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Remembering Our Unsung Pioneer Ancestors

by

Jim Lewis

My great-grandparents, Niels Jensen Norgaard (1848-1920) and Karen Sorensen Norgaard (1852-1949) immigrated to America in 1869 and 1871, respectively. They had both been raised in the Aalborg area of northern Jutland. Niels left his family and a comfortable home at the age of twenty to travel alone to a new, yet unknown, destination. His immediate objective was Harlan, Iowa, where relatives had a farm. It was twelve hundred miles across unfamiliar land between New York City and Harlan, Iowa. Niels was alone in a strange land, didn’t know the language, and had little money to sustain himself. He traveled on grit and sheer determination to make a good life for himself and the family he hoped to have one day.

Karen (known as Carrie) Sorensen traveled to America at the age of nineteen, by sea and by rail, together with her entire family. They left all they had in Denmark and set out for their new life. Their destination was also Harlan, Iowa. Soon after they arrived, Niels walked to Moody County, Dakota Territory with a friend to stake a claim for 160 acres of free land. He found a beautiful spot overlooking, and adjacent to, the Big Sioux River. He constructed a hasty shanty, fashioned some crude furniture, buttoned it up for the winter, and walked back to Harlan. Karen would fall in love with and marry Niels, whom she had known back in Denmark, in 1872, after getting reacquainted at Cuppy’s Grove Baptist church near Harlan. The wedding took place as they were on their way to the new home Niels had built on the prairie of Dakota Territory. Karen’s family remained in Harlan while her father, Soren, searched for a homestead in Nebraska, just west of Omaha. Before he could bring his wife to their claim, he contracted typhoid fever and died. Karen’s mother, Ane, and her brother Anders joined Karen and Niels in Dakota Territory after Soren’s estate was settled.

My great-grandparents were among the first homesteaders in Moody County, Dakota Territory. In fact, Grandma Norgaard was purported to be one of the first white women in the county. The log
shanty that Niels hastily constructed, overlooked the Big Sioux River just northeast of Dell Rapids. When that home burned a few months after their marriage, they lived in a sod house built into the side of a hill. Their journey of sacrifice, hardship, joy, sorrow, crop failures, droughts, grasshopper plagues, devastating summer storms and winter blizzards, and ultimately their bountiful blessings, began in that tiny twelve-by-fourteen-foot shanty. They would have twelve children on the prairie homestead, but they would only see nine grow to adulthood. Such was the life of a pioneer. My great-grandparents were pioneers who left an inheritance that reaches beyond their children’s children. What they left for future generations cannot be measured in financial terms. In my book *Unsung Pioneers: The Spirit that Made America Great* (2018), I tell their story in extensive detail, enhanced by material from many other historical and literary sources, but in this article, I focus primarily on their role as pioneers in the settlement of the Dakota Territory in the late nineteenth century, based largely on a first-hand account by their son Charles (Charley) Norgaard, who was born on January 17, 1885 and died on March 30, 1977.

When he recorded his family history in the 1950s, Charley described his childhood home as sitting beside a dirt road, which was once crisscrossed by buffalo trails, going hither and thither. If you start in one direction on the road and travel far enough you will come to the effete east, and if you start in the opposite direction and travel a few hundred miles farther, you will come to the distinctive west. My birthplace is neither effete, nor is it distinctive. It isn’t particularly pleasing to anyone passing by either. It is beautiful only in the eyes of those who have lived here, and in the memories of the Dakota Territorially born whose dwelling in far off places has given them moments of homesickness for the low rolling and smiling hills, the swell and dip of the ripening grain, the fields of sinuously waving corn, and the elusively fragrant odor of the new mown hay.

