

MY IMMIGRATION YEARS

FROM NORWAY TO AMERICA

My father, Wilhelm Bakke, wrote these stories about his experiences during his immigration into Canada and the United States after he retired from teaching at Central Washington University. He also wrote short stories about our families history and life in Norway when he was a child. He had hoped to publish a book but never completed the project. We found this memoir after his death in 2004 at age 94. I worked to compile them in this format.

Karen Bakke Verrill

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FROM NORWAY TO AMERICA

**A Memoir by
Wilhelm Bakke**

Compiled and edited by Karen Verrill

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Front cover photo is of the author in Alberta in 1925.

Photo on back cover is of section of an altar railing the author made of wrought iron.

All photos included are from family albums. Photographers are unknown.

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*To my husband Gordon,
who also dared to explore new horizons*

—Karen Bakke Verrill

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PROLOGUE

A Return Trip to Norway

THE EVENING IN New York was uncomfortably hot and humid. It was a relief to finally enter the air-conditioned plane and take off. The canyon of the big city lay behind, and Long Island was left in the smoke and haze as the plane raced the deepening shadows for the June twilight of the north. The dinner, served as soon as we reached cruising altitude, was enjoyed mostly in silence. The larger number of passengers were well-worn older folks, serious and grim-eyed as American-Gothic immigrants from days of different transportation going home for a visit, a last look, yet another fishing trip, or perhaps still a search for that “different dream.” Now only a fueling stop at Gander before crossing the Blue Meadow to the Old World.

The coastline shifted beneath us, rather bewildering in its many details: towns and valleys in the vastness of the view. Then as lights began to show as little sparks, like distant fireflies, and

the captain or the stewardess identified various landmarks as they came on and faded to the drone of our engines, there under the starboard wing—was Halifax.

The shoreline, the cut of the bay, something of the pattern of the waterfront was vaguely and uneasily familiar as I watched it glide away beneath us. I lost the comfort of the plane for the uneasiness of another distant time, and the anxiety of an old anticipation blotted out the pleasure of the one I shared with my travelers.

I. ON THE WAY

March 1923, Age 17

THIS STORY REALLY started more than three-score years ago. When I left home at the sophisticated age of seventeen, the mountains of Norway sank into the North Sea at about the same time that I encountered two unforeseen difficulties. One was seasickness; the other was homesickness. Eventually I got over the seasickness, although for some hours my indifference as to reaching shore or not seemed to match the repeated dry-spin of the ship's propeller.

My first train ride coincided with the six-hour night ride across England from Newcastle to Liverpool. Neither the darkness nor the ride the previous night contributed any enjoyment; all that remained was the impression that it was a small country. During the two-day stay in Liverpool, the shipping line generously gave the people with tickets for the same ship a two-hour bus ride in the surrounding country. There was no escaping a comparison between the snow-covered home valley on the West Coast of Norway and these beautifully green fields of vast, undulating country—but no

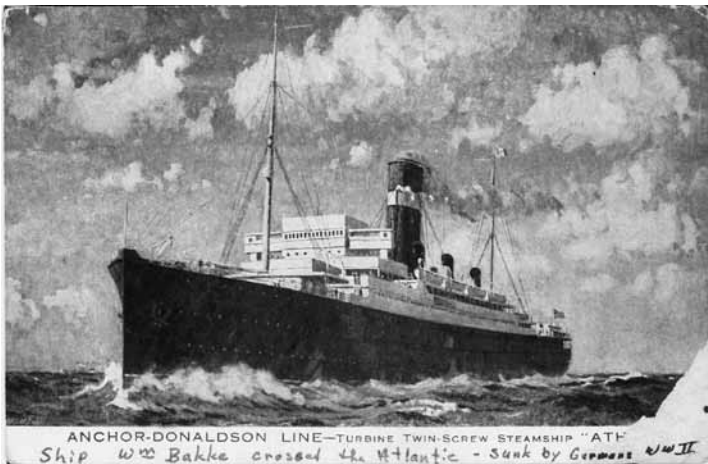
mountains in sight. Somehow I completely forgot how my countrymen of a thousand years ago had found preferable this and other areas in and around the Irish Sea. I was but impatiently traveling through. And the area where immigrants were quartered in Liverpool had little of order and cleanliness or of lasting appeal. It was of some interest to watch the very heavy transportation of goods on that shore-side street.

With few exceptions the traffic was horse-drawn wagons of tremendous size piled high with different goods. Most of them were drawn by farm horses, and the horses were truly giant ones, such as I had never heard of. Their hooves and very hairy lower legs were about the same size as the big chopping block Grandfather had in the woodshed.

The ship finally got started and hooted its way through the fog so thick that southern Ireland was not visible. A small but comfortable cabin was shared with an older man from southern Sweden. To my surprise we could understand each other somewhat, perhaps even better than I had understood a cousin of mine from a mountain valley in Norway. And so arose the question of how valid was the notion of differences based on nationality.

