

History of Houston County Minnesota

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Spring Grove Township (Riceford & Newhouse)

The township of Spring Grove lies in the extreme southwestern corner of the county, and is identical with a government township. It has an area of about 23,000 acres. On the north is the township of Black Rammer, on the east is Wilmington, the State of Iowa is on the south, and Fillmore County on the west. The township was at first known as Norwegian Ridge, the name being especially applied to the whole elevated region which extends over into what is now Wilmington. When first organized Spring Grove was much larger than it is now, taking in a part of what has since been organized as Black Hammer. There are three villages, Riceford, on a creek of the same name, in section 6, and Spring Grove and Newhouse, on the C. M. & St. P. Railway (formerly the Narrow Gauge) in section 11.

The only stream of any importance is Riceford Creek, which courses along the western border of the township near the county line, running north, to finally unite with Root River. This township, taken in connection with its neighbor, Wilmington, has some special geological features worthy of notice. Most of the other townships in the county are gorged with deep valleys and ravines, cut in alternating strata of sandstone and limestone, below the general level of the country; but here, the prevailing features in the county are reversed, as a connecting series of elevated ridges forming broad uplands rear their water-sheds nearly 200 feet above the surrounding prairie country. One common ridge a mile or more in width extends in a diagonal direction from the southwestern part of Spring Grove to the northern part of Wilmington. From this main upland extending in various directions, numerous spurs project, some of them for two miles, with sequestered valleys between. The widest of these are two miles across. As mentioned in the geological account of the county, these peculiarities are not due to upheavals but to erosion.

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In several places from elevated points some remarkably fine views are obtained. Looking northward, nearly the whole of Black Hammer township is spread out like a panorama, to the west is a depression, with an elevation far beyond. The prospect looking south is only interrupted by the highlands beyond the Iowa River, and whichever way one turns there is hill and vale, prairie and woodland, with dwellings dotting the landscape, and an occasional spire above the intervening groves pointing to the blue vault above.

This region is called the hill country, and embraces ten miles or so from east to west, and six or seven from north to south. The surface drainage is in all directions, and the top of the watershed is remarkably level, and carries the railroad bed with little grading. The slope either way is quite gradual, and what may be deemed remarkable, the whole region is overspread with a rich clay loam, and being mostly open country is occupied by numerous farms, some of them on an extended scale. The dwellings are usually in sheltered nooks among the groves or below the brow of a protecting declivity.

The village of Spring Grove is quite pleasantly situated on a high part of the main ridge, on nearly level ground, on the southern part of the watershed. The buildings are well set apart and are neat and substantial.

Along the table lands the early settlers found beautiful groves of oak, without underbrush, interspersed with maple and black walnut, and in the shady aisles of these overhanging boughs, clear and sparkling springs bubbled up in the most inviting places, urging the seeker after a home to make this spot his abiding place. Much of the timber is now gone, but enough remains to give a good idea of the delightful prospect that greeted the early explorers.

The soil is of a clayey nature, merging into dark rich loam in the lowlands, but somewhat lighter along the bluffs, which are well adapted to grazing. In the southern part of the town, toward the west, the numerous springs form rivulets going south, to finally reach the Upper Iowa River in the State of Iowa.

An abundance of limestone is found along the ridges cropping out at convenient points, and an occasional kiln is burned with satisfactory results, although on account of the want of a steady market this is in no respect an organized industry. This lime rock also furnishes most excellent building material, and has been extensively used for this purpose.

The first actual settler in Spring Grove township was James Smith, a printer from Pennsylvania, and then a bachelor, who arrived in the spring of 1852 and took a claim of 320 acres in section 11. In the fall he went to Lansing, Ia, to work at his trade, but returned in the spring of 1853. After his marriage to Elizabeth Lundrum, of Illinois, a Sunday-school was started at his house, and was maintained for some time. Mr. Smith also secured the establishment of the post office, giving the

place the appropriate name of Spring Grove, which it still retains. His house was the first stopping place in town. At an early date he was appointed a justice of the peace, and was a member of the county commissioners court while Minnesota was still a Territory.

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Arthur B. Bow, of Vermont, who arrived about the same time, or perhaps a little earlier than Smith, built a cabin just west of Smith's and staked out large quantities of desirable land with a view to speculation. After a while, however, he sold out to Embrick Knudson and went further west.

