

Step into the shoes of an immigrant in new experience at Old World Wisconsin



Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

At Old World Wisconsin, livestock graze outside barns originally built by immigrant settlers.



Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

Anna Altschwager, Old World Wisconsin's assistant director of guest experience, leads the discussion at the conclusion of a Wisconsin Journey tour.



Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

St. Peter's Catholic Church is part of small-town life in Crossroads Village, a re-created immigrant settlement at Old World Wisconsin.



Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

The Caldwell Farmer's Club Hall is one of more than 60 historic buildings at Old World Wisconsin.



Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

Vegetable and flower gardens grow around log homes at Old World Wisconsin.



Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

Wisconsin Journey tours often wind up inside the Harmony Town Hall, which dates from 1876.



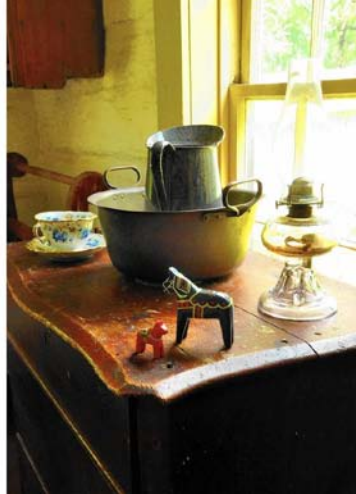
Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

A 19th-century kitchen inside a settler's home has been re-created at Old World Wisconsin.



Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

Simply furnished rooms give a glimpse of the lives of the European immigrants who settled Wisconsin.



Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

Visitors taking the Wisconsin Journey tour find a few children's toys among the items Swedish immigrants may have brought with them when they left the old country.

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Katherine Rodeghier Chicago Tribune

When I learned my babies died, tears welled in my eyes.

Even though they weren't my own flesh and blood, I identified so strongly with my character that I couldn't help feeling emotional. She was a real woman, an immigrant in an unfamiliar country, facing real 19th-century hardships — deprivation, disease, death — as she struggled to survive on a homestead her family carved from the Wisconsin wilderness.

It's not a new story. European immigrants settled Wisconsin and much of the Midwest, as any middle school student knows. But [Old World Wisconsin](#) is presenting their story in a new and more compelling way.

The living history park near Eagle, about 40 miles west of Milwaukee, has more than 60 historic structures moved from across the state and reassembled among 576 acres of [Kettle Moraine State Forest's Southern Unit](#). Visitors roam on their own through 10 ethnic farms and a rural village to see how immigrants from the old country — Germany, Poland, Scandinavia, Ireland — lived between 1840 and 1910.

But for a few weeks this fall, visitors can be more than passive observers. They can be part of the story by assuming the roles of real people, immigrants brought to life through public records and personal journals. Led by an "experience facilitator" dressed in 19th-century costume, each immigrant's story unfolds over 90 minutes with a big reveal at the end.

I won't tell you who my character was; part of the fun comes from unraveling each life story and I won't be a spoiler. I will tell you this: She was among a group of immigrants who boarded a ship in Sweden and sailed to New York in 1843 in a journey that should have taken six weeks tops but ended up taking 10. One family on

board had seven children, including 1-year-old twins. All continued on to the Port of Milwaukee and walked — walked — some 60 miles west to a tract of wilderness around [Lake Koshkonong](#), where they settled.

Our Wisconsin Journey tour began when we were each handed laminated cards printed with basic information about the immigrant whose shoes we would figuratively fill. A tram took us to our first stop, a log home where each of us unpacked a wooden box containing the items “we” carried from Sweden: farm implements, petticoats, a sack of beans, a sewing kit. Reading from our card, we talked about our identity. One of us had been an officer in the Swedish military. Our leader was a budding naturalist who chose our settlement site for its abundant bird life. There was a minister-turned-farmer and a spinster chaperoning her younger sister.

We also shared some of our reasons for leaving Sweden. Economic hard times. A forbidden romance. A thirst for adventure. Scandal. Some of us were chasing the American dream, others simply had nowhere else to go.

We moved on to our second stop, another log home where a woman in pioneer dress stood outside watching chickens strutting around the yard. We sat under a tree next to a barn and, as a heavily pregnant cow mooed loudly and continuously, examined three new handouts. A tax form from 1847 listed our worldly goods: how much land and livestock we now owned, how many household goods and how much farm equipment we had acquired. A census from the same year gave more hints about what had happened in our lives since arriving four years earlier. Two children had been born, but when we saw that several others had disappeared from the town rolls, dead apparently from fever, our group fell silent.

To cement the message that life was hard, we each received a challenge card outlining a problem we faced. A wife falls ill and can't afford medical care. An unmarried woman must leave her sister's growing household to find work elsewhere. We were urged to work with fellow settlers to find solutions. A farmer needs cash; could his sons earn money working on another farm?

At our final stop, a town hall dating from 1876, we sat in a circle as our “experience facilitator” revealed what happened to us in later years: who died young, who lived into old age, who married the farmer's daughter. One of us became the first person of Swedish ancestry elected to the state legislature. Another became a college professor and prominent figure at the [Milwaukee Public Museum](#). More children were born, including a daughter named Swea for the ship her ancestors boarded in Sweden.

We learned what it took to become a U.S. citizen, a seven-year process for men in those days. Women automatically became citizens when their husbands did.

At the end of the tour, visitors frequently share stories of their own ancestors and draw parallels to the issues of immigration today. That's OK, said Anna Altschwager, Old World Wisconsin's assistant director of guest experience. “We encourage discussion.” Visitors often express a wide range of views.

“The takeaway is going to be different for every single person,” she added.

Altschwager said the Wisconsin Journey tour is meant to evoke contemplation as well as personalize history by allowing visitors to live it rather than just “be talked at.”

Testing the tour in a pilot program last year, the staff wondered how visitors would respond to playing a character. They loved it, Altschwager said. At museums and historic attractions today, it's all about the guest experience, and at Old World Wisconsin "we want it to be about questioning, about play, about discovery."

Katherine Rodeghier is a freelance writer.

If you go

Wisconsin Journey tour: The 90-minute experience runs Tuesday through Friday, Sept. 4 through Oct. 26 at 10 a.m., noon and 2:30 p.m., \$12. Maximum 16 visitors per tour; tickets at wihist.org/wisconsinjourney.

Old World Wisconsin: One of 12 sites of the [Wisconsin Historical Society](http://wihist.org), admission is \$19 for adults, \$16 for ages 65 and up, \$10 ages 5-17. No self-guided exploration on Wisconsin Journey dates; W372 S9727 Highway 67, Eagle, Wis., 262-594-6301, oldworldwisconsin.org.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/travel/ct-trav-old-world-wisconsin-immigrant-experience-0909-story.html>