

# Nels "Big Nels" Nelson Hersdal

Nils Nilsen Hersdal (Nels Nelson Sr.) "Big Nels" Nelson 7/4/1800 – 9/21/1886

Although it was 32 miles between Rochester and Murray the Sloopers kept in touch with each other. The men of Murray also went to Rochester. "Big Nels" Nelson was known to take two bushels of wheat (120 pounds) on his shoulders and walk the 32 miles.

Nels Nelson came to Mission in 1835, walking from Murray to Buffalo and then working passage to Chicago on a lake steamboat at \$3 per day. In Chicago, at a place which later became the heart of the city, he encountered a farm wagon mired deep in the mud. In Fox River he did not acquire land until 11th Mo. 9, so he may have arrived after the rest of the Norwegians. When he returned to his family in New York, he worked his way to Detroit and then walked to Buffalo, a distance of 255 miles, beating the stage. In Buffalo, "Big Nels" was much admired and entertained for having made better time than the stage."

Nels Nelson (Hersdal) and his wife Bertha lived the balance of their lives on their farm one and one-half miles southwest of the present village of Norway. They prospered, as they had done in New York, and Big Nels was referred to as a rich man. Living with the Nelsons was an old woman named Ellen who was a slave to work. She had a neck yoke and would use it to carry two great crocks of butter all the way to Norway. Big Nels liked to tease her. She went with him on a trip to Ottawa one time with a team of mules hitched to a wagon. When they left for home, he let the mules go and they lit out on a dead run. Old Ellen was bounced off her seat into the bottom of the box and yelled at the top of her lungs all the way across the Fox River bridge and out of town.

Nels and Bertha survived all the other couples on the Sloop. Bertha died first at 78, and Nels lived four years longer. When he died in 1886 at the age of 86, he was the last of the older generation that had voyaged on the Restoration. Both he and Bertha were buried in a little cemetery created on their own farm just above a ravine and well back from the road.

Cholera victims were not carried far. Several of the Sloopers had their own cemeteries and there were no less than nine in the settlement. Indeed, one cemetery, that on Johan Nordboe's old farm, was called the cholera burying ground. George Johnson was buried in a cemetery on his own land, but Gudmund Hougas was buried in the cholera section (NE corner) of the Norway Cemetery. In deference to his prominence in the community, the coffin was made of planed boards. His grave was marked by red grooved bricks about ten inches square. This area of the cemetery was allowed to revert to its wild state since the settlers believed to plow or care for it might spread the cholera.

Big Nels Nelson and Rasmus Olson were the two Sloopers who looked after the burials. Nels had acquired some lumber wherewith to build a barn and he used this to make coffins. They did the burying at night. Neither one contracted the disease - Rasmus because, in the opinion of some, he chewed such an inordinate amount of tobacco; and "Big Nels" - well, he was simply too big to imagine being sick.



"Big Nels" Nelson



"Big Nels" and Bertha Hervik Nelson