

SCANDINAVIAN MORAVIANS IN WISCONSIN

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IDEAS course through continents, over seas, and like wind-borne embers start conflagrations wherever spiritual tinder intercepts them. Thus, the theological views of John Wycliffe of England lighted a great fire in Bohemia through the conditioned mind of John Huss. The Hussite doctrines, long and often suppressed, three centuries later found a favoring host in the soul of Count Zinzendorf of Saxony. Thence it spread over Europe and through parts of America, resulting in the creation of pious Moravian communities in many places. The American center was the well known and well loved Pennsylvania town of Bethlehem.

Though the Moravian church antedated the reformation led by Luther, and its founder had anticipated many of the doctrines of the German reformer, it was Lutheranism that overran the north countries of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, establishing itself as the official religion in each of these states. That left to Moravians only the opportunity to send missionaries into their communities in the hope of making Lutherans 'Brethren-minded.' These men were missionaries of the 'Diaspora.'

When, at the beginning of the year 1849, a Diaspora worker of Stavanger, Norway, Stephanus Due, heard a Macedonian cry which came from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, asking for a pastor to shepherd the Diaspora brethren at that place, he appealed to certain 'candidates' who had just completed their theological studies in a Norwegian Lutheran seminary. All wanted to be missionaries in different parts of the world, several being destined to Zululand, in Africa.

The youngest, A. M. Iverson, was to be sent to a rigorous Lutheran school in Dresden. He, however, did not wish to go to Germany, he was inclined toward the United Brethren faith, and—after full consideration, much prayer, and the casting of the lot, a well known United Brethren device for ascertaining the Lord's will—he decided in favor of the Milwaukee mission.¹

With the wife he married after that decision had been reached, Iverson sailed for America on a small schooner which was nearly lost in severe storms at sea, but finally, June 13, 1849, landed safely at New York. Remaining only long enough to leave a letter for the Moravian (United Brethren) pastor, the Rev. O. Bigler, in New York, who was absent in Bethlehem attending a synodical meeting, he went forward with a group of Norwegian emigrants he was guiding, to Milwaukee, where he arrived on the twenty-ninth of June.

Although the situation in the Wisconsin metropolis was less favorable for his work than had been represented, he was able, nevertheless, to assemble a group of the Brethren-minded whom he molded into the first Scandinavian Moravian congregation of the state, the preparatory organization meeting being held on Sunday, August 26, 1849, and the official reception of members under the auspices of the Provincial Helper's conference of the church taking place on Monday evening, October 22, 1849. Eighteen members made up the original list, and of those twelve were Norwegians, four

¹This paper, for its factual basis, rests mainly upon the 'Journal,' or 'Brief Account of the Activity of the Evangelical Moravian Church among the Scandinavians in Wisconsin,' by A. M. Iverson, as translated from the Norwegian by John Bolser, 1929-30. Iverson's 'Account' in the original is in the archives of the church at Ephraim, Door county, Wisconsin. The translation is said to have been approved by the Rt. Rev. Bishop Clement Hoyler of Green Bay. Iverson wrote the 'Journal' in the years 1896-99, about fifty years after the beginning of his mission, and he complains of the dearth of records to help him with dates, and so on. Evidently, it is mainly memories, supported at a number of points by contemporaneous records.

Danes, and two Swedes. The official 'helper' in completing the organization was a German missionary of the society, the Rev. F. Fett, who proved a powerful support to Iverson at that time and also later.

When Iverson, nearly half a century after the event, wrote his account of these affairs, he had confessedly forgotten much which if remembered would have made his record more realistic. For example, he gives from memory the motive for taking the congregation away from Milwaukee and settling it in some country place. As he puts it:

Through the course of the winter, the more experienced brothers and sisters had often discussed with me how much better it would be for the christian life in the congregation, if located in the country, as the city life was connected with so many dangerous temptations and it was generally known that some brethren who were workmen were often cheated out of their wages and that they were often without work with depressions in business and hard times. Even the brethren who were sailors desired much more to live in the country than to sail on the lakes.

