

THE NORSE-AMERICAN CENTENNIAL

by

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*Success
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Seated one day at my desk busily engaged with my studies, I heard a rap at my door, and at my, "Come in," there entered a well-dressed, intelligent-looking young man. He greeted me cordially, and stated that he had been directed to my office to receive some information about the Norse-American Centennial, of which he had read a great deal in the papers lately.

I offered him a comfortable chair and stated that I would be very glad indeed to be of service and give him whatever information I was able to dispense.

He seated himself quietly, looked about the room for a moment or two, as if in doubt as how to put the first question. Then, with a start, he turned towards me, and asked in a very pleasing voice, "Will you kindly tell what this Centennial is and what is the occasion for it?"

I replied, "Most certainly I will, and that with pleasure. One hundred years ago there glided into New York harbor a small and strange ship with a cargo of iron and fifty-three persons on board. It was the Norwegian sloop "Restaurationen," bringing ^{the} first shipload of Norwegian immigrants to America since the days of the Viking voyages in the tenth and following centuries. This little ship left Stavanger, Norway, July 4, 1825, for America, sailing by way of England and the Madeira islands, and arrived in New York harbor on October 9. Four years earlier, two emissaries had been sent to America by a small band of Quakers at Stavanger to pave the way for the landing of this little colony. These two men were Kleng Peerson and and Knud Olson Eide. ^{Kleng Peerson} They returned to Norway in 1824 with a

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W. D. Peerson
H. D. Peerson*

favorable report, and the result was that a small ship was purchased and reconditioned, given the name, "Restaurationen," leaving for America the following year with its precious cargo. The arrival of this ship at New York marked the beginning of a constantly swelling stream of Norwegian immigration to America. The purpose of the Centennial Celebration is to commemorate this event and to pay tribute to the Norwegian pioneers and their descendants for the great achievements they have accomplished in the New World during these one hundred years and the contribution they have made to our great common blessing, America, with her lofty ideals, splendid institutions, and marvelous and unexcelled opportunities."

As I spoke, gradually warming up to my subject, he listened attentively and with an appreciative interest. As I paused, he instantly asked, "Where there no Norwegians in America before this time?"

"Oh, yes; but just how many is not known. Quite a number of Norwegians came over with the Dutch and settled in New Amsterdam. One of their number, Anneke Hendriks, a woman from Bergen, Norway, was married, on Feb. 6, 1650, to Jan Aertsen van der Bilt, the ancestor of the Vanderbilt family. Even before the Revolutionary War, in which many of Norwegian descent took part, there was in Philadelphia a society composed of Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes, called Societas Scandinaviensis. Even Gen. George Washington, our first president, became a member of this society after the War, because he was of Scandinavian descent. But while there were Norwegians in America, they were comparatively few and scattered, having formed no independent settlements."

"Where did these immigrants settle?"

"The 'sloopers,' by which term I mean those who came on the sloop "Restaurationen" settled in Kendall and Orleans counties, New York, where Paerson and Eide had already arranged to plant a colony. Here they remained for only a few years, the greater number moving westward in 1834, settling near Ottawa, Ill., founding what has since been called the Fox River settlement. In 1836 and 1837 new contingents of Norwegian colonists arrived, and settlements were made at Chicago and Beaver Creek, Iroquois county, Ill. This last mentioned settlement proved to be an unfortunate one, for most of the settlers died from the ravages of malaria a few months after they had ~~located~~^{located} at this place. The remnant^w left the ill-fated settlement and located among their countrymen at Fox River. With the arrival of fresh immigrants the old settlements grew and new ones were formed. The first Norwegian settlement in Wisconsin was made in Rock county in 1838, the Muskego settlement the following year, and the settlement in Dane county, Wis. was made in 1840. From these settlements, which may be called the mother settlements, the Norwegian immigrants and their descendants spread rapidly, year by year, as the stream of immigration increased, to the neighboring states, Iowa, Minnesota, and Dakota territory, and later to every state in the Union. The bulk of the Norwegian population are in the mid-west states, Minnesota having the largest number of Norwegians of foreign birth."

"About how many Norwegians or persons of Norwegian descent are there in the United States at the present time?"

"That question is not very easily answered, as we have no exact data as to the actual number of persons of Norwegian extraction in the United States. Hon. O. P. P. Jacobson, Railroad and Warehouse Commissioner of Minnesota on the basis of figures given by President E. G. Quamme of the Federal Land Bank, St. Paul, states that the total number of persons of Norwegian descent is fully 5,000,000. This figure is undoubtedly much too high. Conservatively, it may be said that there are at least 2,250,000 persons of Norwegian blood in the United States at the present time, a Norwegian population about equal in number to that of the old fatherland, Norway. The Fourteenth Census gives the number of those who are born of Norwegian immigrant parentage in this country and those of foreign birth as 360,236,225. Of these 363,862 were born in Norway. To these figures must be added the number of native born Americans even to the ~~fourth~~ ^{fifth and sixth} generation^s, whose parents were not born across the seas, which would give a number approximating the one given, namely 2,250,000."

"Are there any Norwegians in Canada?"

"Yes; quite a number. According to the Canadian census of 1921, there were in Canada at that time 68,856 persons of Norwegian origin. Of these 22,186 were born in the United States, 23,568 in Canada, and 23,102 elsewhere, mostly in Norway. Since this census was taken, 5,559 have arrived in Canada by way of ocean ports and 319 from the United States, making a total, not counting natural increase in population, of 74,734 persons of Norwegian descent now living in Canada. Of these about 45% are ^{located} located in Saskatchewan and 30% in Alberta.

