
Biography of Jens Olsen

Jens Olsen (christened Johan), the father of Gideon Elias Olsen, was born 9 January 1807 in Idd, Ostfold, Norway, a small village south of Fredrickshald which is the first Norwegian dry one enters when coming from Sweden on the extreme southern route. (Fredrickshald is known as Halden today.) Jens was the youngest child of Ole Jensen and Barbara Tollefson. He had two sisters, Giertrud Maria and Oliana, and three brothers, Joen, Elias, and Torger.

It was the custom in Scandinavian countries to give children a surname, which was derived from their father's given name. Jens and his brothers and sisters were given the surname of Oleson and Olesdotter, or Olsen, because their father's given name was Ole. Ole was named Ole Jensen because his father's given name was Jens. Jen's mother was called Barbara Tollefsdotter, or Tollefson, because her father's given name was Tollef. This practice of naming was called patronymics. It became confusing after a time because there were so many people with the same name, so individuals were further identified and designated by their occupations or place of residence; e.g., Master tailor Jens Olsen. However, patronymics have been a great boon to the genealogist who is able to identify parentage more readily because of it. By 1850 surnames became fixed and patronymics were no longer used.

Jens homeland of Norway is a long, narrow country (1100 miles long, 280 miles wide) lying above the 58° latitude on the northwestern edge of the European continent. It has a common eastern border with Sweden; the rest of its border is one of the jagged coastlines in the world being characterized by many long, narrow inlets called fjords. .

The northern one third of Norway lies above the Arctic Circle, and is called the Land of the Midnight Sun. Norway is mostly a high mountainous plateau covered chiefly by bare rock. There is very little farmland, most of which lies in the southeastern lowlands where the Olsen family originated. There are many lakes and deep valleys, rivers and waterfalls. The coastal areas are shielded from the stormy northern seas by about 150,000 islands of various sizes. Because of the many fjords and rivers in Norway early travel was done by boat, or overland by skis.

Norway's climate is much warmer than most regions lying so far north. Snow that falls along the coast melts almost immediately. The warm North Atlantic Current of the Gulf Stream keeps nearly all the seaports and harbors free of ice all year round. Average temperatures along the coast are about 55° in the summer and above 25° in the winter. Inland lowland temperatures range from 60°-70° in the summer to 10°-20° in the winter. The higher plateau region is colder and is covered by snow most of the year.

Little is known about the actual personality of the Olsen family in Norway. The earliest known ancestors were residents of Idd, Ostfold, a small village located a few miles inland from the coast in Norway's most southeastern lowland region. It is situated very near Sweden's border and lies about 100 miles north of Denmark's northernmost shores across the Skagerrak Sea. It is impossible to know how early the family first appeared in the area, or where they came from, as written records do not begin before the mid 1600's. Early records are very scarce and, when found, are very sketchy. Idd vital records do not begin before the early 1700's so it is fortunate that the Olsen genealogy goes back as far as it does, beginning with about the year 1675.

We can assume that the family was of the peasant class because they remained in the same small parish for several generations. The area in which they lived lies in Norway's very limited farming and timber area, so perhaps they were farmers, or loggers. They also might have been fishermen since

they lived so close to the coastal regions. Fishing and timbering were Norway's main export industries for hundreds of years.

Jen's father died when Jens was less than a year old, so he never knew his father. His mother, Barbara, married Lars Amundsen in 1810 when Jens was three years old. He was a young man, age 21, when his mother died. Family research records indicate that he was a soldier in the common Danish-Norwegian army when he emigrated to Aalborg, Denmark as a young man. He was 26 years old when he married Marie Dorthea Berg (age 21) in Aalborg on 23 February 1853.

Jens learned the trade of tailoring in Aalborg, an ideal location for the tailoring business since it was a relatively large city. Jens and Marie made their first home on Skolegaden (School Street). Their first child, Barbara Jensine Dorothea, was born on 24 April 1833. Christopher Marinus was born 21 November 1834 and died one month later on 18 December 1834. By this time Jens had become a master tailor and was able to set up a tailoring business of his own. He moved his family to Adelgaden (Add Street), which became their permanent home. When their third child, a boy, was born a year later they followed the custom of the time and named him after their little boy who had died. This second Christopher Marinus was born on 8 December 1835; Barbara was only 2 ½ years old. A second daughter, Julia, was born on 10 June 1838. Waldemar Christian, born on 6 March 1840, died when he was only nine months old, on Christmas Eve. Imagine the sorrow that they must have felt at losing a second baby at a time when they would rather have been filled with joy and thanksgiving.