In 1861, Congress declared the remaining north portion of the Louisiana Purchase as the Dakota Territory. The following year the Homestead Act opened the land for settling
by any and all who could meet the criteria for filing and working a claim. Many came to the territory, but not all of them were of the sturdy stock necessary to tame the wild lands of Dakota. In 1871 there was already a movement to separate the territory in two sections that might eventually be welcomed into Statehood. Politics would delay that initiative for several more years, but that didn’t stymie the optimism, courage, and determination of those set on making the territory their home. One such person was a young Danish immigrant, Niels Jensen Norgaard. Nels as he would later be known, came by foot with nothing but a shovel and axe to search out a homestead in the southeastern part of the territory. Nels possessed the pioneer grit that would endure him through many hardships over the ensuing thirty-plus years as he built his claim into a holding of 700 acres. Most of that acreage is still in the hands of extended family and it is still being farmed today, more than 80 years later [more than 140 years in 2020].

Nels, and those like him, would endure all the hardships and tests that the new land would throw at them, brush off the dust of the droughts, swim through the rivers of floods, shovel snow until their arms fell off, and fight the grasshopper devastation year after year. That was the kind of stock they were. Like most of his neighbors, Nels had come a long way seeking a new life. To return to Denmark without fulfilling his dream would mean he had failed, and failure was not an option.

These are the people who really built the Nation we are blessed to reside in today. They planted farms and trees. They built the first roads and bridges and fences. They built the first schools and churches. Some opened their homes to the other pioneer family children and taught them not only the three “Rs,” but about being thankful to God for the blessings that He lavished upon them. Some of those blessings were hard to deal with at the time, but they were necessary challenges that created the abundant harvests that followed. There were weeks when the drifting snow and
sullen sleet held communities in their bitter grasp. There were times when hot winds came out of the southwest to parch the land with its feverish breath. But, between those onslaughts there were days so perfect, so filled with the aroma of clover and alfalfa, and the rich, pungent smell of the newly turned loam that to the prairie-born, there were no others as lovely. God had created all that the pioneer enjoyed. How could there be anything better? There are few [none in this new century] people left who have seen the transitions, and who have witnessed the flicker of the last burnt-out embers.

When Dakota Territory was new, homes, like dresses, were constructed more for durability than beauty. Thrice a room was added to our small dwelling until it attained its present form and size. Mother kept everything that came into the house. As a consequence, there was in it a flotsam of her many years on the prairie. She often remarked, "They are not antiques, they are just old." To her, and the other pioneers as well, there was no particular period of time. They lived through a breathtaking evolution of change. Mother had lived with candle sticks and spinning wheels, telephones and automobiles, push-button lights, and indoor flush toilets.

To those who persevered, may we take it upon ourselves to salute and respect in memory those who pioneered in Dakota Territory and built the foundation on which rests our heritage. They were not stylish, but they were strong. They were not highly educated or cultured, but they had innate refinement and courage. We owe our very existence to the unsung pioneer.

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When Niels emigrated in 1869, he did so for the same reasons as many other young men his age, namely, to avoid conscription into the military and improve his economic situation. He wasn’t an unpatriotic person, but he had seen enough death and destruction in his country from the war with Germany in 1864. In addition, Niels was the oldest of eight children living on his stepfather’s copyhold farm,
which meant that the land was leased from a larger landowner. Land reforms of the 1850s gradually made it possible for many copyholders to buy their farms from the landowners, but it took decades for this to become the norm across Denmark, so Niels had no prospect of inheriting the farm to support his own family someday.

This aerial view of the Norgaard farm near Aalborg shows how all of the buildings open into the central courtyard. Image used with permission from the author.

Niels traveled to New York on the SS Northern Light, a side-wheeled American cargo steamer that had been in service for seventeen years before Niels boarded it. Although it advertised accommodations for 250 first-class passengers, 150 second-class, and 400-500 in steerage, it had made fewer than ten passenger crossings up to then. Niels’ crossing in 1869 was its last passenger service, so conditions would not have been lavish. According to his son Charley:

Shortly after they had set sail in early March the weather became stormy and cold, continuing thus day and night for many days causing great numbers of these wayfaring folks to become very seasick. Some became hysterical in this rocking and cracking boat, tossed about by the turbulent seas. Many times it did look like they would be completely submerged by the on-coming mountainous waves or cracked
to bits by the monstrous icebergs seen floating nearby. The brave Captain and his crew were kept on constant alert day and night trying to guide and keep the ship, with all its passengers, safe and intact.

