

Emigrants

“If we go over there, we may have to live on rabbit, too.”

By Hallvard Dahlie

The well-known ski jumper from Ringsaker, Nels Brandvold, who is now in Canada, has sent the following interesting letter from his new home. Readers will certainly find many acquaintances among the people he talks about.—Editor’s Note, the Hamar Daily Post.

Isn’t that just like Nels, Sigrid thought, as she read through the paper, a couple of days old by the time she got it from the Ringes. He writes as much to the Hamar newspaper as he does to me. All I’ve got so far are four short letters and a couple of postcards, one from a place in Saskatchewan called Cut Knife, where he went with a harvest crew last fall. What a weird name, it’ll take some getting used to those names in Canada, if I ever get there, she thought. She turned back to the beginning of the letter and read it more slowly.

“I thought perhaps it would interest your newspaper’s readers to hear about a Norwegian settlement here in Alberta. Viking is the name of the place....” Well, that’s an appropriate name for the place, anyway. “...and the Norwegians here play a large role with the settlement, and make a strong impression on the community.” Well, isn’t that jumping from the frying pan into the fire, she mused. I thought he wanted to escape the Norwegians. That was certainly one of the things he implied that March morning when he told me he wanted to sell the farm and leave Norway. “There are too many busybodies around here telling me what to do,” he had said, “at least in Canada

we’ll be able to do what we want.”

She knew what he meant by busybodies, for they had always been more critical of her than of him. Even two of Nels’s sisters had treated her harshly ever since she had arrived in the district. Guess they thought I had no business coming here from Oslo and stealing their brother from the local girls. She smiled at her memory of Nels telling her how he had to keep escaping from the aggressive behaviour of some of the single women here, especially the two he referred to as “big brawny Hilda” and “round rolling Nellie,” who pursued all the young ski jumpers.

That March morning, almost a year ago now, hadn’t turned into the crisis either one of them had feared, not that there hadn’t been a few tense moments. The children had gone through a bit of a crying session, especially Helga, who understood more than the boys what was happening. All they wanted to do was go down to the lake for some fishing.

Sigrid remembered the look on Nels’s face when he walked into the kitchen that morning: his face flushed red making his blue eyes brighter than usual, and his silly grin frozen, as though he had had a mild stroke, or had just come from a visit to the dentist. He took off his sheepskin coat, hung it on a hook behind the door, then went to wash his hands in the little room off the kitchen, while Sigrid brought his porridge to the table. She herself had no appetite, sensing the tension of the moment, but she



FRED HULTSTRAND HISTORY IN PICTURES COLLECTION, NDIRS, NDSU, Fargo, ND, c.1912

poured herself a cup of coffee, then pulled up a kitchen stool and sat across from him.

“There’s something I have to tell you,” he had begun, his voice low but firm, his eyes fixed on some spot between himself and Sigrid. “As you know, times are pretty tough in this country right now, and by the looks of things they won’t get better any time soon. If I can’t make a go of the farm now, what’s going to be here for the kids when they get older? As I’ve told you many times, my father wasted a lot of money when he ran the farm, foolishly investing in that brewery his cousin’s family was involved with, and now we owe back taxes, we need new equipment, and we haven’t enough milk cows to bring us much income. Instead of spending any more on this place, I think we should look into going to Canada, where land is cheap and times are good. What do you think?”

He stopped talking, as though suddenly remembering the porridge set in front of him, which he methodically ate, spoonful by spoonful, dipping each one into the cup of cold milk beside his plate to cool it off before swallowing it. When the last of the porridge was gone, he slurped the remainder of the milk from his cup, then pushed the dishes to the side. The world could be coming to an end, Sigrid mused, and Nels would still follow the same routine at breakfast, just as he has done every day since their marriage.

She knew it didn’t matter what she thought, for he had probably already made up his mind, but she was so moved

by the guilty look on his face that she restrained herself from making any caustic rejoinder. Secretly, she was pleased that he had come to a decision, for he had been pretty miserable these past few months, and anything would be better than the way they were living now. But I’d better say something, she thought, taking a sip from her coffee cup, her elbows pressing into the tabletop. “If we’re so short of money, how can we afford to go to Canada? Have you worked out how much it would cost to move us all there?” Her cup rattled a bit as she set it down on her saucer, but she was determined to retain her composure.

