

Chapter 2 - Theodore's First Settlers

Travelling to Theodore

When writing the stories of their ancestors for the *Theodore and District History* book a number of people included comments about their ancestor's experiences of crossing the Atlantic. Unfortunately, most of them failed to include detailed accounts of what it was like for their ancestors to leave the old country and journey to a new land. With the passing of that generation, those first-hand accounts are now lost. It is possible, however, to get some notion of what many of these early settlers experienced from photographs, works of art, and other sources that are now available on-line, and while details would be different for each family a general impression of their experiences can be achieved.

Leaving Home

For nearly all of Theodore's early settlers who came from Europe the process of coming to Canada began with the selection of their most cherished possession and the dispersal of what they were leaving behind. This was followed by loading their belongings on a cart, and travelling to a sea port and assembling on a dock.

In 1890 Edvard Petersen painted a group of Danish emigrants at Larsens Plads (Larsen's Place) as they prepared to leave for North America.¹ In the late nineteenth century Larsens Plads was a major hub for trans-Atlantic traffic from Copenhagen and many of Theodore's Danish residents would have departed from it. It was used extensively by the Thingvalla Line,² one of several steamship companies that transported Theodore's Danish immigrants.



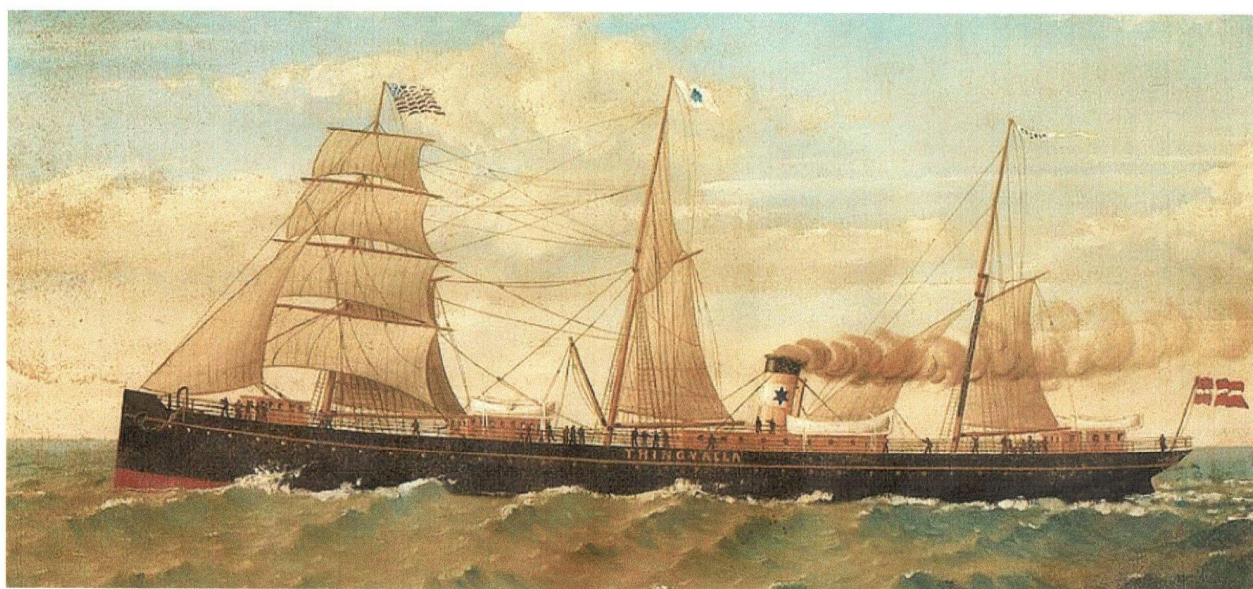
Emigrants waiting to board the Thingvalla

Edvard Petersen, *Udvandrere på Larsen Plads*, 1890. This image is in the public domain.
Downloaded 15 January 2016 from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edvard_Petersen#/media/File

Danish emigration records show that about 287,000 Danes, or about one tenth of the population, emigrated from Denmark between the years 1868 and 1914,³ with a great many of them going to the United States. Many of the contributors to the *Theodore and District History* book state that their Danish ancestors had first emigrated from Denmark to the United States, and first settled in or near the communities of Storden, Westbrook and Windom in Cottonwood County, located in southwestern Minnesota, and later came north to Theodore.