A few of these suffering sick folks died from the ordeal and burial services were held on the ship, usually by a sympathetic Christian fellow traveler, and the bodies lowered into the storm-tossed sea. Perhaps it was a dear child, wife and mother, or a master of a family on whom depended success and livelihood in the new and strange land whose life had departed, leaving behind dear sick ones to mourn their loss and mar their dreams of the happy days ahead.

The usual time for this ship to cross the Atlantic was about four weeks, but, due to the bad storms and hazardous sea, it was over six weeks before these worried and sick folks saw the long looked- and wished-for shores of America. Most of their provisions had become spoiled and unfit to eat, their drinking water was all gone. No doubt, but what there was great joy and loud shouts as they drew near the shore of this great and promising land of liberty.

From New York, Niels traveled by train to Harlan, Iowa, where his uncle Carl Hansen and his wife lived in a community of Danish immigrants. He worked on the Hansens’ homestead through the summer in gratitude and commitment for their sponsorship. He attended the country school during his first winter to learn English and to learn more about what made his adopted country so great. He worked a number of different jobs to earn enough to strike out in search of his own homestead claim. The territory was filling up quickly, but, to Niels’ advantage, homesteading was a challenging undertaking that some immigrants were not cut out for. Farming on land that had been turned and planted for several generations in Denmark was entirely different work than breaking soil for the first time in history. As new homesteaders fanned out from their bases in Harlan, Iowa and Omaha, Nebraska, others headed back home or found work in local business or industry. Not everyone possessed the patience, persistence, and perseverance required to prove up a homestead claim.
Although a homestead claim was free for the taking, there would be expenses that Niels had to prepare for before he could venture out from Harlan. He worked for the railroad, laying track around Omaha, so others could travel further west in search of just the right place. At that time in the history of the railroad, track heading north only went as far as Sioux City, Iowa. To get into the heart of Dakota Territory required a sturdy pair of legs or a team of oxen and wagon. Horses were not plentiful, and they probably were not of much use to the homesteader anyway. Homesteaders learned that the previously unplowed prairie was so densely rooted from centuries-old prairie grasses that horses weren’t strong enough for the task. Many of the new immigrants couldn’t afford to outfit themselves for the journey north, so Niels still had time to get ready. He worked as a hired hand in the spring of 1870 for a wealthy merchant, Mr. Thorne, in the Council Bluffs area. He took care of the family’s elegant carriage and horse, as well as serving as houseman and errand boy. Charley later explained, “Nothing that would help Niels get closer to the goal of owning his own homestead was beneath his pride.”

In the fall of 1871, Niels decided he was ready to seek out a homestead in the good farmland he had heard about in the Dakota Territory, north of Sioux City. He returned to Harlan to tell the Hansens about his plans and to propose to Karen before setting off with his friend Jens Peter Uttrup. In Sioux City, they bought supplies, including an axe and shovel, as well as a .45 caliber pistol and a breech-loading shotgun for protection and hunting. Of their onward journey, Charley recounts:

Leaving Sioux City on foot with their pack of provisions, Niels and Jens headed for Vermillion, Dakota Territory, which is about 50 miles Northwest of Sioux City. Vermillion was the location of the United States land office for that portion of the Territory. Reaching there in a couple of days, they inquired about the best opportunities for unclaimed land. After considering options, they decided to walk almost due north to the Jim River to look for a site, but it seems that after going some distance they misjudged their direction and walked northeast. How they could have navigated through the Territory with primitive and incomplete maps escapes
this writer anyway. There were no settlers along this route of whom to inquire as to their whereabouts, so they kept on walking. The weather was nice, fall like. Sleeping on a blanket under the high blue canopy beset with twinkling stars that seemed so close that a person could almost reach up and pick one. They were certain they had made the right decision, even if their direction was a little off. Maybe God was guiding them to the place He wanted them to claim.