“I thought I’d go over first, find out what it’s like, and if it’s okay, work long enough to raise the money to bring you and the kids over,” he said, fixing his eyes on her coffee cup. “As a matter of fact, I have already booked passage on the *Stavangerfjord* sailing out of Bergen early next month, and I already have my passport.” He chanced a look at her, and caught her eyes blazing directly at him.

“And what am I to do when you go? Stay here alone with the children? I’m not going back to stay with my mother in Oslo, that’s for sure.” Furious, she stepped off her stool, and went to the stove to pour herself another cup of coffee, banging the pot on the stove so hard that a spurt of coffee shot out and sizzled a moment before evaporating. She kept her back turned to Nels, struggling to hold in her tears.

Nels had never seen Sigrid so upset. He pushed back his chair and went to her, his arms stiff as he tried to embrace

her, feeling her body shaking. He was awkward in situations like this, usually saying the wrong things, and never good at showing physical affection. He tightened his arms around her body, but she didn't respond, so he stood still, waiting for her to stop shaking, looking at the red clasp holding her shining black hair in place. It was that beautiful hair and her dark eyes that had overwhelmed him when he first saw her some ten years earlier.

"Look," he said gently, "I've seen to it that you can stay right here until I've decided about Canada. Do you remember that man who came a couple of years ago who wanted to buy the farm? Well, I told him that if we move to Canada he can buy it, but until I make that decision no one is buying it. I have left papers and details with Gunnar and explained all this to him, so you don't have to worry about anything."

"Not worry?" she cried, breaking away from his embrace. "It's my life, too, and I'm not supposed to worry? All I've heard is *I this* and *I that* and *my farm*. Well, what about me? Why don't you explain things to me before you explain them to Gunnar? Don't I have a say in anything, and why do you have to make all the decisions?" She stepped back towards the table, and glared at him, her eyes full of tears of anger and frustration.

"Of course I meant you, too," he replied, chastened by her outburst. "It's just my way of talking, it's the way my father spoke, it's just how things are done here, you know that. But I make you this promise now: I will never sell the farm unless you agree to it, and if you don't want to move to Canada I'll come back as soon as you ask me to. As a matter of fact," and here he grinned in some relief, moving closer to her, "my passport is good for only six months, so if things don't work out by the fall, I'll have to come back unless I renew it over there. But I do have to go and give it a try. Things aren't getting any better here." He took hold of her shoulders, willing her to look at him. "Now, do you think I can have a cup of coffee, or did you spill it all?"

And they both had laughed, Sigrid hugging him and drying her tears against his shirt. She had to hand him that, he didn't burn all his bridges behind him, and I didn't even know he had arranged for his passport. He was probably afraid to tell me, thinking I would put too many obstacles in his way, that's why he told everything to Gunnar and not to me. The way men keep their wives in the dark about things in this country, it's just not right. But the Ringe family has always been good to me, and with Nels's two unfriendly sisters now married and living far away, I'll be okay, she rationalized, and agreed that his plan was probably the best for all of them.

She looked at the newspaper letter again. "One notices immediately the church..." that's a bit of a surprise, he never went to church once here after we were married, except for funerals and weddings, or when the children were christened, "...a handsome building with a tower and spire, clean and simple in style, and the master builder Even Olsen from Loten deserves all

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the honour for his work." He still remembers Ibsen, she smiled, noting the "master builder" reference, he always did like Ibsen, used to quote some of his early poetry to me when we were courting. Nels always managed to surprise me with one thing or another, and of course Loten is where his mother was born, maybe that's why he mentions the church. Or maybe it reminded him of the beautiful church here in Ringsaker with its towering spire. It's almost a thousand years old, Nels told me all about it one night when we were courting in the graveyard. And the inside is gorgeous: blue pews, ornate pulpit and a Flemish triptych dating from medieval days. Not that I go there that often, but it's a beautiful place, and once in a while I take the children there to show them the gravestones of their ancestors, or the house on the church property where Nels himself was born. "I was born in the manse," he often told me, "and that's enough church for me for the rest of my life!" Perhaps he is homesick for the place, but of course he would never let on to that. Let's see what else he says.

"On the streets one constantly hears Norwegian speech, and most of the Norwegians here are farmers, but there is the odd one in other occupations as well. The owner of the largest business is a man from Hamar and the policeman here, too, is a Norwegian." Well, how come he knows the policeman? "He was one of the first I met when I came here. I came up from the station, suitcase in hand," and that's the only luggage he took with him, one large suitcase, said he wouldn't need many clothes, and that I could bring the rest when I came. He even asked me in one of his letters I got before Christmas if I would bring his skis when I came. Fat chance of that. "...and stopped outside the hotel, when he came charging directly at me. What have I done now, I wondered, but was soon reassured when in an 'Opplands' dialect he bid me welcome, and said you're probably thirsty after your long trip, and took me into the beer parlour and bought me a glass of beer."

