

## A Pioneer Relates

Bib: Minneapolis Tidende

June 16, 1932

(Translated Jan. 17, 1931 from the Norse language by Mr. I.A.Kampen former Co. Supt. of Schools, Griggs Co.)

John E. Vangen, Binford, N. Dak., called at the "Tidende's" office while attending the church meeting in Minneapolis. Vangen is one of the sturdy pioneers at Lake Sibley, where he has resided since 1863.

Vangen has much of interest to relate. It was in 1871 he left his birthplace Hauesetera, Ullensaker, Norway, and came to America. He crossed the Atlantic on the sailing vessel "Nordlyset". It took 14 weeks to cross the ocean. The worst of it was that the food and drinking water were running dangerously low. For 14 days they had little or nothing to drink and eat; barely enough to keep alive. Finally they landed at Newfoundland where they secured provisions and also tobacco. It was the sweet English tobacco which tasted so good that even the women liked to try it.

The first year and a half he spent in Minneapolis, then moved to Northfield, Minn. In 1863 he went to Dakota and came to Lake Sibley. The soil appeared fertile and there was plenty of water and grass--in face the land looked good to him and he took a homestead and settled down. But it was rather dreary to begin with, far between the neighbors. The nearest white neighbor to the west was 18 miles away. To make up for it, there were crowds of Indians who trekt from the Devils Lake reservation to the reservation at Sisseton. On the trips the Indians generally remained at Lake Sibley several days, often an entire week. There could be up to 30 Indian tents at a time. But the Indians were honest and peaceable. From Vangen they often borrowed one thing and another, but they always returned what they borrowed. Once he gave them something they did not use. He had just butchered and the Indians came and begged for some meat. Vangen gave them a large piece, and he thought they needed salt with it so he threw in a bag of it. The salt he later discovered left untouched. Evidently salt was not a part of their recipe for cooking.

Lake Sibley is a historic place, and several things could be discovered around the lake. The lake is named after the well known Minnesota governor and general in the Indian War, Henry H. Sibley, and here he built camp Atchison, July 8, 1863. At that time there were 4,000 men assembled and they had in the course of one day dug many long trenches and fully prepared to battle the Indians. Most of these trenches was on land belonging to Vangen, but could not be considered as of any special value as instruments for farming, and in course of time he leveled them out. But on the land of his neighbor, Nels Thune, there is still some remnants of the trenches. Thune has deeded the trenches to the North Dakota historical society and a fence has been put up around the place. On the highest point of Thune's land there is also a grave. For a long time people thought it was an Indian grave, but it has been established that a soldier of Sibley's force is buried there. George Brent is his name, and he lost his life over near the present village of Courtenay when his gun went off as he dismounted from his horse. The government has erected a monument over his grave.

Vangen and Thune found many things that reminded them of the Sibley expedition against the Indians. Vangen found a cook stove used by the soldiers. At that time he did not think that old scrap iron like that had any historic interest and he dumped it on a stone pile where pieces of the stove has since remained. He thought more of a sword which was picked up, and he gave the finder a dollar for it. He sold it later for five dollars and considered it a good bargain; but the buyer sold it again



receiving twenty-five dollars for it.

Big piles of buffalo skulls and bones lay scattered over the prairie. Indian arrows in the skulls testified to the manner of death of the animals. These bones were a source of income to the settlers. They picked them up and sold them for as high as 16 dollars a ton. It gave Vangen money to buy lumber for a frame house so he could move out of the sod shanty. However, the bone piles did not last long when the Indians found out that the bones were worth money. They swarmed everywhere over the prairie picking up the bones.

Vangen also has much else of interest to relate from pioneer days and later. It was not always easy to get along. There were few farm machines and implements in those days; no modern threshing machines, only those operated by horse power. Often it got late into the winter before threshing was finished. Vangen recalled one time he threshed for Gabriel Gabrielson, at New Year's in bitterly cold weather.

Lake Sibley later became a rendezvous for hunters. There was no fish in the lake, but an enormous lot of geese, and hunters came from far away places. From Chicago there were many and those Chicago nimrods were anything but dry. They brought large liquor kegs along and they drank firewater by the pailful. It was not difficult to secure roast duck. Vangen once fired a couple of shots into a flock of geese and then picked up 15 geese. However, the birds did considerable damage to the crops, especially in the fall of the year.

Much have changed around Lake Sibley since Vangen came there in 1883. His settler's sod shanty has long ago given way to a fine, modern two and one-half story dwelling and the virgin lands have become fields and meadows, the result of a long life of work and industry. Vangen, as most farmers, is wondering how things will turn out if better times and more equitable conditions for the farmers do not come soon. It was often difficult in the old days, but the farmers got along and forged ahead, while now many farmers lose everything which they have struggled to obtain these many years.

June, 1932



John P. Vangen

From interview by Hannah Lende

John Vangen was born April 19, 1858 in Olsaker, Prastjeld, Norway. In 1871 with his father, he left Norway for America. They went in a sailboat named the Nolissee. After fourteen weeks on the water they landed at Quebec. From Quebec they went to Milwaukee, and by train to St. Paul. Mr. Vangen's father got work in a sawmill, but there was no work for John. He walked to Minneapolis and got work for his board, for a married couple. His father soon after worked on the railroad. Mr. Vangen stayed at this place for one and one-half years.

In 1873 Mr. Vangen's mother came to Minneapolis with her five children. Very shortly after, she died from small pox. The rest of the family went to Goodhue County, Minn. in 1873, where each child was taken into some other family. John was old enough to earn a living and took to hiring out to farmers.

In 1875 John Vangen was confirmed, and learned to read. His father and he bought some land in Northfield, Minn. and farmed there for seven years. He was married in 1881 to Bertha Hanson in Fairbou, Minn. by Reverend Peterson.

Mr. Vangen then left the farm to his father and in 1884 with his brother, Carl, and Andrew Overby, started for Dakota territory. He took with him some stock, <sup>four</sup> two oxen, horses, and machinery. He came to Cooperstown and took a preemption on section <sup>20</sup> 13, Bryan township.

The first years here Mr. Vangen picked buffalo bones on the prairie and sold them in Cooperstown to the Lawrence Brog. and a Mr. Hagen, from \$8 to \$18 a ton. His sod house and



barn was built right away.

Mr. Vangen's first machinery was bought in Cooperstown in 1886. It consisted of a binder, \$215, a Hepgood plough, and breaker. He put in fourteen acres of wheat this year and was entirely hailed out. In 1888 his crop was froze out. The next year was dry and yielded nothing.

During these years, Mr. Vangen mowed hay and hauled it to Cooperstown, a distance of about thirteen miles, for \$3 a ton.

Mr. Vangen has been out in many snowstorms. Many a time he has walked all the way from Cooperstown to Binford, a distance of about thirteen miles, in severe snowstorms when it was 53 degrees below.

In 1891 there was a good crop, but Mr. Vangen hadn't seeded in very much due to the preceding dry years. He put in thirty-five acres and got 1000 bushels of wheat, some oats, and potatoes out of it. After 1891 the crops were pretty fair up to the recent years. Mr. Vangen kept on buying more land and when the hard times came, he lost it all.

Nine children were born to Mr. and Mrs. Vangen. April 14, 1937, Mrs. Vangen died. Mr. Vangen then left the farm and rented it out to his boys, and moved to Binford, where he now resides.