After about three days of steady walking they could begin to see, far off in the distance, what looked like trees. Getting closer, they could see it was a river bordered with trees and soon a sod or log house came into sight. They hustled up to one and inquired as to where they were and about the river. They were told it was the Big Sioux River and that some little distance further up there was a town called Sioux Falls. It had a general store and there were a few houses there, besides the military post. They felt much relieved and set out for this town. Upon reaching Sioux Falls they found it humming with activity. Niels and Jens stayed around the town for a day or two further inquiring on homestead sites. While there, they talked to a fellow who offered to sell them his rights to a 160-acre tract which the river cut through and which included the waterfalls for $500. This was the site of the Queen Bee Flour Mill then, and now is the site of the Northern States Light and Power plant in Sioux Falls. Niels told this fellow he wouldn’t give him anything for those rocks and water. Niels proved to be an innovative, creative, and quite successful farmer, but he was not a businessman. The land he passed up turned out to be worth millions of dollars, but his sights were set on bigger rewards.

Wishing the man good fortune in disposing of his land, they strapped their packs on their backs and started north once again. There is a steep hill just north of the city of Sioux Falls. When they reached the top, the view that lay before them as they looked northward across the many acres of beautiful virgin soil bordered on the west by a green ribbon of big trees along the Big Sioux River, was inspiring, and
they felt assured that somewhere up there they would find their hoped-for site.

They could see quite a number of log and sod houses up and across this valley so, following a wagon trail on northward, they walked on, stopping often to inquire as to any favorable sites. The settlers in this neighborhood were mostly Norwegians. As Niels and Jens moved north inquiring at each place, they were told the same story, which was that all nearby land was taken by a brother, sister, or a friend. They kept on walking north with high hopes and, when shortly beyond the last settler, a day’s journey from Sioux Falls, they reached a rocky dells where most likely they crossed the river and followed it along the west side until coming to where a creek of running spring water was flowing from the west into the river.

Here, along the river, was a great many large trees, which they valued much for logs and fuel. Here also was nice, gentle rolling prairies for cultivation, with good pasture land along the river. These two young homesteaders decided that this was to be their chosen site and established their claims side by side. They immediately started making a sod and log house on the dividing line, presumably then lawful to hold a claim. Niels chose the north half, and Jens the south.

Homesteading a claim required that a person build a suitable living place either of sod, logs, or sawn lumber, and furnish it with at least a place for cooking, a stool, and a table. Such a rudimentary beginning was how Niels started his new life in his own home, in and on his own land. There were two other stipulations for the homesteader. He had to go to the land office to file his claim, and, although there was no cost for the land, he had to pay a filing fee of about $14. That was a handsome sum for those days. The other requirement was that the homestead had to be occupied for five years in order to “prove-up” the claim. That would be the most challenging stipulation for many of the early homesteaders.
Niels chose his claim because of the abundance of trees along the river that could be used for fuel and a dwelling. In spite of the abundance of trees, Grandma Norgaard didn’t live in a mill-sawn, lumber home until they had been married ten years. After she accidentally started a fire that burned down their first home, the twelve-by-fourteen-foot shanty of logs and sod, Niels constructed a dugout in the bank overlooking the river. It might have had a nice view of the river but raising a growing family in a dugout was a challenge, to say the least. Still, Karen was proud of having given birth to twelve children without the benefit of a doctor or hospital. When she began having children in 1873 there weren’t any doctors or hospitals around. In fact, there weren’t too many other white women around, so the few who were wound up as nurses, midwives, pharmacists, etc. to their and their neighbors’ families. Karen claimed that she was up on the third day after giving birth, cooking meals on the fourth, and doing laundry on the fifth. That might not be much different from today, but remember, in the 1800s there was no pre-natal or post-natal care, specialists of any kind, or sterile instruments and rooms. Those were formidable pioneers.
As if it wasn’t challenging enough just to be out homesteading on the prairie, Dakota and Montana were still contested territories when Niels claimed his homestead in 1871, so armed conflicts such as Red Cloud’s War flared up from time to time. A number of uprisings in the late 1860s and early 1870s worried homesteaders, who were far from forts and settlements. Niels and his neighbors had been laboring for five years to carve out homes and cities in the prairie when news of the defeat of General Crook’s army by the Lakota war leader Crazy Horse and his warriors at the Battle on the Rosebud River in June 1876 reached the homesteaders. Tensions were likely further exacerbated when news of an even greater defeat at the Battle of Little Bighorn reverberated across the plains. As a new arrival to the area, Niels may not initially have been aware of the tensions between the US Army and the displaced Lakota people, but he soon became aware of the precariousness of his situation. Charley describes his father’s first encounter with his Native American neighbors while building his house on the homestead:

He [Niels] was down by the river, just north of where the creek empties into the river, cutting down trees and trimming the logs for the house when he had his first real scare and experience with a hostile group of Indians. As he was cutting away at a tree, he suddenly heard wild shouts and screams from the south, across the river. Looking in that direction he could see coming towards him about 10 to 12 big, naked Indians. The leader having a feathered toupee on his head and swinging a tomahawk over his head. Father hurriedly picked up his loaded shotgun lying nearby, which, fortunately, he had brought along on the chance of getting a duck or goose for their evening meal.

He remained standing where he was until the leader had crossed over to his side of the river and was rapidly approaching, looking very savagely at father. When they had approached quite close to him and didn’t look like they were going to stop, he raised his gun and fired a shot over their heads. This shocked the murderous looking big fellow and his band so that they all stopped and stood still only a few feet from father. They seemed to have a surprised look.
on their faces and were undecided as to what further to do. This probably being their first experience with white man’s thunder stick. Father reached into his pocket and brought out his chew of tobacco and offered it to the big Chief who muttered something not understandable to father, but seemingly happy he took the whole plug of tobacco, and then they all turned and stalked away.

Although he needed the land to support his family, Niels’ calm actions suggest that he may have felt compassion with the plight of the Plains Indians from whom it had been taken. During this same period, his brother-in-law Eli Jensen was enduring oppressive conditions on his farm in the Solsted area of southern Jutland, which had been annexed by Prussia after Denmark’s defeat in the war of 1864. When he eventually emigrated to join his parents and brother-in-law in Dakota Territory, Eli lost his farm to German settlers moving into the area, giving him the unique experience of being both the vanquished and the victor, to whom go the spoils. He was vanquished in a land dominated by German influence. He subsequently became victor of a land that had previously been dominated by Native American Indians who had freely roamed the lands for untold generations. It does seem ironic.

Unlike many Danish immigrants who sought out communities of like-minded countrymen, Niels stayed just long enough in the Harlan area to repay his sponsor and save enough money to start his own homestead in a place of his choosing. Yet as soon as Niels and Karen were settled on their homestead, they began helping other Danes make their way to America. Niels sponsored several young men by either providing them with passage, a place to live while they established their own claim, or both. Mrs. Tinus Andersen (maiden name Ane Katrine Olesen) recalled how Niels helped her family get established on property adjacent to the Norgaard claim in the early 1870s. In an interview published in a Dell Rapids newspaper in the early 1940s, she shared her story of those early days:

Mrs. Andersen came here when there was no Dell Rapids. She was seven years old when her parents [Jens and Ane Christensen (Naesby) Olesen] left their old home in Denmark for this country to take up a homestead along the Big Sioux river. Niels Norgaard met them in Worthington with
his covered wagon because that was as far as the train went and he drove them and their belongings to their new home.

Her remark about Niels picking them up may seem obscure and not worthy of note by today’s standards, but as you will see later, a round-trip to Worthington, Minnesota from Moody County in 1874, when the Olesen family immigrated, could take a week. There were no trails, bridges, or road signs along the way either. Rivers had to be forded, which could mean unloading and loading the wagon and carrying some items across obstacles by hand. It was no small task to “pick someone up” at the train station. Her story continues:

Immediately they built a one-room frame house on the land ... and they lived in these crowded quarters for a long time. There were no roll-away beds in those days but boxes were used for the children’s beds and they were shoved under the parental bed during the day. Life was very primitive and Mrs. Andersen recalls the severe hardships, the privations, and the struggles of the pioneers. They had to contend with blizzards in the winters and with locusts and sometimes prairie fires in the summer. The grass grew so tall, over one’s head, ideal for hide and seek games, but when it became parched by the hot winds and caught fire not only the homes, but the lives of the settlers were threatened. Once they had to wade out into the river to escape the flames. The nearest trading center for a long time was Worthington and sometimes it was impossible to make the trip for supplies. During one whole winter, Mrs. Andersen recalls, her family had one cup of sugar which a kind neighbor had given them from her meager hoard.