The statement partly obscures the fact that Scandinavian immigrants, with relatively few exceptions, tarried in cities only long enough to amass the necessary means to buy land and begin farming. It was, of course, their general demand for a farming opportunity which impelled the Milwaukee brethren toward the country.

The problem of where to go had not been settled when, in the following May (1850), Iverson was invited to Bethlehem to receive ordination. But after that event, in New York city, he fell in with a remarkable Norwegian character, Nils Otto Tank. This scion of the distinguished Norwegian Tank family, whose father Carsten had been prominent in the government, seems to have been destined for a high and important position in Norwegian politics and administration. But his career was altered drastically when, at Herrnhut, Saxony, the homeland of the pious Count Zinzendorf,

he was suddenly converted to the Moravian faith. 'Henceforth,' says H. R. Holand,² 'for many years we see Otto Tank, who had been reared among the *bon-mots* of brilliant salons, humbly and patiently teaching the gospel of salvation to tawny heathen in distant tropics.' While the adverb 'humbly' is of doubtful validity as applied to Otto Tank, it is true that he had gone to Surinam, Dutch Guiana, with the wife, Marian Frueauff, of Herrnhut, who appears to have been the proximate cause of his conversion. Her death in the tropics sent him back to Europe in 1847.

Marrying at Amsterdam the daughter of the learned Dutch clergyman, the Rev. R. J. Van der Meulen, he now, in 1849, sailed for America, taking with him ample means from his paternal estate, report crediting him with possessing a million dollars. Meeting Iverson in New York, he (so Iverson says) promised to procure lands and to find work for the poor Scandinavians of the Milwaukee Moravian congregation. Iverson accompanied Tank to Milwaukee where, meeting the men of the congregation, the latter renewed his 'golden' promises; then buying a fine team and carriage, and taking Henry Johnson as driver, brother Fett, Mrs. Tank and their daughter, Tank set out to seek an appropriate body of land for his purpose. This he found on the west side of Fox river, a tract of nearly a thousand acres, now a part of the city of Green Bay.

On that tract, divided partly into building lots, partly into ten-acre farm-lots, the members of Iverson's congregation, about twenty-five families, with their pastor, received allotments in the autumn of 1850, though most of them lived in the Episcopalian mission building which had been made into a dormitory. They formed a colony that persisted till 1853 though not in the peaceful manner appropriate to a

² 'Nils Otto Tank,' Wisconsin historical society *Proceedings*, 1908, 146-154.

Moravian religious commune. The blame for its disruption is by some placed upon Pastor Iverson, by him and others upon Otto Tank.

Tank was a born aristocrat who cherished the feudal tradition. He apparently desired to establish a kind of manorial estate and maintain a 'lord of the manor' relationship to the people upon his woodland domain. But these nineteenth century Scandinavian settlers, already inoculated with the virus of American independence, and one and all demanding the privilege of individually owning land in the new world, instinctively offered passive or active resistance to the manorial régime. Iverson may have utterly misjudged Tank when he believed the latter capable of taking from the settlers the results of their labor and then forcing them off their lands, leaving the improvements as his clear profit. But much in the local situation, including Tank's refusal to grant legal titles to the lots the people occupied, under oral contracts to pay ten dollars per acre or more, was out of harmony with their desire for a free, independent American existence.

Without attempting to apportion the blame as between Tank and Iverson, but with much sympathy for the latter's views—shared, be it observed, by the people of the colony almost without exception—let us now follow the fortunes of this first congregation of Scandinavian Moravian colonists in Wisconsin. Iverson, of course, Tank having been repudiated, became their unquestioned leader, which some believe to have been his ambition from the outset and his principal reason for opposing Tank, a theory the present writer cannot share.

Iverson's account of the beginnings of trouble with Tank deserves to be given in his own words:

Different brothers began to tell me confidentially that they received no edification in listening to Bro. Tank's addresses, but found them cold and incapable of making an impression. However, this was not the

worst, for now began a heavy trial touching our temporal affairs. . . . At the time of the decision to assign tracts of farm land and lots in town to the various brethren, everything was arranged orally and Tank stated at the time, that no written contract was necessary between brethren. All of Tank's promises with reference to assistance were only oral.