The void that was left at the death of their baby was filled a little more than a year later when another son was born on 16 February 1842. True to custom they named him after their little boy baby who had died fourteen months earlier and called him Christian Waldemar. Gideon Elias (christened Gudi Elias) was born on 8 May 1844.

At this time Denmark was under the rule of a monarchy with the Lutheran Church being the controlling governmental body. Everyone was christened in the Lutheran Church. There were a few dissenters, but very few. When the government was changed to a representative form of government in 1849, Lutheranism was no longer considered the state church and the country was opened to missionaries of other religions. The people were given the freedom to choose which religion they wished to join. The Mormon Church, or Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, responded by sending missionaries into Denmark for the first time in 1850.

Jens was friendly to the Mormon missionaries and welcomed them into his home but he never joined the Church. His wife, Marie, and daughter Barbara, who was 17 years old, joined the Church on 17 November 1850 with the third group of converts to join the Church in the Aalborg Branch. There is evidence that they had been meeting with the missionaries for several months. When their last baby, Johannes, was born on 14 June 1850 he was not christened in the Lutheran Church, an unusual occurrence since they were still members of the Lutheran Church. This would cause one to conclude that they were perhaps seriously considering the message of the Mormon missionaries at the time. Johannes died when he was five months old, just one day before Marie was baptized. Perhaps his death was the catalyst that prompted her and Barbara to accept membership in the Church. Perhaps it was this same event that kept Jens from making a final commitment to the Church.

Christopher was baptized a month later. Julia and Waldemar were baptized a year later; and Gideon, who was only six years old when his mother joined the Church, was baptized in 1853. In spite of the fact that his wife and all of his children had joined the Church, Jens still would not declare his willingness to affiliate himself with the Mormons. Yet he continued to be friendly and to make the missionaries welcome in his home. One of the missionaries, Christian John Larsen, took a fancy to Barbara and later married her. It is from his personal journal that we are able to gain some insight into the personality and character of Jens.

Christopher, who had grown into a young man, left home shortly after his seventeenth birthday to emigrate to Utah. Some months later Barbara went to Copenhagen where she married Christian John Larsen on 30 October 1853. Jens' wife, Marie, took ill and died 7 September 1855, leaving him to care for three teenage children (Julia, Waldemar, and Gideon, ages 15,13, and 11). Barbara had not learned about her mother's death until several weeks later. After her marriage to Christian Larsen they returned to Aalborg. The following entry is taken from Christian Larsen's journal:

“25th November 1855. I called on my father-in-law. Jens Olsen, as he had promised my wife one hundred Danish dollars (50 American dollars) as her share of her mother's estate, but he only gave me half of that amount, yet he wanted me to give him a receipt for the full amount; but as I was not willing to do that he became very angry and used many hard expressions against me. I reasoned with him for a while and finally he agreed to furnish the balance by Friday, December 1st.”

Barbara and Christian took Waldemar with them as they were making preparations to leave Denmark for America. Jens was left alone with Julia and Gideon. He must have felt that there was very little left for him to enjoy in Aalborg. He had no relatives there, and now his family had nearly all left him. He left Aalborg before the end of the year (1853), and returned to his native home in Norway, taking Julia and Gideon with him. He settled in Fredrickshald, just a few miles north of the small village where he was born. Fredrickshald was a good-sized city so that he would be able to continue with his tailoring business there. He had some relatives still living in the area although his parents had died before he left the area as a young man. Jens was now forty-six years old.

Gideon continued his association with the Church and was rebaptized in 1860. He left Norway in April 1863 leaving his father Jens and sister Julia standing on the seashore with other relatives. Jens, now fifty-six years old, must have felt a great void in his life being left with only Julia to give him comfort. It is hoped that she loved and cared for him and that he took comfort in having her near him. Julia married seven months after Gideon left Norway to Baker Carsten Edvard Nilsen. Jens died four years later at the age of sixty on 22 July 1867.