

Biography of Ole Bolkan
--Mary Brosten

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The contents that follow express but in a meagre way what this worthy citizen has endured, has accomplished, and has acquired during his stay in our state, North Dakota.

Mr. Ole Bolkan was born on January 18th, 1849, in Stordalen, Northern Tronhjem, Norway. His mother's name was Annie Myr, his grandmother's on the mother's side was also Annie Myr, but the grandfather's name has been forgotten. Mr. Bolkan's father's name was Peter Bolkan. His grandfather's name on the father's side was Christopher Bolkan and his grandmother's name was Mollie Bolken.

Mr. Bolkan's father hearing glowing reports of America about what had been accomplished and might be accomplished, decided that the family could better itself by taking passage for this glorious country. Hardships were endured in Norway also, therefore Mr. Bolkan together with his father, his mother, and his three brothers, Christopher, Martin, and Gustav, and his sister, Anna Petrins, sailed for the United States in 1866. The whole family settled in Orfordville, Wisconsin, and lived there for seven years. Thinking they could better themselves, the family moved to Iowa, and there they bought land in Worth County, Northwood, Iowa.

Mr. Bolkan received interesting reports about North Dakota through his brother, Christopher, who came here in April, 1880. Being enthused over this information of North Dakota he decided to come out and get land. On October 1st, 1880, Mr. Bolkan came to Fargo having driven there with horses, two colts and one older team and in a covered wagon. He had then driven from Davenport, Iowa, covering a distance of 700 miles. Finding employment he hired out at the Dalrymple ranch near Casselton for \$70.00 per month with 2 horses and himself and worked there until it froze up. On November 14th he then started out for this locality where his brother, Christopher, already was living. After some debating to which piece of land to "squat" on he settled in Section two on the northeast quarter as his homestead, and the southwest quarter he took as his tree claim. This was in Sverdrup township 145, Range 58 west. He did no building that fall but only cut logs for a cabin. He left here for Valley City again driving with a team and wagon where on December 24th he went by rail to Iowa where he was married on New Year's Day to Mary Everts of that state. She was only 19 years old when married and certainly it took a brave heart to go out in the wilderness knowing nothing of what the future had in store, but going blindly into hardships and difficulties, but hers was an unflinching nature and she showed no hesitation in her undertaking. Mr. Bolkan came back in the spring by railroad to Valley City, Mrs. Bolkan remaining with his parents for

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At this time the mail for this locality was taken from Valley City which was the nearest railroad station, by a mail carrier with team and buggy to the Lee Post Office 15 miles from Mr. Bolkan's claim, so it was not uncommon for the pioneers not to get mail for weeks and weeks at a time. Therefore Mr. Bolkan did not receive the letter from Mrs. Bolkan telling she would arrive at a certain time. Bewildered and alarmed fearing there might have been an accident, yet determined to go on, she acted on her own accord, and hired a man to take her to Mr. Bolkan's claim. Traveling then was by means of a mere trail, not a highway, so it is little wonder when they approached a fork in the road they knew not which one to take. To make matters worse the driver decided he must return home. After due deliberation, Mrs. Bolkan chose one trail which eventually took her to an acquaintance of Mr. Bolkan's who directed her accordingly. Imagine Mr. Bolkan's surprise and joy when coming in the evening from haying and finding her already established in their little log cabin.

Mr. Bolkan sold his older horses shortly after coming here, so he had only the younger team left together with one breaking plow brought from Iowa. With this equipment he broke the land for his first year's crop which he seeded by hand. He broke land for 10 acres of oats and 5 acres of wheat which when harvest came he cut with a cradle. When we realize that one able man could lay only four acres of wheat in one long day in long even swaths, we can well appreciate what this undertaking meant to cut a total of 15 acres. The grain had to be bound by hand, which he did by twisting ends of grain together making a temporary knot, sufficiently strong to hold a good amount of grain, afterwards placing it in shocks and after that it was stacked as was the custom in Norway.