At first some of the more experienced brethren were not wholly satisfied with such a loose method of doing things, nor was Bro. Fett, but I said that it was my hope that Bro. Tank would keep his word and his promises. But, unfortunately, it soon developed and became very plain that Tank made first one change and then another in his arrangements as regards land and lots and other details, and as time went on these changes became more important. If a brother made a reasonable objection and reminded Tank about the original arrangements, terms and promises, he flew into a snorting rage and was unwilling to make anything right.

The brethren appealed to Iverson, he says, and he remonstrated with Tank. But Tank

became angry again and would make no concessions and even used insulting language against the brethren. The matter grew worse until finally the land deal seemed so hopeless, judging by Tank's last statements, that all our brethren, including Bro. Fett, understood clearly that it would never be possible for them to pay for their land or their lots, but that they would remain the property of Tank forever, and that all their drudgery would benefit Tank only.

A committee of the leading members, not including Iverson evidently, was appointed to demand from Tank 'written and legal contracts' as originally agreed. This demand produced a tempestuous scene, but Tank finally agreed to it and appointed a day for the men to call for their contracts. The brethren were on hand at the time set, waited long before they were permitted to see Tank, and when he appeared

he was in a furious mood and in a thunderous voice he shouted that he never would give anyone a written contract for land or lots and that they would have to be governed accordingly. It didn't help in the least that a brother reminded him about his promise made four days ago. He left them as a madman and slammed the door behind him. Deeply discouraged, our brethren were compelled to leave without having accomplished anything.

The whole gathering came over to the mission-house and in my presence they told the whole story about the sad ending and the grave question now arose: 'What was to be done?'

There is some obscurity in the above account. But it probably means that Tank had agreed, orally, to lease lots of land to individuals with the privilege of paying for them at given rates later, and thus ultimately owning them in fee simple. When Tank refused to abide by those understood terms, the settlers felt it was no longer possible to do business with him.

A meeting was arranged for, by Iverson and Fett—who was privy to all this business—and, after prayerful consideration and a free interchange of views, it was fully agreed that no further reliance on Tank was justified; that a complete separation from him was the only proper course. They, however, petitioned him to take back all the properties and to give a detailed accounting. 'But this resulted in much loss, especially to some brethren.' Iverson does not explain how the 'much loss' occurred, but it is evident from his statement that Tank made an accounting with the lot-holders, which was one of the main points at issue.

The German pastor, Fett, sustained Iverson in his report of these proceedings as made to the Moravian church heads at Bethlehem, which is a strong reason for accepting his view of the imbroglio rather than that of Tank. Iverson says that Tank later showed himself bitterly opposed to Fett while manifesting friendliness toward Iverson and some others. Tank went so far, he says, as to prefer charges against Fett in a letter to the church fathers which charges, when reported back, were solemnly pronounced false in a paper signed by all the men of the Scandinavian congregation. That paper was sent on to Bethlehem.

These events occurred as early as 1851. It was not, however, till 1853 that Iverson found for his people a new do-

main in the forest of Door county. Most of the land was heavily timbered with hardwoods, betokening fertile soil. They divided it much as did Tank, building lots along the waterfront, and ten-acre farm-lots farther back. Here, after much severe labor as explorer and pioneer, Iverson planted his own Ephraim which, unlike Otto Tank's Ephraim, exists to this day.

The difficulties with Tank occurred, or were terminated, early in the year 1851. From that time the members of Iverson's small colony were thrown upon their own resources and lived as they could, each family in such rented quarters as it could get and depending upon such mode of earning as was available. Some, Iverson tells us, had to go to distant places in order to find the means of livelihood. Again there was talk about buying lands, especially cheap government lands, but no one had the means for that purpose. However, in the end help came in a way to shed a very clear light upon the relations between Tank and his erstwhile colonists.

