faith. The government takes it for granted that a compulsory belief is no belief at all, and that it will be best shown who has religion or who has not if there is complete religious liberty.

The *Christian religion* is the prevailing one in America; but on account of the self-conceit and opinionativeness of the teachers of religion in minor matters, there are a great many sects, which agree, however, in the main points. Thus, one hears of Catholics, Protestants, Lutherans, Calvinists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, Methodists, and many others. There are also various sects among the Norwegians, but they do not as yet have ministers and churches. Every man who is somewhat earnest in his belief holds devotional exercises in his own home, or else together with his neighbors.

I have already said that the United States has no king. Nevertheless, there is always a man who exercises just about as much authority as a king. This man is chosen for a term of only four years, and is called president. In matters which concern all the United States as a whole, the legislative power is vested in the Congress, which is composed of men who are elected by the various states. Each of the separate states has its own government, just as Norway and Sweden have, but their common Congress, their common language, and a common financial system unite them more closely.

For the comfort of the faint-hearted I can, therefore, declare with truth that here, as in Norway, there are laws, government, and authorities. But everything is designed to maintain the natural freedom and equality of men. In regard to the former, every one is free to engage in whatever honorable occupation he wishes, and to go wherever he wishes without having to produce a passport, and without being detained by customs officials. Only the real criminal is threatened with punishment by the law.

...An ugly contrast to this freedom and equality which justly constitute the pride of the Americans is the infamous *slave traffic*, which still is tolerated and flourishes in the southern states. Here is found a race of black people, ... who are called *negroes*, and who are brought here from Africa, which is their native country; these poor beings are bought and sold in the southern states just as other property, and are driven to work with a whip or scourge like horses or oxen. If a master whips his slave to death or shoots him dead in a rage, he is not looked upon as a murderer. The children born of a negress are slaves from birth, even if their father is a white man. ... The northern states try in every Congress to get the slave trade abolished in the southern states; but as the latter always oppose these efforts, and appeal to their right to settle their internal affairs themselves, there will in all likelihood soon come either a separation between the northern and southern states, or else bloody civil disputes.

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For what kind of people is it advisable to emigrate to America, and for whom is it not advisable? -- Caution against unreasonable expectations.

From all that I have experienced so far, the industrious Norwegian peasant or mechanic, as well as the good tradesman, can soon earn enough in America to provide sufficient means for a livelihood. I have already spoken of the price of government land, and I shall merely add that I know several bachelors who have saved two hundred dollars clear within a year's time by ordinary labor. Blacksmiths are everywhere in demand. A smith who understands his trade can feel assured that his neighbors, in whatever place he settles, will help him build his house and smithy, and will even lend him enough money to furnish himself with bellows and tools. ... An itinerant trader who is quick and of good habits can become a rich man within a short time, but he must not be afraid to undergo hardships and to camp outdoors night after night. Servant girls can easily secure work, and find very good places. Women are respected and honored far more than is the case among common people in Norway.

...Those desiring to emigrate to America should also carefully consider whether they have sufficient means to pay their expenses. I would not advise any one to go who, when he lands upon American soil, does not have at least several dollars in his possession. I believe that young people who have enough to pay their passage from New York to Rochester are in a position to emigrate. That will require about four or five dollars. Those who have large families should have enough left to pay their way as far as Illinois, where land is cheap and where plenty of work can be secured at high wages. Expenses for each adult from Norway to Illinois must be figured at about sixty dollars, in addition to expenses for board across the sea. If one goes on Norwegian ships the cost of the passage is just as much for children as for adults. It can be estimated, therefore, that forty-five dollars in all will be spent for children between two and twelve years old, and thirty dollars for children under two years. Those who do not have enough to pay their way can hire out to some one who is in better circumstances, and pledge themselves to work for him, for example, three years for fifty dollars a year. This will be to the mutual advantage of both parties. ... An employee who has come to America through such an arrangement ought to compare his pay and prospects here with what he had in Norway, and thereby be induced to fulfill the engagement upon which he has entered, for he is held by no other bond than that of his own integrity.

...Many go to America with such unreasonable expectations and ideas that they necessarily must find themselves disappointed. The first stumbling block, ignorance of the language, is enough to dishearten many at once. The person who neither can nor will work must never expect that riches and luxurious living will be open to him. No, in America one gets nothing without work; but it is trite that by work one can expect some day to achieve better circumstances. Many of the newcomers have been shocked by the wretched huts which are the first dwellings of the settlers; but those good people should consider that when they move into an uncultivated land they can not find houses ready for them. Before the land has been put into such shape that it can support a man, it is hardly wise to put money into costly dwelling-houses.