Emigration from Denmark had, of course, begun long before 1868, but many emigrants had been the victims of ticket fraud and other criminal acts. The Danish government, therefore, in 1868 passed strict law to protect those who were seeking a better life in another country. Ticket

agents were made responsible for compensating anyone who was defrauded and had to deposit large sums of money at the police to cover any demands for compensation. Every ticket sold had to be validated at the local police office and there were limits on how many people a ship could carry as well as how much food had to be on board the ships. Finally, the name of every emigrant who bought a ticket in Denmark was recorded.⁴



S/S Thingvalla - Public Domain Media

The Thingvalla: A typical Small Emigrant Ship

The S/S Thingvalla, pictured on page 113, was a typical steamship of the time, and one of nine ships operated by the Thingvalla Line. It had originally been built in 1874 to transport freight, but was converted to passenger service after it was acquired by the Thingvalla Line in 1880. The ship had two decks and could accommodate fifty first class passengers, fifty second class passengers and nine hundred third class passengers.⁵ It is interesting to note that although the

Thingvalla line was a small company with small ships, it offered serious competition to its much larger rivals such as the Allen Line, The Canadian Pacific Line and the Cunard Line, all of which were Canadian owned and operated.

Financing the Voyage

The cost of travelling from Europe to North America in the mid to late nineteenth centuries was no small matter since in the late nineteenth century the ticket alone would have cost almost a year's wages for a farmhand.⁶ Fortunately, for the immigrants the steamship companies engaged in a price war, and by the spring of 1881 it was possible to travel from Norway and Denmark to New York relatively cheaply. As a result thousands of Scandinavians emigrated to North America.⁷

In 1900 *The Leader* published an advertisement for the Atlantic Steamship Lines that stated the price of tickets from Regina to Great Britain, Ireland, and the rest of Europe. Cabin prices were \$42.50, \$50, \$60, \$70, \$80 and upwards, and intermediate accommodation was \$32.50 and upwards.⁸

Even the lowest cabin price would often be beyond the means of many immigrants, so in order to save as much money as possible, a great many of them would have chosen to travel in steerage, which is sometimes called, "between decks." At a price of \$22.50 per ticket on the Atlantic Steamship Lines the immigrants received the cheapest fare offered on a ship but received almost nothing in the way of comfortable accommodation.⁹ One of the images in the series shows the crowded conditions and lack of privacy in steerage on a North German Lloyd steamship.

Those who could not afford to buy a ticket were sometimes able to sign on as part of the ship's crew. When the ship reached its destination they simply jumped ship and stayed in North America. There are several stories of people shovelling coal on cattle boats that sometimes also served to carry immigrants in *Theodore and District History*.

Another way for immigrants to finance their passage to North America was to sell themselves into indentured servitude. In exchange for receiving the transportation costs to North America, some immigrants promised to work as servants or farm hands, occupations that were in high demand before World War I, for a certain number of years or until the ticket was paid for. Such schemes were very popular prior to the First World War, and a great many people took advantage of the offers of assisted transportation. In the summer of 1900 *The Leader* ran the following advertisement.

Mrs Sanford who brought out a number of servant girls last year from England and Ireland is leaving on Aril 14th for another party. The fare of \$36.50 to Regina must in all cases be advanced, but would be deducted from girls first wages until repaid. None but girls with satisfactory references brought. General servants are promised \$10 a month. Fares and references should be sent to W. F. McCreary, Commissioner of Immigration, Winnipeg, who will receive them until May 30th.¹⁰

In England some young women found assistance through the British Women's Emigration Association. This was a 19th-century English organization devoted to helping poor young women emigrate from England.¹¹ Because there were few opportunities for many single women in England prior to World War I. It was widely believed that they would do better economically if they were to emigrate to one of the Dominions or colonies in the British Empire.¹² It was also widely believed that they would have a better chance of finding husbands if they emigrated.¹³

While it is not known how many, if any, young women came to Theodore through the work of the efforts of the British Women's Emigration Association a report on their work in 1906 states that 744 women came to Canada that year compared to 603 in the previous year, and that among the different classifications there were: 192 servants, 102 industrial workers, 69 middle class women, and 41 ladies.¹⁴ The report went on to state that the majority of the young women found employment as dressmakers, shop assistants, milliners, and machinists in linen factories.¹⁵

Life on an Immigrant Ship

Although detailed accounts of crossing the Atlantic Ocean are missing from many of the stories that appear in *Theodore and District History*, a few experiences have been mentioned by the descendant of Theodore's early settlers. These experiences include one encounter with an ice berg, numerous cases of seasickness, the length of time required for the trip, sometimes several weeks, and the fact that some of the ships also served as cattle boats.