The proof that Iverson's view of the difficulties with Tank was the version accepted by the Bethlehem fathers thereby becomes conclusive. And, if there had been any doubt about the facts, Tank, a rich and very influential member of the church and a regularly commissioned missionary, should have been almost certain to have the society's favoring opinion. As it was, a distinguished and venerable leader of the church in Bethlehem, the Rev. H. A. Schultz, proffered to Iverson the loan of \$500 with which to buy land, and it was that loan which made possible the acquisition of the new domain, entered by him at the land office in Menasha.

The loan was made on most generous terms. Iverson, in turn, was generous with the settlers who bought building and farm-lots, all transactions being on a no-profit basis. By in-

vesting a portion of his \$500 in several soldiers' land warrants, the thrifty pastor was even enabled to make his money go farther than by paying it out directly for land at the minimum price of \$1.25 per acre. He purchased 424 $\frac{3}{4}$ acres. The legal proofs he bore away from Menasha of that purchase brought contentment and joy to the brethren.

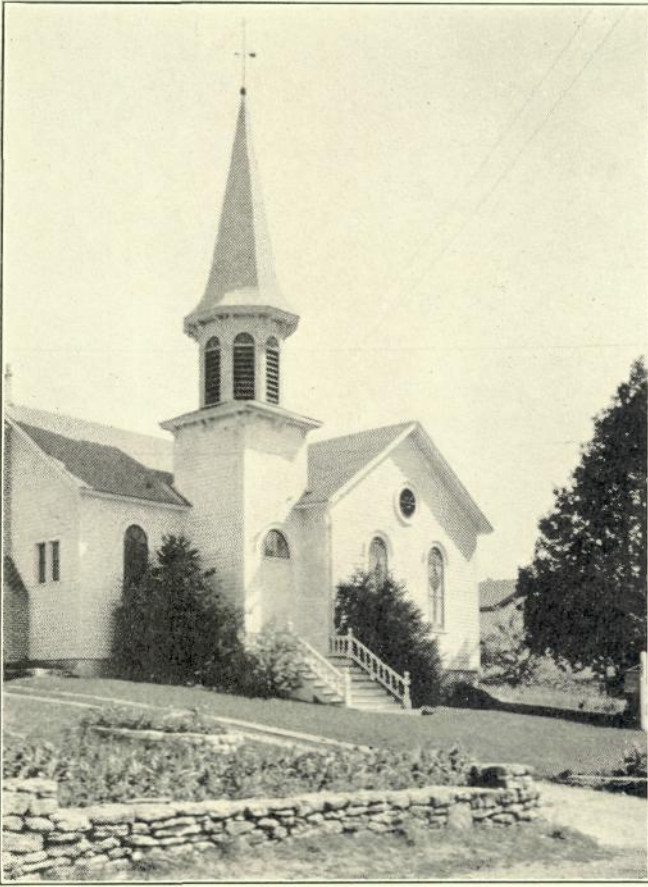
The economic basis of the settlement was fishing and forestry. Some of the people devoted much time and skill to fishing, in the winter making openings in the ice for the purpose, and selling their fish at first in Green Bay. Most of them, however, had considerable timber on their farm-lots which must be cleared off in the course of making fields. Some of it was cedar, and it was found that large quantities of cedar fence-posts could be marketed. Later piling, shakes, railway ties, and so on were sold through steamers tying up at the little wharf built at the foot of their village.

Iverson disclosed his possession of a considerable variety of practical skills. He had built a good boat with his own hands, which he used in the exploring voyages. He selected the colony's lands, aided by experienced farmers. He surveyed the domain and made a tentative plat which proved accurate enough for a scientific survey. He was agent of the colony in contracting for and delivering various kinds of timber products. He was school superintendent of the township. Finally, he was the architect of their church building and one of the carpenters who built it. As a settler and farmer with the rest, he chopped, grubbed, broke up land, and grew crops. He joined in all the common enterprises. In a word, strikingly in contrast to Tank, who was always aloof, cold, lonely, aristocratic in his relations with them, though obviously never for a moment forgetting his vocation as their spiritual head.