Mr. Knudson, who was a native of Norway, had come to Spring Grove about 1854. He assisted in the organization of the township, and was for several years postmaster and town treasurer. About 1863 he also moved farther west, finally settling in Stearns county, where he died in 1880. One of his children became Mrs. Nels Bersen of Fillmore county.

John Vale, a pioneer from Iowa, came here in the winter of 1851-52 and ran a line around immense tracts of choice land, also cutting and splitting some rails. In the following spring or summer, however, he moved away, after selling his rails, and such rights as he acquired, to Knud Knudson, Knieland and Fingal Asleson, who remained here as permanent settlers. Anthony Huyck, of Caledonia, came to Spring Grove soon after Mr. Smith, and, having ox teams, made some valuable improvements. Many other settlers arrived during the summer of 1852.. Most of these were making a general western progress on the lookout for a desirable location, and, finding here all that they desired, took up claims and remained.

During the first summer, when this region was attracting so much attention, there was quite an immigration of enterprising young men and women from Norway, some of whom had halted for a brief while in Wisconsin. A number of these men rose to positions among the leading farmers, businessmen and politicians of the county, and in most cases their descendants are still living here. Among the more prominent of these were the following: Peter Johnson Lommen, section 3; Even Evenson Haime, section 9; H. Narveson, section 10; Fingal Asleson and Knud Knudson, section 10; Ole and Tolef Amundson Berg, section 16; Torger Johnson Tenneland, section 15. Knud Olson Berg located on section 10, but after his death a number of years later his family removed. Among other Norwegians who arrived in 1852, or within a year or two afterwards, were:

Gudbrand M. Rund, Levor and George Timanson, Gilbert Nielson, Myrha and Hans Nielson and Ole C. Steneroder. The locality in which these men settled was known as Norwegian Ridge, and on the organization of the county it became the name of the voting precinct. One settler who came here, named Ole Oleson, was known far and near as "Big Ole," from his extraordinary size. In a year, however, he removed to Iowa.

In the southern part of the township the earliest settlers were Ole O. Ulen, on section 26; John Anderson Kroshus, section 26; Ole Christopherson, sections 34 and 35, with others. The locality is known as "the valley," and contains some of the finest cultivated farms in the county;

The southwestern part of the township, lying south and east of Riceford Creek, is mostly prairie, and much of the land was bought at the early land sale by speculators. At a later period it was settled largely by Americans. Among these was W. Banning, who, in the fall of 1852, built a grist mill on the creek in section 19. Though a small and primitive affair, and slow in its operation, it was very useful to the settlers, as it was the first (Page 176) mill in this region, and was regarded with wonder and admiration by the Indians, who freely patronized it. At first it was a mere corn cracker, but after a while the stones got a little nearer together, and the product was dignified by the name of meal. An earlier description of this mill, published some twenty-seven years ago, may prove of interest to present day residents of the county. It was as follows: "A dam was thrown across the river, and a head thus obtained. Below the dam was a box to receive a wheel with a vertical shaft, the wheel having buckets radiating like the spokes of a wagon wheel, placed at the bottom. The water was admitted on one side, and following the wheel three-quarters round, would make its escape. It was a wooden affair and the crudest kind of a turbine wheel, with no attempt at confining the water and securing the reaction, as is now done. The running stone was connected directly with the wheel shaft, the stones rested on a strong hardwood frame, and literally stood out of doors, with no covering except in case of rain, when a few boards would be called into requisition to cover the hopper. The great trouble in the whole business was to feed it slow enough for its capacity. It is said a whole handful of corn inadvertently dropped in at once would bring everything up standing."

Among the numerous yarns told at the expense of this mill is that of a man who, having seen his grist deposited in the hopper, went around below to see the meal come through, and after waiting a reasonable time and there was no "giving down," an investigation was made, when a mouse was discovered catching up each kernel as it appeared, and biting out the eye, when it would throw the rest away. This intruder being driven off, the man in due time got his grist through. But, after all, the efforts of Mr. Banning are not to be despised, considering the obstacles he had to overcome, the long distance over a bridgeless and roadless country he had to convey the stones and the tools and material he required for his undertaking, which, under the circumstances, was a most formidable one. All this, moreover, was accomplished with very small financial resources. The stones of this mill, which measured twenty-six inches in diameter, subsequently came into possession of V. T. Beeby, of Riceford, and the site of the mill was occupied by E. Nelson. In June, 1853, Mr. Banning sold the mill property, including a considerable tract of land that he had staked off, to W. H. Rowe, who improved the mill and fixed a bolting-box, to be revolved by hand, so that he had a flouring mill. He also rigged up a saw for his own use.