Because many immigrants tried to arrange their travel so that they would arrive on the prairies in the spring and have time to plant and harvest crops and gardens, they would have crossed the Atlantic during the late winter months when storms are common and the sea is rough. The late winter storms could account for much of the sea sickness and some of the delay, but a good part of the problem was the fact that many of the ships were just slow because they had been designed to carry freight rather than passengers.

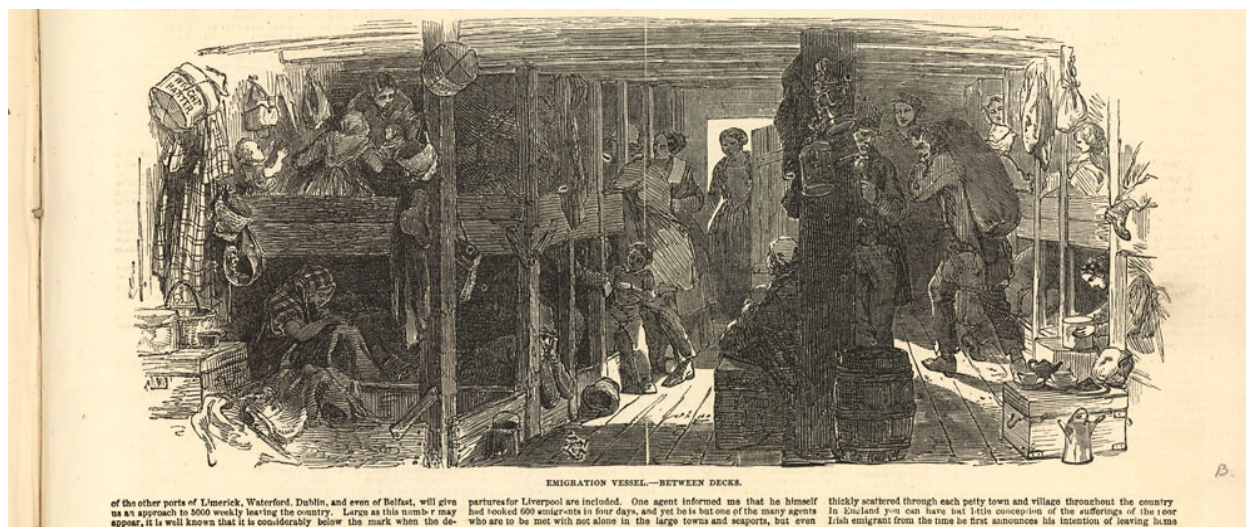
Steerage was the cheapest and least comfortable way for immigrants to cross the Atlantic Ocean. In 1911 the American government received a report from its Immigration Commission on the conditions that existed on board the ship bringing settlers to North America.¹⁶



John C. Dollman - The Immigrant's Ship - Google Art Project - Public Domain Media

The report described the sleeping quarters as large compartments, holding as many as 300, or more, people. Passengers, it said, were divided into three classes; women without male escorts, men travelling alone, and families. Each class had a separate compartment, often in different parts of the ship, and communication between the compartment was often shut off.

The picture on the next page shows a typical steerage compartment filled with immigrants reveals several outstanding features. First there is a noticeable lack of privacy. The bunks appear to be next to one another without so much as a curtain separating them. Second, it appears that a very large number of people have been crowded together in a very small space. Third, it is easy to see how the bunks could be quickly disassembled and stowed away to make room for other cargo, on the voyage back to Europe.



Conditions in Steerage or Between Decks on a typical 19th Century Immigration Ship.
Retrieved 12 February, 2022 from Library and Archives Canada

Although it is not obvious in the picture, the report of the Immigration Commission says that there was no place for hand baggage and no hooks on which one could hang his or her clothing. The report also says that many passengers had to go to bed fully clothed because the bedding was so inadequate that they could not keep warm otherwise. In 1897 the Reverend L. Heiberg, wrote a very severe criticism of the Thingvalla Line. He claimed that he and his family were not told that they had to bring their own bedding and that the mattresses on the ship were small, very thin and stank.¹⁷

Sanitary practices, according to the report, consisted primarily of sweeping the floor. No “sick cans” were provided and the vomit of those who were seasick was often not removed immediately and the wooden floors reeked with foul odours because they were not washed. Wash rooms and lavatories were supposed to be kept in a clean and serviceable condition throughout the voyage, but the report claims that they were both uncomfortable and unhygienic.

Other pictures show that dining rooms with tables and chairs were not a part of the usual amenities in steerage. Passengers would often pass in single file before the stewards who served the rations, and then find a place wherever they could to eat them. Later the passengers washed their own dishes and hid them away until the next meal.

