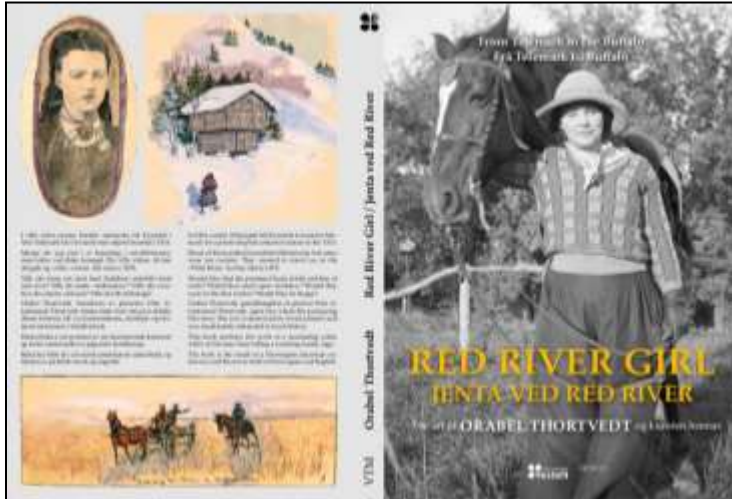


Cross of Christ Chronicles

New Book from Norway Features Houston Pioneers



Near the end of last month, we received a long-awaited shipment of books direct from Norway. We have been looking forward to sharing this news with all of you, since the main section of this book tells a story of emigration from Telemark, Norway to Houston at the outset of the Civil War, and subsequent

settlement along the Buffalo River near Moorhead in the Red River Valley, as told through the lives and experiences of one man and his extended family and friends. That man was Ole G. Thortvedt (1829-1908), a drawing of whom appeared in last month's Parish Visitor. He came to Houston in 1861 in the company of a large group of acquaintances from Fyresdal in West Telemark to join their many compatriots who had settled here during the previous decade. Many others from neighboring parishes also made Houston their destination that year for the same reason.

After several years on their relatively small farms on Mound Prairie (Section 5), Ole Thortvedt led a wagon train with friends and family members 400 miles up to Clay County, becoming full-fledged pioneers on the open frontier of the Red River Valley in 1870. They were the first to settle along the Buffalo River and there they confronted *Nature* in all her fury with brutal winters, prairie fires, and grasshoppers, along with all the hardships involved with just "breaking" the prairie to open it up for cultivation, and constructing shelters for "man and beast."

This remarkable new book heralds the completion of an interesting and exciting new venture involving Ole's granddaughter, Orabel, and ultimately Ole himself and his contemporaries. The West-Telemark Museum at Eidsborg, in conjunction with The Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County (Minn.) (HCSCC), recently concluded an in-depth research project concerning Orabel Thortvedt and

her life as an accomplished artist, writer and family historian, resulting in a traveling exhibit and a beautifully designed and fascinating coffee table-style book titled *Red River Girl—the Art of Orabel Thortvedt*.

Orabel (1896-1983) was a unique and captivating woman who loved horses, history, and art, but she probably loved her grandfather Ole most of all. It was at his knee she heard so many wonderful stories about the past and his experiences coming over from Telemark and pioneering in Minnesota, both in the hills and valleys of Houston and the great wide expanse of the Red River Valley. Growing up in what came to be known as the “*Buffalo-bygdi*” (Buffalo River Settlement—Houston’s largest Norwegian colony) Orabel never tired of listening to all that the old ones had to say and took it all into her memory, setting everything down in her numerous notebooks as part of what was to become her life-long obsession: writing and retelling her family’s story, as well as the other families in the settlement, illustrating them with fine pencil or pen and ink drawings and exquisite watercolors, themselves becoming historical and artistic treasures.

Ole Thortvedt’s entire extended family, including every sibling but one, his old mother “Gamle Jorand,” stepfather and stepbrother arrived in Houston during the summer of 1861, staying with various friends and relatives that first year. Because of the intimate knowledge gathered over many years from those older family members and neighbors, Orabel was able to tell the story of her mother’s life in Fyresdal, the ocean crossing and overland travel to Houston, the movements and activities of her family as they acquired land and built a new life on Mound Prairie, their long slow journey up to Clay County by wagon train in 1870, their pioneering efforts and encounters there along the Buffalo River, and the development of their new rural settlement up to 1899, *in almost unbelievable detail!* That, together with her artwork, is what separates her account of the immigrant experience, from all the others that have been written over the years.

But there is much more to the book than Orabel’s stories and illustrations, by the inclusion of several well-researched and written articles, which while scholarly are also very accessible to the average reader. Tillman Hartenstein, educational programs coordinator at the West-Telemark Museum, introduces the book and explains the project, talks about Orabel’s work, and even offers a psychological assessment of her obsessive pursuits, and Dag Rorgemoen, director of the W-T Museum, writes specifically about the circumstances concerning immigration in 1861, the year the Thortvedt family left Telemark.

Mark Peihl, senior archivist at HCSCC, shares information about the family and what they meant to the region, as well as the materials they left to the society which now occupy 70 linear feet of shelving, while local boy Jim Skree provides background information on Houston's early history with an emphasis on the decade that the Thortvedt, Gedstad, and Gunderson families lived here: 1861-1871.

Lene Teigland Kleivi, archivist and collections manager at the W-T Museum, writes about two people who both influenced the Thortvedt family moves, from Fyresdal to Houston County and then farther on to Buffalo River. On a more personal note Gunnar Midtgarden, a cousin from Fyresdal, tells about his visits with Orabel and her family in 1978 and 1981. Professor Emerita Betty A. Bergland of the University of Wisconsin-River Falls contributed an article on Orabel's years as an art student in Minneapolis.

As a special treat, the last page of the book features a nostalgic poem written in early 1913 by Houston's own Ivar Vathing (Sigurd's uncle) as a look back at the early years of Houston's settlement. It is presented in the original Telemark dialect, along with a literal, non-rhyming translation. On the facing page there appears a large color portrait of Ole G. Thortvedt sitting in a *kubbestol* (log chair) of his own making, with the farms of he (to the left) and his brother Bendik Gunderson (to the right) on Mound Prairie in the background.

As a highlight of the book as far as our congregation is concerned, there appears a brilliant watercolor of the Stone Church as it would have looked shortly after its completion in 1866. It accurately depicts the early landscape, with the exception of the stone fence that went across the front of the churchyard.

Another significant and beneficial aspect of this book is that it can serve as a vicariously rewarding and revealing stand-in for those who do not have a written family history of their own. After all, the experiences of all the pioneers who came to this part of the country at that time were basically the same, no matter their ethnic or racial heritage. This book can provide truly enlightening insights.

As historians, especially, we owe a great debt to Orabel Thortvedt. She and her incredible lifetime of work have long been known in rather limited circles, but with the release of West Telemark Museum's critically acclaimed book, she now belongs to the world.

—This exceptional book can also belong to you for only \$45.00, plus \$5.00 shipping if mailed. The coffee table-style, 9 ½ x 13 inch, hardcover book weighs in at over three pounds, and its 193 pages are printed on luxurious, semi-gloss, art silk paper, profusely illustrated with black & white and color photographs, including numerous scans of Orabel's artwork. The entire text appears in both English and Norwegian, so you can try your hand at reading *Norsk*, as well! Contact: Shelley

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