Not all the pioneers were tried and true and occasionally a villain stirred up a little excitement in the settlement. Once, Mrs. Andersen witnessed the kidnapping of her sister. She saw a stranger who was driving a wagon with a pair of mules stop the little girl as she was taking lunch to her brothers who were herding cattle, and take her up on the wagon, apparently to give her a short ride. But when the little sister did not return she described the incident to her parents and her father rode horseback in the direction the
stranger had taken but did not overtake him until he had reached the outskirts of the present Sioux Falls. He rescued his daughter and the kidnapper went peacefully on his way.

Today, the kidnapper would likely have been arrested, beaten beyond recognition, or maybe killed by an angry parent. However, Jens Olesen was a Baptist pastor who believed that kindness and love, even for one’s enemies, was more important. After all, no physical harm had been done.

In settling the Dakota Territory, my great-grandparents faced all manner of challenges, including extreme weather. They experienced their first blizzard in the fall of 1872. Busy with building a home and breaking up the ground for crops, Niels and Karen hadn’t had a chance to get to the post office in Sioux City, 120 miles away, for a long time. Charley reports that Niels decided to walk there in early November, before winter set in. The weather was pleasantly crisp and sunny after a light snowfall when he set out, but in the afternoon of the second day,
time so he could breathe; the wind being so fierce it would
choke him otherwise. He often felt like giving up and laying
down, but something told him to keep going.

After what seemed like an almost hopeless struggle, he stumbled over something and fell. Feeling around in the snow for what he had stumbled over, he found it to be a furrow of turned sod. Hoping it to be a fire break around someone’s house, he started to follow the furrow to the left, this being east and easier going according to the wind, which was coming from the northwest. But, after going only a short distance, out from seeming nowhere, he heard a voice urging him to ‘go the other way.’ So he turned around and started into the storm.

The storm was raging so fierce it was almost impossible to face it and get ahead. Sometimes he had to crawl on his hands and knees. So, perhaps discouraged and tired, he turned around facing east with his back to the wind for rest and to let the wind drive him back east. Again, that same voice shouted for him to go the other way. Stopping and listening he could hear only the whistling wind, so now he decided this time to do his best facing it, so on and on he worked against this terrible freezing blizzard, often on his hands and knees, constantly thinking of his dear wife back on the homestead and hoping she was safely inside their little house with their two good friends.

On he struggled, until it seemed almost the last bit of his strength was gone, when all at once he sensed that he was near something, and, luckily, he was, for he soon came against the wall of a sod house. With renewed strength, and the comfort of knowing he may have found a safe haven, he got to his feet and started feeling his way around the house for a door. Finding it, he stumbled inside and closed the door. He was greeted by two screaming women, who had been frightened by his sudden entrance, and a big dog jumped on him, but did not bite him. Peeling the ice from his face as best he could and getting his eyes open so he could see, he tried to tell these frightened women not to
be afraid, but they could not understand him although he could speak English quite well then. They were French folks and could not understand English or Dane. They soon calmed down and it began to dawn on Father that perhaps their men were out in the storm and the women feared they may be lost just as he was.

The Frenchmen returned soon afterwards, each leading two head of cattle, which was all that they had been able to rescue of their large herd. After taking refuge with the French families for one day, Niels continued on to Sioux City for the mail, passing dead cattle all the way.