But I soon met with yet another obstacle to fame and fortune: the mysteries of the English language. Built-in plumbing was a great convenience even aboard ship where the railing used to be called a place for “feeding the crabs” in case of seasickness. My problem was finding my way around. Segregation by sex had not come to the facilities of the outhouse on the farm, but I wasn’t completely sure about that on board ship. Having read a number

of books translated into Norwegian, I gathered that manhood came in more than one grade or quality among the English. One of these, “gentlemen” seemed somewhat foppish and useless. Nor did it occur to me to relate that word to what I was looking for. When I saw a young man with a cleaning brush in his hand enter a room marked “women,” I thought perhaps that meant some grade of men, perhaps young men. When I discovered my mistake, my humiliation was complete. I felt I had disgraced myself in the eyes of the whole British Merchant fleet. It was many years later, when that ship was the first one the Germans torpedoed at the beginning of World War II, that the last of my sense of guilt sank with it.



The ship Wilhelm Bakke crossed the Atlantic on in 1923: Anchor-Donaldson Line—turbine, twin-screw steamship, sunk by the Germans during World War II.

The Atlantic seemed to be resting after the winter, so it was smooth sailing the next seven days and nights. Two or three ships came into view in the distance; that and a lifeboat drill were the only breaks in the monotony.

The hum and vibrations of the engines and the propeller died noticeably as the ship slid into the Halifax harbor and waited for the tugs to move it into the dock. Despite the bitterly cold March morning everyone seemed to be on deck to get their first look at America. Somehow the story of one man's suicide on board was dismissed along with the past monotony. Ahead lay the future and right before us the harbor, crowded with cable-laying ships.

Not much of a city it seemed. It was crowded along the waterfront but the houses were scattered onto the sides of the barren ridges that rose toward evergreen forest and snow-filled gullies. Not very impressive in the grey of the morning, but my thought and the hopes were with the destination to the west. The atmosphere of tension left little chance for speculation as the passengers were herded through Customs. Immigration was very thorough in its checking for vaccinations and deformities, and closely inspected eyes and throats. Even a bump and a scar on one of my fingers, caused by a cut with an ax years before, came in for a close and detailed examination. Once through the narrow aisles at the port of entry and the grim air of officialdom, there was a general scramble for the waiting train.

The first car back of the coal car was my home for the next seven days and nights. Somehow we were liberally treated to both cold air and coal smoke. There were seats on both sides of the aisle. Each

unit had two seats facing each other, intended for four persons. For sleeping, the seats could be pulled toward each other, and the back of each seat would slide down forming a four-pad bunk for two. The overhead, that seemed like part of the arched and sloping ceiling, lowered down and out to form a sort of trough-like shelf for a sleeping place for the other two passengers. No padding, no covers, just a place to stretch out as the Canadian National Railway train rumbled on endlessly.

It was a poor trade-off for the comfortable two-man cabins aboard the ship. What was worse, there was no substitute for the fine meals we had there. Perhaps the ticket allowed for meals, but if so, one seemed not to know what to do. So after the first day watching shoreline and brush land, snow and ice, a sort of routine evolved. Whenever the train stopped, a number of people scrambled for the store that might be nearby. Shopping was a matter of pointing to a loaf of bread or a bottle of milk or a piece of sausage; then, holding out some money and hoping the clerk wouldn't take it all. Finally, there was the scramble back on the train to an impatient whistle.

Arriving in Montreal after dark the next evening, we were more or less herded into the large station for a long wait. Even in that large structure the floor seemed to move in the manner of the ship's deck. A boy or young man was moving about peddling something that many in the mixed crowd bought and ate. I held out some change and had my first sample of that American dish, ice cream. But the fragrance and the flavor—which I later learned to call vanilla—and the undulating floor was too much; I had to

put it down and leave it. And that sample was a cure for vanilla ice cream for more than three years.

The country was not very interesting. It was neither flat nor hilly—and no mountains. The train tooted past some small towns, but soon it was just endless evergreen forest and ice-carved little lakes. Now and then there were signs of some logging or woodcutting, but all was lost in the vastness of the country. It was a major thrill for me when I saw my first deer, four of them moving away from the railroad into the timber. From then on until we reached the prairie, I watched in vain for the American abundance of game I had read about in James Fenimore Cooper's stories.

The days and nights wore on monotonously, but for one occasional buck. Even though it seemed an immigrant train—at least at my end of it—occasionally a conductor would check the tickets. That was simple enough for most. However, three dark, black haired women, thought to be from the Mediterranean, observed special security for their tickets. When asked for the ticket, they would stand up in the aisle, lift their skirts in front, without any hesitation, and retrieve the ticket from a belt or lining of some garment. On both sides of the aisle, from both ends of the car, there seemed rows of stretched necks, at least among the men, but of no noticeable concern to the exhibitors. By showing the ticket to uniformed officials, the change of train in Winnipeg was easy enough. The train toward Estevan was much nicer and the passengers were local people who were different, seemingly both at ease and purposeful.