Not that he's a regular drinker or anything, but he wouldn't turn that down, and he gets much more talkative when he's had a glass or two. But she remembered

that night she met him at the ski dance, when many of his ski mates were drinking pretty heavily, he hardly touched a drop, so she never had to worry about him in that respect. And it was nice of that policeman to greet Nels the way he did, he must have been pretty tired after that long train ride from Halifax. Sigrid just couldn't grasp how big Canada was. Guess I'll find out, she mused, if I ever get there myself.

The farms, too, seemed awfully large, compared to ours in Hedmark, if what Nels says is true. "A man from Hedmark, Hans Husvein, has twenty-one quarters of land, and another who has enough to turn around on is Carl Andersen, with sixteen quarters." Do we need that much land, Sigrid wondered, but if land is almost free in Canada, as those officials told them that day in Hamar, maybe Nels sees himself as a big landowner.

But right now he sure isn't that, he's just working for someone else. "We got a bush-clearing job, and now we are working hard for our dollars, some Trondelag fellows, some Vallset people, and myself. And we are so stylish and well-off that we eat rabbit every day." Sigrid smiled, Nels always was quick-witted, even sarcastic at times if the occasion demanded it. He's not much of a cook himself, at least he never was here, so maybe they all take turns making rabbit stew, and Nels would never complain. He always ate whatever I put in front of him.

Well, there had better be more than rabbit stew to lure me to Canada, Sigrid thought, and went to the bureau drawer to get Nels's last letter, which came just before Christmas. "It looks as though I should stay in Canada," she read, sitting down in the rocking chair by the window, "as times are pretty good, and I'm getting all kinds of work. As you see, I'm sending you a money order, and I should be able to send quite a bit more later in the winter." She knew he sent as much money as he could, he was never one to keep very much for himself, that's for sure, and she felt a bit sad thinking how lonely it must have been for him at Christmas. At least I had the children and

kind neighbours like the Ringes, who invited us all over for Christmas Eve. Nels didn't say where he had spent Christmas, but with all those Norwegians he talked about, I'm sure he was well looked after. But the sooner we get together as a family again, the better it will be for all of us. It's almost a year now since he left, so we have to make a decision soon.

She sat looking through the darkening window for a while, hearing the children laugh and shout as they played. They really have been good since Nels left, she acknowledged, though little Eric, just turned four, keeps asking where his daddy is, to which Arne, barely a year older, answers in a big brother brag, "Don't you know? He's gone to Canada, to find us a new house. Don't you know anything?" Then Eric cries, and Sigrid has to hold him on her lap to explain things, or Helga brings the big world atlas over to the table and shows him the map of Canada. "See," she explains to him, his tears subsiding, "here is Halifax, and way over here is Viking, and daddy has gone all that way on the train. Would you like to do that?" And Eric nods his head, stifling his sobs, as he follows Helga's finger across the map. Tonight, Sigrid decides I'll sound them out.

"How would you kids like to eat rabbit?" she asked them at the supper table, and they all giggled as she read them part of Nels's letter from the newspaper. "See, that's what he's been eating, so if we go over there, we may have to live on rabbit, too! Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Yuk!" Helga grimaced, "I'd rather starve than eat rabbit," and Arne said, "I'll eat them, and maybe daddy will let me help him catch them," and Eric said, "Will the rabbits chase me?" at which Arne gave him a look of disgust.

But they all started talking so excitedly about going to Canada that Sigrid made up her mind right there and then: tonight she would write Nels and tell him they were coming, so he'd better find them a place to live. Tomorrow, I'll go and ask Gunnar to get all the papers in order, and find out about getting our passports. The farm may be in Nels's name, but this time I'm going to make the decision.

"Okay, children," she said, quieting them down. "You have to get ready for bed, but first I want you to do something. You can each draw a picture or print a little note to send with my letter to daddy, so he'll know you all want to come. Helga, you're good at printing now, so get a large envelope from the bureau drawer, and print daddy's name and address in large clear letters:

Mr. Nels Brandvold
General Delivery
Viking, Alberta, Canada
Now, isn't that a fine address?"



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