

From the Grisons to Wisconsin's prairie

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From the Grisons to Wisconsin's prairie

ON March 20, 1842, Bartholomew Ragatz, then 50 years of age, bade farewell to his native village of Tamins, located at the confluence of the Upper and Lower Rhine in the mountains of the Canton of Grisons.

He had relinquished his office as district mayor and sold his profitable sawmill and stately home. He hoped to find an even more prosperous life in the American Midwest, which had been opened only a decade before to outside settlement against stiff native resistance.

Ragatz was accompanied by his second wife Agnes and nine children between the age of 22 and four. The oldest son Christian, born in 1817, had already left a year earlier in order to report first-hand on the opportunities and to select a suitable place for the family.

The emigrants travelled in a large wagon which was packed with chests, boxes and bedding and was drawn by six horses.

"Our hearts sank," reported later the then nine-year-old son Oswald, "as we saw our beloved mountains, on which we had so often gone climbing, vanish in the misty blue distance."

The emigrant party followed the Rhine all the way to Strasbourg, whence it turned westward to Paris and then to Le Havre.

After nine days of waiting, the family boarded the three-master "Wood-Leid" which was on its second voyage to New Orleans and had room for 130 persons.

Since Ragatz disliked the crowded conditions of the steerage, his family was lodged in two rather spacious adjoining cabins, where they prepared their own food which they had carefully selected before embarkation.

Due to the captain's incompetence the ship almost perished between Cuba and Jamaica. Only the cook's last minute intervention – he cut the ropes of the sails with a kitchen knife – saved the day.

After 61 interminable days, the welcome cry "Land" was heard. A faint line of blue appeared on the horizon.

"Land, solid land again. Our future home, our land of dreams, which we would aid in building up." Soon New Orleans was reached. It appeared strange to the newcomers. It was hot, the food exotic and the mosquitoes bothersome.

The slave market was shocking, "where men and women, some in chains, were being sold like cattle." Ragatz angrily refused the offer of a slave servant girl.

The family gladly moved on upstream to St. Louis and then to Galena, where they hoped to find Christian. They had watched with fascination "the virgin forests, the grassy prairie lands, an occasional settler's home, and straggling villages", which lined the river banks.

However, Christian had already left Galena and asked the family to move on towards a new place called Sauk City. Thus they struck out into the wilderness and finally reached their destination after 109 days of arduous travel.

There was no time for rest. Some six miles west of the settlement 640 acres were staked out. "The ground was fertile, woods lay near at hand, and spring as well as creek water was easily accessible. Truly, this met heart's desire."

Near the place had been an Indian village, and some native families still lived on the border of the newly staked out domain. "As we did not plow up the land they lived on, there was no trouble. But in due course ... the men of the community marched against them and ordered them to clear out.

"The graves and cornhills, however, were soon levelled and all trace of Indian occupation was thus erased." Much land was ploughed up during that first summer and fall of 1842. Cattle, sheep and pigs were bought and

transferred to the new farm. A golden future seemed at hand.

But the first winter turned out to be unusually harsh. Most of the cattle perished during the many snowstorms and long periods of cold weather. Hungry wolves tested the endurance of the newcomers severely. "We simply dared not remove our clothing for a full month," reported Oswald. His father deeply regretted to have come "to this accursed land".

Spring arrived slowly. It was decided to grow grain instead of raising cattle. Much new ground was broken during the subsequent years until beautiful fields and lush crops contributed to the

happiness of these immigrants. The children attended a modest, but efficient frontier school.

John, Henry and Oswald turned to the ministry for some years. The former became an insurance broker and then a banker in Chicago, the latter a successful grower of Crawford peaches near St. Joseph, Michigan.

Father Bartholomew Ragatz died in 1859, the owner of a large and prosperous farm. This is just one example of the some 350,000 Swiss immigrants who through the years have sought a new life in the United States of America.

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