Fortunately a stranger came into the vicinity with a little threshing rig, crossing at Sibley's Crossing and threshing any grain pioneers might have. Although Mr. Bolkan was not at home at this time, he having gone out for fall's work, yet his wife managed it all very ably, and as a result he was 170 bushels of oats and 70 bushels of wheat richer. None of this grain was sold for the wheat was kept both for seed and to be ground into flour, the oats had not been threshed, but was fed to the horses in the bundle form. The bundles having to be chopped out of the snow and ice with an ax. His wheat he took to Valley City to be ground into flour. Cash charges were not common then, but the millers would take every eighth bushel of wheat for payment. Surely this custom must have been brought here by our immigrants, for it is again the old country method.

There was also a mill at Portland North Dakota, where Mr. Bolkan had wheat ground, but he said it was a question as to which one managed to give him back the least, in other words, who put the most in his own bin. The winter of 1880-1881 saw a very heavy snow which remained until April 14th before any melting took place. The snow was so hard that it carried even the weight of horses. The winter of 1881-1882 saw an early snow but it left again before Christmas.

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In 1882 he broke 20 acres on his own land and by breaking land for other people he managed to earn extra money, not otherwise to be had. In the spring of 1882 he bought a seeder. This he hauled from Hope which was merely a railroad station then, the railroad having come there in 1882.

In the summer of the same year he also bought a binder in company with a neighbor. This machinery together with a harrow gave his sufficient working tools for some time. He gradually broke more land and expanded in general so it seemed but a matter of a few years until he had his land under cultivation.

There were four children born into the family, two who are living. Gustavus, the oldest, living now on Mr. Bolkan's homestead, and Angeline, Mrs. Olaf Syverson, living in the valley near the Sheyenne River about 2 miles from the homestead.

Mr. Bolkan did not experience the thrill of seeing "wild" Indians, but he did see some who traveled back and forth digging snake root, which they sold for medicinal purposes, also he saw some who canoed down the Sheyenne, whose waters were much larger than now. They traveled between Standing Rock, South Dakota, to Devils Lake, North Dakota, which was a reservation where the government had given them land. However, he did see the results of an interesting happening. Two Indian tribes who were enemies had been out hunting. They met and immediately a battle followed. Twenty-eight graves mark the place where this happened. These graves were very evident when Mr. Bolkan first came here. He personally counted the mounds, also a half breed who used to be a trapper, not taking active part in the battle but had been stationed in a ravine tending horses while the fight was on, told him.

It is Mr. Bolkan's belief that we can find Indian graves on top of the hills all along the Sheyenne River. He has seen parts of skeletons brought to Cooperstown found on Martin Ueland's farm, also on the Aarestad farm. Indians brought remains all the way from the Red River Valley to be buried here. Their belief was that the body would come to life again. This vicinity was considered a very fine hunting ground, therefore they buried their dead here, where upon awakening they should be happily surrounded, and dear to the heart of the Indians, hunting would be possible at once.

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This particular man decided to improve upon the method. One morning as the farmers were coming into town with their loads, this man also was in line. When it came his turn to weigh his load, it was found that he had 3 tons, while the others had scarcely one. They all were very much surprised to hear this, wondering how it could be possible. However, he himself let the cat out of the bag later on and they found out he had soaked the bones in water.

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Of all the hardships and obstacles met with in Mr. Bolkan's pioneer days the dry years from 1883 to 1888 were the most difficult. Finally in 1888 a bumper crop seemed to be coming again, the future seemed bright, and hopes for buying more land which would eventually bring returns were experienced especially, so when he had the opportunity of buying land adjoining his own for \$10.00 per acre and pay at any time convenient, when all was so encouraging a heavy frost came killing every spear of wheat he had so he did not harvest a kernel. In those days wheat was everything. To make matters worse, one of his two horses "committed suicide" by hanging himself in his halter while he and the other horse were helping the neighbors. All the rest put together did not begin to compare with this disappointment. Then he said it seemed he just had to give up, but somehow he overcame even this, he again mastered it and from then on times were not so bad.

