

Ole Johnson Came To Merrill When City Was Rail Head

Ole Johnson, now 88 years old, is one of the oldest residents in the city of Merrill.

He was born in Telemarken, Norway, on December 22, 1853, and came to the United States when he was 22 years old. He left Norway on March 4, 1881 and landed in the United States on April 23, after an unusual trip in which the boat was frozen in the ice of the North Sea for three weeks.

Ole arrived at Merrill on July 9, 1884. The end of the rail line was then at Merrill and the depot was where the present round house stands. He well recalls his first meal in Merrill, at a house at the corner of Douglas and Fourth streets.

Eight sawmills were operating day and night at the time of his arrival and nearly every home in the city kept boarders and roomers to accommodate the many persons employed in the lumber industry.

Previous to 1893, the sawmills did not operate in the winter when the timber was cut and the rivers were frozen.

Ole recalls one important event in the early life of Merrill when he and Andrew Moon unloaded the first carload of logs to arrive in the city. They came by rail to Wright's sawmill in 1893. Before that time logs came to the various mills by way of the rivers.

During the flood in the fall of 1894, Mr. Johnson recalls that boats had to be used within the city and the water was over the level of the existing wooden bridges. A boat was used to transport those traveling between the east and west sides of the city.

In 1893, following his appointment by Mayor Charles Badeau, Ole served on the police force of the city and he recalls many interesting experiences as a police officer when most of the men in the city were lumberjacks and river drivers.

He recalls that the Seventh Ward was practically all virgin timber when he arrived. In those early lumbering days, the mills cut only pine, using no hemlock or hardwoods whatsoever.

His first job was with the Merrill Lumber Company, located in the Sixth Ward. Later he worked on railroad construction in this area. He recalls that ties were hauled down the railroad. No horses were used in logging operations in the woods. At the time he drove two yoke of oxen skidding logs in the woods.

Merrill had limited street lighting. Ole recalls, each evening a man would go about lighting each light and using a lantern to locate the lamp posts.

Many Indians were employed in lumber camps and they lived in primitive style in wigwags adjacent to the camps. Lumber was rafted down the Wisconsin River, instead of being hauled by rail.

In the first lumber camps, the buildings were constructed entirely of logs, with pole floors and roofs. Lumber was used only for doors and tables. Laborers received only \$18 a month. Hours were not mentioned and you sometimes walked from five to eight miles to be at your job before daylight. You worked until dark and then walked back to camp. Food, says Ole, was anything but desirable in those early days.

Mr. Johnson was employed at Heineman by the Heineman Lum-



The "Peggy" logging engine operated by the Union Land Company, a Stange company subsidiary, in their logging operations in the Newwood country, thirty years ago.

ber Company and was there when the village was destroyed by fire in 1912.

Ole couldn't speak a word of English when he arrived in Merrill. He had left school at the age of 14 years. However, he acquired, as did many immigrants, the ability to speak, read and write in English.

Ole has had a variety of interesting experiences and recalls all of the men prominent in the life of the community from the pioneer days to the present time. He has a wide acquaintance among both young and old and they enjoy his friendliness and the vivid memories of Merrill's early days which he relates in his

inimitable style.

Mr. Johnson states that present day winters are neither as long or as cold as those of earlier days. He recalls the winter of 1899 when he was working just north of Merrill and the temperature averaged 50 degrees below zero for a period of weeks. More snow fell, he says, in those earlier winters and it was not unusual for snow to be four feet on the level in the woods.

He has resided on Seventh Street in the Seventh Ward for many years and in recent years has lived at the home of his daughter, Mrs. Lyndon B. Emerich. He enjoys unusually fine health for his years.

He was married in 1888 and his children are Mrs. L. B. Emerich, Miss Rudy Johnson and Oscar Johnson.

They Were Busy

In the earlier days of merchandising in Merrill, clerks in retail stores had to talk German and Norwegian to customers, because many of the latter were unable to talk English. Many of the residents of Lincoln county were immigrants who were so busy making farms out of the wilderness that they had not had time to study the language of their adopted country.

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John Leland, early Merrill resident and well known in the logging and lumbering industry.