

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Confirming Our Faith for 160 Years—Part 2

Mathilda and Ole Bergland's Family

Back in November we reported on our very first confirmand, Mathilda Abrahamsdatter Bergland, who was confirmed by herself as a married adult on September 2, 1857. Getting back to Mathilda and Ole's family, I don't remember what became of all of their children (and there isn't time to find that information right now) but to see how they fit into Houston's history let us follow one of their daughters.

Nettie Bergland married Knut T. Halvorson (a.k.a. Knut Halvorson Skree and Knut T. Heia) and like his *sviger far* (father-in-law), Ole Bergland, Knut had his roots in Fyresdal. Being from that enchanting valley of folk culture and fantasy must have "done something" for the women in that family. (It's the land of my paternal ancestors as well, if that tells you anything).

Knut's father, Halvor Thorson Skree, came from a Skree farm on the west side of the large *Fyresvatn* (or lake) quite a distance from my family's farm on the west side of the much smaller *Skrevatn* (Skree Lake) in the upper part of Fyresdal. It took me years to unravel the mystery of that other Skree family I'd seen in the church records, and it didn't help that there was yet another Skree family in Mound Prairie in the early years with roots in Vrådal, in West Telemark.

Knut Halvorson's other names (mentioned above) tell an interesting story as well. He used the first one in his younger years which referred to the name of the farm (Skree) his family came from in Norway, and the other one is what the Norwegians (and I assume the others in Houston) called him after he took over the farm in Sheldon that was settled by Sveinung Haakenson Heia from Vinje in West Telemark.

That was the custom brought over from Norway where each farm had its own name which rarely changed (aside from a certain degree of evolution in spelling), most going back centuries and even to Viking times. Whichever farm you lived on you took that "place name" and put it after your Christian (or given) name and patronym (your father's name followed by "son" or "datter"). The use of place names served to differentiate the various families, but they should be thought of only as an "address," and definitely not as a surname back in Norway (which is rather difficult for Americans to understand).

When a family moved to another farm they used that farm's name as long as they lived there, and so on. This could lead to a number of name changes over the years and grown siblings with different last names. The immigrants brought this custom with them and quite naturally continued with it for the first 10-15 years or so over here. This resulted in a few families carrying the name of a farm they took over from someone else, in those early years, as their fixed surname to this day, even though it has nothing to do with their heritage in the *gamle landet* (the old country). This was the case with the Sanden and Weom families in Badger and it makes it that much more difficult to trace the family's origins, as you can imagine.

My Nerison family in Badger was known as Vraa for several decades for that very reason, but it didn't become permanent. (You will often see Vraa in reference to them in the old *Houston Signals*, but not on their gravestones.) It was the same for Knut Halvorson. He and his brothers and sister settled on their patronym of Halvorson as their permanent surname. (In America both genders used "son.") The old Heia farm where Knut and Nettie raised their family is right off the first big curve as you go up the Sheldon road (County 10, just past Marilyn Jore's) and was last inhabited by Ervin and Verna Krage and their son, Ervin Jr. Before the barn fell down you could see "K.T. Halvorson" in large wooden letters above the hay mow doors facing the road. (More about the Halvorson family next month.)

Shelley and Jim, Cross of Christ Archives, January 2018