

A Young Bride from Norway to Iowa (Norwegian Emigration Literature)



It is not often that a story like this is published, with a content never intended to be made public. What Elisabeth Koren penned in the middle of the 1850s was her very personal impressions during a long journey from Norway to America's Mid-West and a two year residence among pioneer settlers in Iowa. Her intent was to describe everything as realistic as possible, so that her writings later would make her and her husband truly remember their stay in America. Only a few printed reminiscences have been published, of the struggle and strife suffered by the wives of Norwegian pastors during those pioneering times. Elisabeth Koren's diary is therefore unique. It covers two years of her life, from when she as a newly wed bride suddenly and quite unprepared moved to the United States and began a life as the wife of a pastor in Iowa. Her new life there differed entirely from the comfortable and upper-class socializing she had enjoyed in Larvik. She was born in 1832, the second child among eight, in a well to do family. Her father was the Head Master of the upper grades school in the city and resided in the red-painted Herregården mansion in center of town, from 1677. It had once been the home of Ulrik Frederik Gyldenløve, a bastard son of the Danish-Norwegian king Frederick III. The king had named him 'Duke of Larvik' and sent him abroad to live. The mansion still stands in Larvik, now used as a museum and for other purposes. Elisabeth had been born a bit deaf,

something that came to hamper her for the rest of her life. Her father sent her twice to Copenhagen to have specialists there see if they could help her - to no avail. Quite young she acquired the skills of "reading lips" - something she skillfully used in conversations with a few persons, without anyone noticing her handicap. But in crowds, such as in parties and gatherings in the church, she did not manage to hear and follow what was said. Of that reason she often kept to her self. She also developed interests that were fitting for solitude, such as reading and gardening. Elisabeth married her cousin Ulrik Vilhelm Koren, who was born in 1826 in Bergen and thus six years her senior. Pastor Koren died in 1910 in the parsonage on Washington Prairie, after having served the same pastoral calling in Iowa for more than fifty years. In his youth his family's destitute conditions after his father's sudden drowning had forced him to earn his University education, by teaching and coaching. This might have been the reason why he so quickly accepted a call from a far away place like Iowa. But it made him the first Norwegian pastor serving congregations west of the Mississippi. His call had arrived on June 13, 1853, and was on behalf of several Norwegian settlements in the Decorah area. Vilhelm had quickly accepted the call and just as quickly proposed to his dear friend and cousin Elisabeth, asking her to be his wife and go to America with him. To this she had said "Yes" and after a very short engagement they were married in Larvik. Just 18 days later they were on their way, leaving Larvik and Norway on board the steamship

«Constitution» for Kiel in Germany. From there they went by train to Hamburg, by ship to New York, and by trains and wagons to Iowa. They reached Decorah, Iowa on December 21, after having been on the move for fifteen weeks and two days. On arrival they were met with disappointing news: the promised parsonage had not yet been built. Therefore they had to be lodged with farmer families in the area; at length living with the Egges and their two small children in a 14 x 16 foot home. The newly-wed couple was without a separate bedroom and the pastor had no place to work on his sermons except at night when the noisy children were sleeping. But eventually the parsonage was built and properly equipped, and led the Korens to receive their first child under their own pleasant roof.

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