As a preacher, judging from his own account in the book written by him, he was tremendously vital. Speaking always without notes, and 'in a loud voice,' he strove to make his hearers conscious of sin, of repentance, and atonement through Jesus Christ. While he severely criticised the Methodists for their ranting, and the Lutherans for their cold, stiff attitude toward religion, he was certainly in his practice nearer the former than the latter. Indeed, the measure of success in his meetings would seem to have been the dearth or abundance of tears shed both by himself and by the congregation. No move, secular or religious, was undertaken without previous resort to 'burning prayer.'

Also, despite his practical bent, he was a mystic. He expected the Lord's intercession in all things. When he was very sick and apparently quite unable to carry on at church, or even to walk to the meeting place, prayer was answered so miraculously that a long-standing illness was sloughed off in a moment of time. When the people of Cooperstown, seeing the plight he was in, gave him a new pair of boots, and these—as their nature is—being tight, produced the most excruciating pain in his feet on the return journey, prayer brought complete and absolute relief, notwithstanding that he found on arriving at home the skin worn off of both heels! When he was walking a long, hard way through the woods and fainted for want of water, the spirit made him mount a huge log lying by the roadside from the top of which he espied a beautiful, cold spring which had he walked quietly along the highway would have been completely hidden from sight. Thus, he lived to reach home when otherwise he might have perished on the road.

Another trait of this demonstrably good and pious man was an apparent inability to work harmoniously with rival seekers of Scandinavian souls. For the Lutherizing M.



MORAVIAN CHURCH
EPHRAIM, DOOR COUNTY

Olson, who was the cause of Iverson coming to Milwaukee, he had little sympathy. For the adherent of the cult of baptism, a troubling spirit at Sturgeon Bay, he manifested a strong dislike. So long as he had a mission field all to himself he was content; as soon as others, with equal rights, entered it to share the glory of converting sinners, Iverson became unhappy. It was always hard for him to 'take it.'

Ephraim itself, which was peculiarly his own creation, was the apple of his eye. There he labored most happily, built up a small but permanent church, molded a community of reasonably like-minded religionists, and had among them many very dear and precious friends. He looked after his people in health and sickness. As a rule, the unity of the church at that place was affectingly complete, but at times the 'evil one' would sow discord among the people and that called for especially fervent prayers and much patience. He remained at the head of the Ephraim church, most of the time in residence, until the middle of the year 1864, when he became pastor of the churches at Leland and Mission Point (Norway), in La Salle county, Illinois.

During the period of this first pastorate, Iverson visited as regularly as possible the two stations, New Denmark and Mishicott, the first in Brown county, the second in Manitowoc, and about fifteen miles apart. He generally made his visits on foot at the cost of great labor and much weariness; yet, he never complained of the amount of work involved. The removal from Ephraim was hastened by some dissatisfaction within the congregation. He says, after giving an account of the negotiations regarding the Illinois mission: 'I now advised the congregation in Ephraim that it was my intention soon to remove to Illinois. Some brethren listened to this news with deep regret; others were perhaps well satisfied with the change.' The harmony which once

had prevailed was to some extent broken up. 'The arch-enemy tried to create discord wherever possible.' Among other difficulties a Lutheran preacher, Björn, had come to Ephraim, who had caused the secession from the church of many of the Lutheran-minded!

Iverson, to be sure, was above the worldly emotion of revenge. But it must be said he recouped himself against the Lutherans in the Illinois field, where his congregations, at Leland and Norway, were made up largely of seceders from former Lutheran bodies. He, however, was not permitted long to enjoy his stay among those well-to-do Norwegian farmers, for his health gave way in the prairie climate. It seems almost unbelievable that a man who had braved the cold and deep snows of Green Bay and the Door peninsula for fifteen years, should have fallen a victim to the blasts and blizzards of northern Illinois. But so it was. 'The terrible and bitterly cold storms of the prairies,' says the narrator, 'were much harder for me to endure than the intense cold of northern Wisconsin.' Iverson after the lapse of a single year was already thinking of a return to the Bay country, or at all events, a change from his Illinois pastorate.