One very big problem that some immigrants faced as they crossed the Atlantic was bad food. Although the food was officially described as fair in quality and sufficient in quantity in the brochures published by the steamship companies, the reality, according to the reports, was that it was neither. What had begun as good material was often spoiled by bad preparation. In his criticism of the Thingvalla Line, Reverend L. Heiberg, went on to say that the soup served in third class was full of maggots and that it was impossible to eat the fish and meat that were provided.¹⁸ Finally, he claimed that he had to buy bread or food from the chef in the ship's kitchen, but the high prices meant that they were half starved when the voyage ended because he did not have money enough to buy sufficient food for his family.¹⁹

In order to escape from the conditions of the compartments in steerage passengers would often try to spend as much time on the open deck as possible. As one can easily imagine the open deck would not be available during the frequent storms of late winter and early spring and when the weather was calm enough to permit the passengers to use it, the open deck was not a great improvement over the conditions in the steerage compartments. Pictures frequently show that the open deck was often just as crowded as the compartments. The report by the Immigration Commission stated that there is no place for anyone to sit except possibly on the ship's machinery which raises questions regarding the safety of the passengers, and depending on the direction of the wind, passengers were often subjected to showers of cinders from the ship's smoke stack.



Meal time aboard the "Lake Huron" en route to Canada. 1899. Library and Archives Canada

An additional problem that many immigrants experienced while crossing the Atlantic Ocean was boredom. The simple fact of the matter was that there wasn't much for steerage passengers to do except to sit or lay around in their compartments or on the deck. Living, as we do, in an age when literacy is almost taken for granted, it is sometimes difficult to remember that many of the people who travelled in steerage could neither read nor write. Passengers had to create their own entertainment in order to pass the time. Stories in *Theodore and District History* indicate that many of Theodore's early settlers were able to play a musical instrument some kind,

and those who brought their instruments with them could sometimes be persuaded to provide music for impromptu dancing.



Crowds on deck of an unidentified passenger ship. 1890-1914 Library and Archives Canada

For the few immigrants who were willing to spend the extra money and travel third class, conditions on board the ships were significantly improved. The first notable improvement was the fact that third class passengers shared small cabins rather than space in an open compartment. A second, notable improvement was the fact that third class passengers often had their own dining room, as well as a common room and a smoking room furnished with tables and chairs. Because many third class passengers could read and write, book stalls or libraries were often provided for adults and playrooms for children were available on some ships. Finally, the promenade deck was usually covered, to protect third class passengers from some of the weather and the ash from the smoke stacks.



Immigrants skipping while en route to Canada aboard S.S. Empress of Britain.
Canada. Dept. of Mines and Resources / Library and Archives Canada / C-009660

Leaving From Central Europe

Unfortunately, there is very little information about the first Ukrainian settlers travelling to Theodore in the late 1890's and early 1900's. Fred Buzuik, for example, simply reported that when a man came to this family's village and told them that there was free land in Canada, with no landlord to tell them what to do, they sold their house to raise money for the trip to the new land.²⁰ From what little information is available, however, it appears that a large number of Ukrainian immigrants first had to travel to Germany and then sail from Hamburg. Many accounts indicate that the trip across the Atlantic could take three weeks to a month.²¹ Coming to Canada

from Central Europe during the First World War presented a unique set of challenges for those who dared to attempt it.

Murmurs began to circulate in our village of a possible war due to the assassination of the Archduke of Austria. Mother received a cable from my father in Canada urging her to pack up and return to Canada as quickly as possible. There was no time for a visa since we were too far from a place where it could be obtained, nor was it possible to escape legally as the war momentum increased. The family arranged to have mother and I carried bodily across the River Prut (which was a natural border between Austria Russia and Austria) at midnight to escape the border sentry, which luckily we managed.

Mother and I remained with friends of the family until all travel plans were arranged in a few days and then we proceeded to Hamburg where we boarded a German liner. As soon as we set sail it was noticed that the sailors were busy disguising our identity of a German origin. Smoke stacks were changed to American colours (repainted), port holes were blocked out for night travel, etc. A couple of days before we were to land, our boat nearly collided head on with an American passenger boat. We didn't realize we were travelling on an American line until we landed in Boston, Mass, instead of Quebec. There was another delay of three days before we disembarked after proven to be civilian passengers. We then proceeded to Montreal, Canada, greatly relieved and on to Winnipeg where my father was anxiously awaiting our arrival.²²



German Emigrants Boarding a Ship in Hamburg - Public Domain Media

The End of the Voyage

Although there were three major ports of entry to Canada prior to the First World War; Halifax, Montreal, and Quebec, the port of Quebec received most of the European immigrants, handling almost twice the number of immigrant as the port of Halifax. In 1887 Canada's immigration facilities at Quebec were enlarged and the following description of the facilities at Quebec appeared in the *Report of the Minister of Agriculture of the Dominion of Canada for the Calendar Year 1889*.