The Norgaards experienced many other three-day blizzards, including one a few months later that buried their hut up to the top of the stovepipe; they were living with the Uttrups while Karen was pregnant with her first child. The men dug their way out from the inside, while a Danish neighbor, Gammel Christian Sorensen, dug from the top until they cleared a path out. The next step was digging out the barn, clearing a hole through two feet of snow to lower hay and melted snow down to the stock until they could dig a hole large enough to lead them out to the river. On another occasion, Niels helped an Indian dig out his wife and child from a snow cave he had buried them in for shelter the day before; fortunately, they were found safe and warm when their cave was finally unearthed.

Another common danger was prairie fires, which destroyed their newly built shanty on the brink of a knoll just south of the Riverview Cemetery where their baby daughter Caroline lay buried. They were able to rescue most of their belongings but had to live in the barn until they were able to build a new shanty. On another occasion, Karen, pregnant with her daughter Anna, had to rescue the cattle grazing along the river bottom. On her way home, with the cattle running ahead of her, she had to duck under the surface of the river to save herself from the flames. The grasshopper plagues of the late 1870s were just as devastating, as the grasshoppers consumed their harvest-ready wheat, as was a massive hailstorm just before the harvest of 1893 and a drought in 1894. Facing starvation, many of Niels and Karen’s neighbors were forced to move away, leaving their hard-built homes behind.
Fortunately for the settlers, other years produced bountiful harvests and many settlers were able to prosper through their own initiative and effort, which was not the case for many of their friends and relatives back in Denmark, where it was difficult to rise above the status of tenant farmer. When Niels died in 1920, his estate was valued at $114,000, the equivalent of more than $1.5 million today. He came to this country with nothing more than pocket change, a dream, and the ambition to succeed. With the government's gift of free land, he and the others succeeded beyond their dreams, but it wasn't an easy row to hoe. He and Karen built a fine home, acquired seven hundred acres of prime land for raising an abundant harvest, raised nine children to adulthood, supported friends and relatives in their quest to come to America, donated part of their land to be the site of the Scandinavian (now Sioux Valley) Baptist Church in 1888, and dedicated another part as a final resting place for those who helped settle the area and the dear little ones sadly lost. Niels and Karen were generous beyond fault. They recognized that all the material things they had obtained came from God, and it was to Him that they should give thanks. Both the church and the cemetery have stories connected to them that are meaningful to the descendants of Moody County pioneers. The church is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. That is quite an honor for a little country church, and a fitting tribute to the people who raised it up out of the prairie.

Many years after Niels' death, an article by Mrs. James Nesby in the Sioux Falls newspaper, *Daily Argus Reader* honored Karen on the occasion of her ninety-fourth birthday on September 27, 1946. Mrs. Nesby reports that Karen "has grown old graciously and moves about with a briskness and determination that belie her years. She is still able to perform her light household tasks and enjoys doing so. Hers is no dimming vision, since she can thread a needle and read without the aid of glasses." For the generations that had no memory of the homesteading era, Mrs. Nesby explains:

She [Karen] has lived a rugged life. She was the second white woman in the vicinity where she came as a bride to her husband's homestead. Her first home was a log shack that always required chinking to keep out the cold. When it burned down it was replaced by a half sod house on the
side of the hill with only one door and two windows. But she loved her home and the prairie, especially along the river where trees and tall grasses grew. She never complains about the hardships and privations of her early life and to this day has no patience with physical ailments. ... She was a real pioneer. Within her memory are the beginnings of a community and its growth for 74 years. She experienced the dangers of the early days, the blizzards which snowed homes under, encounters with Indians, sometimes formidable, and encounters with outlaws. From the prairie soil on which she homesteaded has sprung some of the most productive farmland in the country. Of her children, seven are living [three died in childhood and nine lived to adulthood]. She has 33 grandchildren, 42 great-grandchildren, and 5 great-great-grandchildren – altogether 90 descendants.

Karen lived almost three more years after this tribute, passing on July 10, 1949. Her obituary described her as the last of the early pioneers,
as well as the last of the charter members of the Dell Rapids Baptist Church, where she and Niels had moved in 1911. At her funeral service, it was said of her that “all her life she was a cheerful person and the faith and happy outlook that guided her during the pioneer days remained with her as long as she lived.”