It is not entirely clear that climate was the sole cause of his resolution to leave Illinois. At least, other matters there were to disturb his equanimity. 'In this village of Leland and vicinity,' he says, 'there resided some Scandinavian Methodists, who had a local minister and a small church, but it was impossible for me to work with them partly because of their great noise and outcry in their revivals, which became unseemly disorderly, and also partly because of their peculiar teaching concerning freedom from sin and perfection &c.' There were rival 'revivals,' and doubtless considerable disunity developed in the community.

Though the congregations at Leland and at Norway, from Iverson's account, must have been practically unanimous in their desire to have him remain, promising that if he would do so they would gladly become members of a United Brethren church, he decided to leave. The call came from the Brethren-minded in Green Bay, and in September, 1866, after an absence in the south of little more than two years, Iverson was back among the Scandinavians whom he had known so intimately in earlier days. With them he organized, September 22, 1866, the third United Brethren church of the Scandinavians in Wisconsin, the first being Ephraim, the second Sturgeon Bay. The Sturgeon Bay church was organized while he was still pastor at Ephraim. At Sturgeon Bay, too, he was instrumental in securing the erection of a church building and dedicating it.

In the late fall of 1867 the congregation in Green Bay began work on a church building which was completed at the end of February, 1869, and dedicated with the aid of Pastor Groenfeldt of Ephraim. Iverson calls it a 'beautiful church.' Again, he seems to have had much to do with planning the structure, he solicited subscriptions for it first at home and later in the East, and with his own hands he made the pulpit. A great revival took place at the close of 1869. But difficulties were encountered, this time from a young Swedish Methodist who strove to lead off some of the new converts to the Methodist church.

The young man in question, having gone to Chicago, at first stirred up the Methodists there to send a couple of Danish revivalists to Green Bay who labored for a time with but little result. Later he himself returned as a preacher, labored enthusiastically, held a noisy revival, and advertised that thirty-five converts had been made. Iverson writes:

About three weeks after this announcement, one of our members went to the meeting on a certain Sunday and at this meeting he was amazed to learn from the speaker, who bemoaned the fact, that thirty persons, his whole converted flock, could now be found only in saloons, at dances and at card parties—totally fallen—and that only one had remained faithful. This was a pitiful outcome, but perhaps what might be expected.

However, the Swedish zealot did succeed in organizing a small Methodist church which persisted about eight years. Then some went over to the Adventists, 'and a few returned to us, meeker and wiser.' Iverson is, of course, not unique in his want of sympathy with religious workers of other views and different methods, but he reveals himself as a very determined, uncompromising sectary.

Iverson served the Green Bay church for sixteen years, until the early months of 1883. He confesses:

This imperfect service closed in deep gloom and intense sorrow. . . . I had written the management of the church in Bethlehem more than once, requesting them to transfer me to some other field of labor and if they had acceded to this important and serious demand it would have been incomparably better for me and equally as well for the Master's service—but they didn't act in time. My many sins of omission and mistakes I need not recount here as I have meekly and seriously up to that time asked brethren, the congregation and the management of the church to forgive me. To what extent this was done, in a brotherly way, God the Omniscient, knows. But one thing I know to my *implacable* [*sic!*] comfort, of which no one can rob me, and that is that the great faithful Friend of Sinners and Savior Himself, out of his unspeakable mercy, forgave me for all my shortcomings and sins and washed me white in the blood of the Lamb, after my repeated prayers.

The *Memoir*³ closes with the prayer: 'May the old Moravian church[es] of dear Ephraim, Sturgeon Bay and Fort Howard [Green Bay] continue to live. Amen.'

³Iverson's book is so charged with emotionalism, and contains so many strictures on fellow-workers, made no doubt in good faith but under the stress of deep feeling, that it would be undesirable to publish it as a document. For that reason it was felt to be better to prepare this brief relation outlining his career and accomplishments. His work and character deserve some permanent record for, as the Rt. Rev. Clement Hoyer says, he was a man 'who made a definite contribution to the history of a part of Wisconsin.'