

Norwegians

■ FROM A1

The first Norwegians who arrived wrote to relatives back home urging them to come to the area.

The 1900 U.S. Census shows that more than 2,500 people were living in the Stillaguamish Valley and on Camano Island — and Scandinavians, particularly Norwegians, were the largest ethnic group. Indigenous people, who were counted for the first time in the 1900 Census, were largely living on reservations at that point.

Earthly paradise

Zacharias Martin Toftezen, born in Norway in 1821, arrived on Whidbey Island in 1849 and is considered Washington's first Norwegian immigrant.

In "The Stanwood Story: Volume II," author Alice Essex wrote that when Toftezen landed, he is said to have exclaimed to his companions, "Our search is over — we have at last found our earthly paradise."

Toftezen filed a claim for over 300 acres near what is today Oak Harbor.

The website of UCLA's Re-Imagining Migration, a program that promotes immigration education, states that in the 1800s, "Handwritten letters served as the perfect vehicle to exchange stories of fear and opportunity between newly arrived immigrants and those who remained in their homeland."

Toftezen's family left Norway, and in 1865, several relatives, including his mother and sister, landed on Whidbey Island.

After a few years, several members of the Toftezen clan came to the Stillaguamish Valley.

In "Scandinavians of the Pacific, Puget Sound" which was published in 1900, author Thomas Ostenson Stine wrote that E. Graham, who had married Zacharias Martin Toftezen's sister Bernhardine, "disembarked at the mouth of the Skagit" in 1870.

The author wrote that the Norwegians O.B. Iverson, N.P. Leque, Nils Eide and A. Danielson "landed in fair-sized canoes" two years later.

Many more arrived and filed claims, cleared land of stumps left over from logging and started farms growing crops and raising livestock, such as dairy cattle.

Independent farmers and entrepreneurs

These Norwegian immigrants had a reputation of being "independent farmers and potent factors in the upbuilding of the county," Stine wrote.

N.M. Lien, who settled near Stanwood in the late 1800s, is described as an "honored" and "conscientious" man who "owns a



STANWOOD CAMANO NEWS FILE PHOTOS

The Norwegian Male Chorus included these Stanwood men in 1922.



Roald Amundsen was a famous Norwegian explorer who visited Stanwood in 1908.

magnificent farm, running pretty nigh into the heart of the city, golden with waving cereals and smiling flowers, and spreads in an easterly direction."

Stine also identifies many "typical Norwegian" entrepreneurs whose "progress and success" led to the establishment of a variety of businesses including hotels, stores, shingle mills and a dairy processing plant.

In "Camano Island: Life and Times in Paradise," authors Art Kimball and John Dean wrote about the first Norwegians who began arriving on the island in the 1870s.

The authors wrote that in 1899, after working in a Camano lumber mill for 11 years, K.P. Frostad and A.K. Sandwick "bought land on which they operated a successful dairy farm," which was one of the first on the island.

Hans Peter and Chonstane Olsen arrived on Camano in 1900 and started a farm.

Retired State Sen. Mary Margaret Haugen, 80, is the Olsens' granddaughter.

"Hans Peter and Chon-



This 1969 photo shows the popularity of the annual lutefisk dinner served in Stanwood every November by Fritjov Lodge, Sons of Norway. The first public lutefisk dinner was held in 1907 at People's Union Hall for a cost of 35 cents.



Crown Prince Olav and Crown Princess Martha of Norway made it a point to visit Stanwood in 1939.

stane came from the Dakotas and originally settled on Lopez Island," she said. "They had 12 kids, and my grandfather was not happy about the lack of good schools there, so they bought property and started farming near Utsalady in 1900."

Customs and social connection

Toward the end of the 1800s, as more Norwegians arrived and successfully started farms and businesses, they turned their attention toward maintaining the traditions of their homeland.

Many of these immigrants were Lutherans, and organizing congregations and building houses of worship were priorities.

In 1879, after meeting informally in homes and available halls, Norwegian-

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Americans built the first church in Stanwood.

In "The Stanwood Story," Essex wrote: "Stillaguamish Lutheran, or Lutheran Trinity as it is also recorded, had the distinction of being not only the first church in Stanwood, but the first church on the Stillaguamish. It was also the first church constructed by Scandinavians in the far west and the first Lutheran church to be built on the Pacific Coast."

In 1892, the church burned to the ground. Congregants rebuilt and opened a new building in 1894, which still stands today at 27201 99th Ave. NW and is known as Our Saviour's Lutheran Church of Stanwood.

In "Camano Island: Life and Times in Paradise," the authors wrote about the start of what would become Camano Lutheran Church.

"Official organization occurred December 17, 1890, in a hall at Utsaladdy, aided by Stanwood's Rev. Christian Jorgensen."

Construction of Camano

Aid of Trinity Lutheran Church."

These events were held off and on over the years until 1952 when the Stanwood Lions Club began hosting annual lutefisk dinners.

Stanwood Lions Club Secretary John Haddock remembers how popular these events were.

"At its peak, I think we served over 1,500 people," he said.

Haddock said that by the 1990s, attendance began to decline and the dinners were canceled in 2012.

Gathering together

Norwegian-Americans also built meeting places to gather and preserve their heritage.

The Sons of Norway was founded in Minnesota in 1895, and according to the national headquarters' website, the organization "provides opportunities for members to reconnect with the culture and traditions of Norway through local lodges and district lodge activities and events."

The website states that today there are over 400 lodges in North America and Norway with nearly 57,000 members.

Stanwood's Sons of Norway's Fritjov Lodge 17 was established in 1910 and is named after Fritjov Nansen, a distinguished Norwegian explorer.

According to Stanwood Camano News archives, the original hall, which was built in the late 1880s, was moved to its present location at 9910 270th St. NW in 1914 and rebuilt in 1934.

Barbara Christoferson, who is the lodge secretary, said that there are about 158 members from the Stanwood-Camano area.

"We are a pretty active organization and we offer cultural and educational events throughout the years," she said.

Honoring the past

The achievements of the area's first Norwegians are commemorated with a granite stone known as the Toftezen Monument at Our Saviour's Lutheran Cemetery on Pioneer Highway just south of downtown Stanwood.

The memorial was, in part, created to honor Zacharias Martin Toftezen whose remains were moved from Oak Harbor and interred at the Stanwood cemetery in 1931. The bodies of his brother and mother — buried in an abandoned cemetery in Stanwood — were also moved to the Lutheran cemetery.

On May 27, 1939, Crown Prince Olaf of Norway visited the monument with his wife, Crown Princess Martha and according to the Stanwood Camano News archives, "...his Royal Highness laid a wreath at the Toftezen monument."

With today's more diverse population, Norwegian influence may not be as strong as it was years ago, but it's still a part of the Stanwood-Camano community.

Churches founded by Norwegians, traditional social activities and shops with Norwegian goods are easy to find throughout the community.

Descendants of those adventurous people who crossed an ocean for a better life live throughout the Stillaguamish Valley and on Camano Island.

Haugen summed up her feelings for the area's first Norwegian-Americans.

"They were such hard-working, honest people who loved America, but they never forgot about their Norwegian homeland and all its beauty and culture," she said.

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