**Norwegian Letter Home**

Objectives

Students will: Read and analyze a primary source document and understand the importance and impact of immigrant letters on immigration to Wisconsin and the United States

**FIRST: Read the background article about Norwegian immigration to Wisconsin.**

**SECOND: Read an “American Letter” by Norwegian Immigrants. Read in a group of 2 or 3 out loud.**

**In pairs or groups of 3, answer the following – each of you will fill out your own sheet, but work together on the answers.**

1. What was the author’s ***intent*** for writing this letter? (intent: reason, purpose)
2. List and describe 4 positive comments the author makes about America and Americans.
3. What did the author recommend to a new immigrant coming to Wisconsin?
4. Give an example of how immigrants helped each other on the frontier.
5. List some important events that took place in the U.S. (or Wisconsin) that the author mentions. Why do you think he wrote about them?

Background

As in most of Europe in the mid-19th century, Norway's population had begun increasing at a rate faster than agricultural production could support. The problem reached crisis levels in non-industrialized Norway, where only 3 percent of the land was tillable.

The first Norwegian immigrants in Wisconsin arrived in 1839, settling on land near Lake Muskego in Waukesha County. The next year, land agents from the Muskego settlement identified a fertile region further west in eastern Dane County and known as the Koshkonong Prairie. Several Muskego settlers decided to relocate. In the 1840s several hundred Norwegians--including the authors of this document--decided to emigrate to the Koshkonong region, which included the communities of Deerfield, Cambridge, McFarland, Cottage Grove, and Stoughton. It eventually became the largest Norwegian-American community in the United States.

The main author of this document, Gunder Asmundson Bondal, (pronounced "Boon-doll") arrived in Wisconsin in 1848. He was 44 years old. Bondal emigrated with his wife, Kari Evensdatter, who also contributed to the letter. Bondal's younger brother, Aadne, had journeyed to the United States several years earlier and had worked as a lead miner near Dodgeville. Following his older brother's arrival, Aadne moved to Koshkonong, and the two men jointly purchased a 124-acre farm near Deerfield. Aadne also contributed to the letter.

In 1854, five years after arriving in Wisconsin, the Bondals prepared this letter for siblings in Fyrsedal, Norway. In the letter, Bondal described the trip to Wisconsin via the Erie Canal and Great Lakes; the process of adjusting to a new home and purchasing a farm; the cost of food and other essentials; wages for men and women; and the family's health, including his concerns about a cholera epidemic. Bondal also mentioned neighbors interested in journeying to the California gold fields.

In sharp contrast to Norway, Bondal seemed pleased to report that rigid class distinctions did not exist in the American West. On page 2 of the letter, Bondal noted that "one never sees an American with his hands at his sides as the foreigners do," a reference to the slight bow, or submissive dip, that Norwegians offered to people of higher social or economic rank in the old country. He also commented on the status of women in American society.

This letter has been edited for secondary-level readers. A complete translation is available at the Wisconsin Historical Society's Archives.

Gunder Asmundson Bondal explained that wages for male laborers ranged from $15-$20 per month. He also lists the prices for livestock and many other essential goods. Imagine that you are a young man and want to start your own farm in frontier Wisconsin. Given your youthful energy, you are capable of earning twenty dollars per month. Your monthly expenses are $16 dollars. Thus, you are able to save $4 dollars per month.

The U. S. government sells land for $1.25 per acre. You want to purchase 80 acres, the smallest parcel of land sold. You will also need the following supplies and livestock to start your farm:

* 1 plow
* 8 hogs
* 20 lbs. of butter
* 2 teams of oxen\*
* 1 threshing machine
* 20 lbs. of candles
* 1 wagon
* 200 lbs. of wheat
* 2 pairs of boots
* 2 cows
* 50 lbs. of pork
* 10 yards of wool
* 2 horses
* 20 lbs. of coffee

\*Since they will form the basis of your small farm, your livestock should be of the highest quality.

Calculate how many months will you need to work to purchase your land. Calculate how many months will you need to purchase supplies and livestock.