The early settlers, though to us they appear surrounded by a halo of romance, in their opportunities for obtaining large tracts of rich land for nothing, or a merely nominal price, in the abundance of game in the forests, and of fish in the streams, in reality had a very hard time of it. The land required a large expenditure of labor before it became productive, and only primitive agricultural tools were available for the purpose, the elaborate and effective machinery now in use being then unknown. There were no luxuries, what we now regard as the ordinary comforts of life were rare, and even actual necessities were hard to obtain, especially in the winter, when most of the settlers in this region had to go to Turkey River, in Iowa, to (*Page 177*) mill. Later a mill was built near Dorchester, but that was still quite a journey. As an instance of the work and hardship required to keep soul and body together, on one occasion Knud Olson took what he could comfortably carry on his back in a sack, and started for the mill below Dorchester, and it was more than a week before he succeeded in getting home. The deep snow and cold weather prevented many from going to mill at all. The Banning mill, already referred to, would on such occasions be immovably frozen up, and the settlers had to grind their corn in a coffee mill, or pound it up in a mortar.

The first birth in Spring Grove township was that of a daughter of Tolef Amundson Bergh, Mary J., who was born Oct. 29, 1852, but who died in the same year, November 29. The burial was on the farm, about three miles west of the village. On Dec. 12, 1852, occurred the birth of John P. Lommen, son of Peter Johnson Lommen. Mr. Lommen is now in Caledonia. The first marriage, it is thought, was that of Hans Nielson Myhra and Mary B. Anderson, in February 1854.

During the years 1854 and 1855 a further influx of settlers took place, and they continued to arrive in considerable numbers for several years. Farms were opened in all parts of the town and the early corners were already beginning to reap some of the rewards for their arduous toil. Larger buildings were erected, schools and churches established, and a general air of thrift and enterprise began to be visible where so recently all was wild and uninhabited, except by the wild beasts of the forest and prairie.

The cultivation of wheat received the attention of the pioneer farmers at an early day, and at first the yield was beyond their expectations, being sometimes from twenty to thirty bushels to the acre, but various untoward circumstances, atmospheric and other causes, produced frequent failures, the crop getting down sometimes to ten bushels or less per acre. From the crude and experimental efforts of early years have been developed more systematic and scientific methods of farming, and the beneficial results are already apparent. Corn, and its remunerative product, pork, is largely raised, and in spite of occasional mortality among the hogs, has been, since the introduction of the railroad, a potent source of wealth to the farmer, rivaling the butter and cheese business, which in these days has attained such large proportions.

The early citizens of the township labored under the disadvantage of being so far removed from market as to render farming or other industries, less profitable than in more favored localities. Therefore, when the Chicago, Clinton, Dubuque & Minnesota Railroad Company made the preliminary survey, and submitted the proposition to build a narrow gauge line if the requisite encouragement was extended, the town voted a bonus of \$12,000, payable within twenty years, the bonds to bear interest at the rate of seven per cent, the town to elect when, within the specified time, the payment should be made. Under the conditions of the contract between the company and the town, two stations were established, one at Newhouse and the other at Spring Grove, and after the road was built farmers and merchants profited by the vastly increased facilities for transportation.

Of the early precinct and town meetings many interesting tales are (*Page 178*) told. At the first county seat election, which took place in Smith's Grove, just east of the present village, the whole town came out, and as Caledonia was seeking the honor, Samuel McPhail, the original proprietor of the village plat, was on hand at this the most thickly settled place hereabouts, and, as told by old settlers, he furnished eggs which were boiled in kettles on the ground, and he also had butter to eat on them, which was more or less a novelty at even the regular meals at that time. If there was any doubt as to which way the question would be decided, the butter and eggs settled it. It was the most exciting election ever held in town.

The first steps leading to the founding and subsequent development of this thriving village have already been mentioned, as have also the names of the principal actors. It required no prophetic vision to foresee the ultimate concentration of capital and energy which has placed this naturally favored spot among the brightest and most prosperous of inland towns, and given to the surrounding country a trading point excelled by none in southern Minnesota. When the settlement of the region west of this led to the founding of the village of Preston, in Fillmore county, this became a halfway station between that place and Brownsville, where the land office was then located. Mr. Smith's house then became a popular stopping place for travelers, and for some time was the only one at this point.