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PIONEER BIOGRAPHY

Ole Bolkan by Mary Brosten

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It is Mr. Bolkan's belief that we can find Indian graves on top of the hills all along the Sheyenne River. He has seen parts of skeletons brought to Cooperstown found on Martin Ueland's farm, also on the Aarestad farm. Indians brought remains all the way from the Red River Valley to be buried here. Their belief was that the body would come to life again. This vicinity was considered a very fine hunting ground, therefore they buried their dead here, where upon awakening they should be happily surrounded, and dear to the heart of the Indians, hunting would be possible at once.

Much to his disappointment he did not see the buffalo herds, so much spoken of, but he said that further west in the state as well as in Montana they were plentiful, so much so that people were killing them merely for their hides.

An industry in which almost every pioneer assisted, including Mr. Bolkan, was picking buffalo bones, which they then sold to agents in Cooperstown and they in turn shipped them to eastern markets to be ground up for fertilizer, and to be used in sugar refining. This proved very profitable to many, as the bones were very abundant, the entire skeleton being found frequently. Mr. Bolkan did not pick a great deal but received \$8.00 per ton for what he sold. He spoke of one, Mr. Johnson, making a fortune for these days by merely picking buffalo bones. Mr. Bolkan told of a happening at this particular time which is interesting and which he knew was also picking bones. Unfortunately these bones were very dry and it took many many bones to make a ton.

This particular man decided to improve upon the method. One morning as the farmers were coming into town with their loads, this man also was in line. When it came his turn to weigh his load, it was found that he had 3 tons, while the others had scarcely one. They all were very much surprised to hear this, wondering how it could be possible.

Ole Bolkan (continued)

However, he himself let the cat out of the bag later on and they found out he had soaked the bones in water.

Sibley's trail which we all know after studying State History showed very plainly when Mr. Bolkan came here. Hauling provisions from Breckenridge to Devils Lake for the Indians were common and this trail was used. Sibley's crossing is about 18 miles south of Bolkan's claim. When he crossed here the first time he could not imagine what the high embankment of dirt was for but it was the breast works thrown up by Sibley's army when they camped there over night while on their way to fight the Indians along the Missouri.

Of all the hardships and obstacles met with in Mr. Bolkan's pioneer days the dry years from 1883 to 1888 were the most difficult. Finally in 1888 a bumper crop seemed to be coming again, the future seemed bright, and hopes for buying more land which would eventually bring returns were experienced especially, so when he had the opportunity of buying land adjoining his own for \$10.00 per acre and pay at any time convenient, when all was so encouraging a heavy frost came killing every spear of wheat he had so he did not harvest a kernel. In those days wheat was everything. To make matters worse, one of his two horses "committed suicide" by hanging himself in his halter while he and the other horse were helping the neighbors. All the rest put together did not being to compare with this disappointment. Then he said it seemed he just had to give up, but somehow he overcame even this, he again mastered it and from then on times were not so bad.

Mr. Bolkan's stories were all so interesting I wish I might tell them all but it would make this too lengthy.

However, gradually times adjusted themselves and slowly improvements were made in machinery. Crops were fair so eventually they could build a better home and barn.

Low prices for grain, hail, rust, droughts, and killing frosts have all been obstacles met with in Mr. Bolkan's life, but he has been brave and kept on.

Unfortunately Mrs. Bolkan passed away in 1914 and since that time Mr. Bolkan has done little farming. He is now making his home with his daughter.

Mr. Bolkan was interested in improvements and education. He was the first member of the School Board of his district.

When seeing and talking with Mr. Bolkan one can very easily see the grim determination which must have been his, but which has now left him and instead he is enjoying life and nature in a quiet contented way for which he found little time while pioneering.

--Mary Brosten