

A NORWEGIAN ODYSSEY



“Resourceful, determined, and tremendously loyal, they made the very best of settlers.” That is how Whonnock’s Norwegians are described in *Maple Ridge, a History of Settlement*. At the core of that important group of settlers were the Lee and Nelson families, originating from Trondheim and related through marriage. The first members of these Norwegians started settling in Whonnock in the late 1880s.

Eric Andersen is interested in the histories of Norwegians in the Squamish area. Based on information from the *Sessional Papers* of the Government of Canada of 1888 and news items in Victoria’s *Daily Colonist* of 1887 he suggested that the Lees and Nelsons had

made a short stop at Squamish before landing in Whonnock. That had been rumoured before but Eric was the first to find written evidence of that stay in Squamish.

Linda Mattis, great-granddaughter of patriarch Ole Lee, established that they had left Norway for Hull on May 4th, 1887, onboard the ship *Hero*. From Hull they took the train to Liverpool and, as a note in the *Daily Colonist* tells us, on Saturday, May 14, this group of about twenty men, women and children embarked on the Dominion Line’s *Vancouver* for the transatlantic voyage to Quebec. The passenger list of the *Hero* shows the names of Ole Lee Sr. (49) and his sons Axel (21) and Ole Jr. (19). Also listed are the names of John Christian Nelson (40) and his wife Anna (36) who travelled with their children, the youngest just three month of age.

From Quebec the group travelled to Victoria, where they arrived two weeks later. After a couple of days the Norwegian fishermen–farmers and their families were taken to Valdes Island on board of the half-a-century-old Hudson’s Bay steamer *Beaver*, then used as a tugboat. On Valdes Island land had been reserved for them, but for unknown reasons they did not stay there but moved on to Howe Sound.

In July 1887 the group was reportedly settling well on the shores of the Squamish River. They had started to “improve” the land and were building houses. The salmon

runs, still in their glory days, must have impressed them.

The *Colonist* mentions friction between the Norwegians and the Squamish Nation. The Norwegians were apparently trespassing and cutting trees on the Reserve. These problems were to be resolved by surveying land for the Norwegians.

However, by the time a surveyor arrived in November, the land where the Norwegians lived was several feet under water. Their houses were all flooded and it had been impossible for them to cook food for themselves and the children. Reportedly they found fish in the nets hanging out in the yard.

The surveyor alerted the authorities in New Westminster, and soon a tugboat and a scow were on their way to Squamish with provisions and other supplies for relief and to evacuate the Norwegians. Fortunately they were all safe and the water level had gone down, but they were determined not to stay in Squamish. They—eighteen persons in all—were taken to New Westminster and “comfortably housed in the Immigration Sheds” to stay there until a new location for settlement would be decided on.

Eventually John Christian Nelson and his family settled in Whonnock on 160 acres at the southeast corner of 272nd Street and 112th Avenue. Ole Lee and his two sons opted not to acquire land at this point and for the next three years led ambulant lives fishing between the Skeena River and the Queen Charlotte Islands, where his sons would continue fishing in later years.

In 1891 Ole Lee went back to Norway to witness the wedding of his oldest daughter, Martha Marie Lee, with Ole Nelson. The couple immediately emigrated to Whonnock, where the groom’s brother, John Christian, was dying. During the following year Ole Lee returned with the rest of his family and settled in Whonnock for good.

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Maple Ridge News changed the title to “A Norwegian Transatlantic Odyssey.”