Mr. Smith's house and store, which was not large, was situated on the old Brownsville road, on the eastern part of section 11, just east of the present village. In 1855, or thereabouts, Mr. Smith sold his stock of goods to William Hinkley, who commenced the erection of a store about a half mile west of Smith's place, and soon moved in a stock of goods. The land he bought of Embrick Knudson.

In addition to groceries and general merchandise, Mr. Hinkley was a dealer in wines and liquors, which in those primitive days meant "whiskey straight." His supply in this line was kept in a little addition to the store, in which he slept, and the weary traveler passing the store any time in the night would gently tap on the window, pass in his bottle or jug with the "equivalent," and Hinkley would fill it without getting out of bed, and hand it back to the grateful customer. After a while Mr. Hinkley removed to Riceford.

About this time William Fleming bought forty acres of land of Embrick Benson, paying him \$100 for it, which was 100 per cent above the government price. This particular forty is the land on which most of the village now stands. Mr. Fleming was a noted character in his way, keenly appreciating practical jokes and stories. He erected a large log building, his neighbors all turning out to assist, making the occasion a holiday, and this house became a famous one in its day. It was the half-way house on the road to Brownsville, and a general stopping-place where dances and parties were gathered. The house was always full, and it required considerable skill to stow away the extra guests always arriving. Men used to be required to sleep across the foot of the bed where there were two or three pointing in the other direction. At one time there were several gentlemen from St. Paul, and to make a bed wide enough to hold them, an annex was made up of a row of chairs in front, and as they proved (Page 179) to be too low a lot of pumpkins were placed on them and they were thus brought up to the grade. After these men left they called it the 'Pumpkin Tavern,' and so Fleming took the hint and he used to take a pumpkin and making a jack-o-lantern of it, place a candle inside and put it on a pole in front of his house as a sign, and of course no one could resist the temptation in those days to call in and take a drink. For many years it was known far and near as the "Pumpkin Tavern," and Mr. Fleming conducted it until his death long years ago. It is said that he was the first adult American to be buried in the town.

After some time Mr. Smith had his farm platted and laid out as a village site, but it was never so occupied, and was finally sold to Robert McCormick, who kept a public house,

The next notable move here was the erection of a building for a saloon, by Nick and Jesse Demering, of Caledonia, near the Fleming House but it was soon abandoned as a saloon, and in 1857, Mr. Badger, of Madison, Wis., put in a large and choice stock of general merchandise. This building was on the present site of Fladager Brothers' big store. The business went on for a few months only, when the building was mysteriously burned, which was a serious loss, as the stock of goods was remarkably extensive for so new a country.

Soon after this a firm by the name of Tarrt & Smith came from Dorchester, Ia., brought a stock of goods and displayed them in a building that is still standing in the east part of the section. After a few years they folded their tents and silently returned from whence they came. The historic forty already alluded to had passed into the hands of Peter Halvorson, who sold it to Mons Fladager in February, 1860, when he came here and identified himself with the interests of the village and town. At first he occupied the old log building formerly used as a tavern by Fleming. In 1864 he erected a neat frame building on the site of the Badger place, and occupied it until November, 1881, when, having completed a fine brick building, he removed his goods thereto. Mr. Fladager became one of the leading merchants in the village, and in time the oldest trader. In fact, the only families within the present village limits when he came were those of Mr. Hinkley and Robert McCormick. The business that is founded is now conducted by his sons, Henry and Peter.

The location of the village is exceptionally favorable, occupying level or gently sloping ground on the table before mentioned, supplied with an abundance of lime rock and brick clay for building purposes, while the rich agricultural country surrounding renders it one of the best for trade in this part of the State. A part of the original grove still remains on the north, which, besides adding to the natural beauty of the place, shields it from the cold northern blasts of winter.

Newhouse is the name of a little place on the line of the railroad, which is quite a shipping point for stock and other farm products. It is located in the southeast of the northwest quarter of section 29, and was at first called Newport, but as it might be confounded with some of the numerous Newports in other States, the name was soon changed to Newhouse, in honor of one of the old families on whose land it was established on the (Page 180) completion of the road in 1879. A grain elevator was built by the railroad company, and a store was soon after opened by Johnson & Halverson, which, however, was not long continued. Tollefson & Co., merchants at the then newly established station of Mabel, opened a branch store here, but soon withdrew to their principal trading place. The first postmaster was Ole B. Nelson, who kept the office at the station.