For the convenience of steamers carrying immigrants to be landed at Quebec, there are magnificent deep water wharves at both sides of the river. Immigrants intending to travel by Canadian Pacific Railway, are landed at the Louise Embankment breakwater wharf, which is about 800 feet long, and at low tide has 36 feet of water. On this wharf is a baggage shed, 400 feet long, where baggage can be handled and loaded, but for the convenience of immigrants who walk on a planked platform to the immigration building where the immigration, railway and other offices are, the Canadian Pacific Railway generally runs the baggage up on railway lorries and spreads it out on the platform in front of the building to be sorted and checked as fast as the immigrants procure railway tickets. It is then loaded into baggage cars and a special immigrant train, usually composed of colonist sleeping cars, is always ready to start, so that there is no unnecessary detention. The immigrant has only to exchange or purchase his railway tickets, claim and get checks for baggage, procure provisions for the journey at the counter, and step from the platform into a colonist sleeper in which he goes through without change, to Manitoba, and even British Columbia. There are rarely more than 400 passengers and their baggage on one train, so that frequently the immigrants by a single vessel require two, and sometimes three special trains. The Immigration Hall erected by the Dominion Government in 1887, is a good two story building 400 feet long, with a wide veranda all around, and fixed seats where people are secure from sun and rain. It is admirably situated, almost surrounded by flowing water, pure fresh air in abundance, and plenty of spare ground adjoining. During the two years it has been in use, all who have passed through have given free expression to their satisfaction with the building and conveniences provided for the weary passenger, after spending ten or twelve days in the limited space available for air and exercise on board ship.

On the ground floor at one end, are sufficient double and single offices to accommodate all the officers connected with the various branches of the Immigration Service, viz: Dominion and Provincial Agents, Port Physician, Customs, Ticket, Telegraph and Telephone Offices, all easy of access to any person either in, or outside the buildings.

The Main Hall, about 250 feet long, has ample room for 1,000 passengers with their hand-baggage, is well lighted by large windows, and many side doors afford easy means of communication with the veranda. In the hall is a long counter and shop, kept by a person appointed by the Government, where immigrants can procure provisions for the journey at moderate rates. For the guidance and information of immigrants, price lists of articles for sale and tables of the Canadian currency value of foreign money, are posted up in the several parts of the hall; these are printed in French, German, Scandinavian [sic] Russian and other foreign languages. Arrangements have been made to exchange money brought by immigrants into Canadian currency.

At the west end is a dining-room, seating 200 at once. As tea, coffee or milk with bread and butter costs 10 cents, and a full hot meal of meat and vegetables, 25 cents, everyone can be satisfactorily accommodated. A large kitchen, supplied with a new modern range, adjoins the dining-room.

The wing is divided into two apartments (male and female, entirely separate). Each contains six bathroom and a number of wash basins, and always furnished with soap and towels.

On the second floor, are two large rooms, that can accommodate 300 people each: fixed seats run all around these rooms, and they will be found useful in case of over crowding from any cause. On the female end there are 15 bedroom and quarters for a matron and assistant. On the men's end there are 4 bedrooms. These may be used by people who wish to rest a day or more before starting on a long rail journey, or those awaiting remittances from friends, &c., &c/. Counting the space of the verandas under roof, the whole premises have ample accommodation for 3,000 people.²³



Immigration Hall, Louise Embankment, Port of Quebec, c. 1890.
Credit: *Library and Archives Canada*, a021357

Notes:

1. Edvard Petersen Painting downloaded 15 January 2016 from:
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<http://www.gjenvick.com/Steerage/1911-SteerageConditions-ImmigrationCommission.html#ixzz41UvV8OPr>
17. Heiberg, L. "Foreign Language Press Survey," *The Newberry*. 1942 Chicago. article downloaded 15 January 2016 from http://flps.newberry.org/article/5420780_3_0633
18. Heiberg, L. "Foreign Language Press Survey," *The Newberry*. 1942 Chicago. article downloaded 15 January 2016 from http://flps.newberry.org/article/5420780_3_0633
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