Riceford is located on Riceford Creek, and lies mostly in the southwest quarter of section 6. It is regularly laid out and has the mill pond on the south, from which the river curves around toward the north and skirts the village on the east. The streets running east and west, beginning at the north side of the village, are Richland, Elm, Mill and Vine. The other way, beginning at the river, there are Main, Second, Third, and Fourth. None of these streets are very thickly settled except Main street, and that cannot be said to be crowded. Before the town was located here, some idea was entertained of establishing it on the flat about half a mile north of where it was finally placed. This would have been near the Crystal flouring mill, but this project was finally abandoned. The village was named in 1856 in honor of Hon. H. M. Rice, of St. Paul, who visited the locality about that time, and following an Indian trail, forded the river about twenty rods from the Crystal mill, and from this circumstance the village was called Riceford.

The site of the village was first taken from the government by William D. Van Doren, in the fall of 1854, and he put up a log shelter. He was originally from New York State, and after stopping a while in Michigan, came on to this region and spent a few weeks about three miles south of here, at the residence of W. H. Rowe and then came to this place and established himself. The next year, 1855, he sold out to Job Brown, the original pioneer, who seems to have been on the alert for eligible points for town sites. Among the first to be attracted to this then promising place were S. W. Wilcoz, J. Shaw, Edward Coffee, J. Muns, Charles H. Brown, John Watson, A. Mosher, and Rollin Dunbar, each of whom erected a dwelling, and some of them other buildings. Just south of the above mentioned claims, on section 7, Orin Chatfield had

taken some land, and in 1856 he commenced the erection of a sawmill, building a dam that created a fall giving him sufficient power for the purpose.

After being in operation for ten years this mill was bought by the flour-mill company and demolished, its material going into their flume and dam.

Soon after Mr. Brown came here he opened a store in a small building just north of the mill. In 1858 he erected a frame building opposite the mill, and soon put his goods in that. It was on or near the site of the first Van Doren habitation. After he sold out there were many changes in the personnel of the trade here. At one time there were two stores with general merchandise, two hotels, two mills, two blacksmith shops, two shoe shops, a foundry, wagon shop, and other concomitants of a thriving village. Those were palmy days for Riceford, for then it caught business (*Page 181*) from the north and from the south, and the traveler from the east or west was put under contribution for refreshment and sleep. The town was a business center. The stores were busy, the hotels were full, the mills were crowded with grain, the shops occupied with business and, to use a modern phrase, everything was "booming." At first several failures of the wheat crop and then the building of the railroad, which inaugurated a new order of things, kept the citizens from realizing their high ambitions

A village which at one time was an ambitious suburb of Riceford, called South Riceford, was laid out on the sidehill, south of the creek. It had its Main street, its Water street, and its Line street, on the northern border, but it was finally abandoned and the dwelling removed or torn down. In 1856 Job Brown began the erection of a flouring mill on his property here, the first loads of tools and materials being brought here by John Muns. The dam was placed about forty rods below the sawmill. The building was of stone, 24 by 40 feet, two and one-half stories high, with two run of stones, one of them being small. The fall secured was nine feet, and a turbine wheel was put in. The machinery at this day would not be considered very adequate, although the mill had a daily capacity of 250 bushels. It was overrun with grists to grind, and was often hilled with sacks awaiting their turn, which would not come around for weeks perhaps. It had but a single bolting cloth, but did a very profitable business.

The Crystal Mill was erected in the southwest quarter of section 6, on a forty acre lot purchased by W. H. Rowe of Dexter & Ripley, in the winter of 1869, and by him conveyed to his daughter, Mrs. S. M. Beeby, wife of V. T. Beeby. In April, 1869, the improvements began with the construction of a dam and the building of the mill. Two run of stones were put in, and a turbine wheel, and on Nov. 9, 1869, it went into operations. The dam, however, proved too weak to resist the spring flood, and in March 1870 was washed away. This accident recurred each season, after each rebuilding, for some years. This proving too monotonous and expensive to the owners, in 1876 a substantial stone dam was constructed, which proved capable of resisting the flood.

In the year 1869 Mr. D. A. Sherwood erected a building 18 by 30 feet, put in a cupola furnace and began iron casting. For a time he did a very good business, amounting to three or four thousand dollars a year.