"What kind of Americans do the Norwegian immigrants make?"

" They make excellent Americans. The Norwegians are an industrious, thrifty, capable, intelligent, peaceful, and law-abiding people, with a remarkable power of adaptation, readily adapting themselves to new situations, institutions, and environment. Hence they quickly become Americanized and enter into the spirit of American ideals and institutions. There are, of course, some black sheep among them, too, but they are the exceptions, not the rule. The Norwegian immigrants and their descendants have from the very first taken an active interest in the political affairs of our country, and many of them have filled high positions of public trust in the community, state, and nation. No less than six of them have become U.S. senators, twelve of them state governors, and many have served in the diplomatic service of the United States. Their patriotism and loyalty to American ideals and institutions have been repeatedly demonstrated in their readiness to serve under the Stars and Stripes in the various fighting units of the U.S. army and navy. Though only a comparatively few had been in this country long enough to establish permanent homes and become somewhat acclimated, at this time the Civil War broke out, no less than 7,000 or 8,000 of Norwegians, many of them fresh from the old country, unable to speak the language of their adopted land, fought in that bloody struggle for human liberty and the preservation of the Union. One of the "sloopers" had three sons, and they all enlisted in Co. F, 36th Illinois Volunteers, one as captain, one as sergeant, and one as private. The captain became lieutenant colonel and the sergeant first

lieutenant, and both fell in battle, gallantly leading their men. The famous "Fifteenth Wisconsin" was composed, officers as well as men, almost entirely of Norwegians, and was commanded by that brave and able leader, Col. Hans C. Hegg, who was mortally wounded at the Battle of Chickamauga, and died, saying: "I am willing to die; for I have fought for a righteous cause." The splendid spirit of patriotism and loyalty manifested by the Norse-Americans of the 80s, ^{was again revealed} in the conduct and service of their countrymen during the Spanish-American War and the recent World War. Both in peace and in war has the Norse-American proven himself a real American of the highest and most desirable type."

"In what occupations have the Norwegians in this country especially distinguished themselves?"

"You will find the Norwegians in this country engaged in every legitimate occupation, and they have rendered distinguished service in all of them. Among them you will find prominent ^{lawyers} ~~xxxxx~~, bankers, merchants, physicians and surgeons, artists, writers, journalists, educators, clergymen, as well as both unskilled and skilled laborers. They have especially distinguished themselves as farmers and in the building and metal trades. By far the largest percent of Norse-Americans are engaged in farming, and in the Northwest, where they are found in the largest numbers, they have had a large and important part in converting what was once known as "The Great American Desert" into ^a rich and beautiful garden spot and the "Granary of the World."

"Are there any Norse-Americans of outstanding success and signal achievement?"

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~~two~~ "Why, yes; there are quite a number of them. There are the great soldiers of the Civil War, Col. Hans C. Hegg and Col. Porter C. Olson, both of them sons of immigrants, and the Minnesota boy, Aldred W. Bjornstad, recently promoted to the rank of major-general. Gen. Bjornstad is a splendid example of what diligent and conscientious application coupled with native ability and high and noble purpose can accomplish. There is the millionaire banker, *of St. Paul, Minn.* Harold Thorson, who died recently. He rose from poverty, became the founder of some thirty banks in North Dakota, as well as one of the chief factors in the success of one of St. Paul's great financial institutions. He left the bulk of his great wealth as a building fund for St. Olaf college, the greatest Norwegian Lutheran educational institution in this country, located at Northfield, Minn. There is Gunvald Ous, the great construction engineer of New York, born and trained in Norway, and one of the most expert and successful engineers in this country. His greatest achievement is the designing and construction of the steel structure which is the back-bone of the giant Woolworth Building, New York. There are the Hoff brothers, Olaf Hoff, the great submarine tunnel builder, and J. H. Hoff, the chief engineer of the American Bridge Company. There are Gustav L. Clausen, the great Chicago sewer expert, and A. B. Neuman, the designer and builder of the large plant of the U. S. Steel Corporation at Gary, Ind. Another remarkable Norse-American in the engineering world was F. W. Cappelen, for many years the city engineer of Minneapolis.

He was born at Drammen, Norway, and came to this country in the 80s. For a time he was employed by the Northern Pacific Railway Company on railroad construction work in Montana. Later he became that company's bridge engineer, with headquarters at Minneapolis, and designed and built the N.P. bridge over the Mississippi river at Minneapolis. As civil engineer of Minneapolis he has designed two other bridges over the Mississippi river, both of re-enforced concrete. One of these, the Third Avenue bridge, he also built, but he died before the building of the other, the Franklin Avenue bridge, was completed. In his honor this last bridge has been officially called "The Cappelen Memorial Bridge." So ^{far} as I know, Mr. Cappelen is the only engineer who has built three bridges over the famous "Father of Waters."

But the most outstanding and best known, being even internationally known, of the successful Norwegians-Americans are the late Senator Knute Nelson, Minnesota's "Grand Old Man," and Reverend Hans Gerhard Stub, D.D., LL.D., LL.D., president of the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America, the one a poor immigrant boy and the other the son of one of the very first immigrant pastors. As a poor immigrant boy, only five years old Knute Nelson came to this country. The story is told of him that while he was crossing the Atlantic, he came upon his mother praying in her cabin and weeping over her destitute condition, and uttered the sympathetic and encouraging words: "Don't cry, mother; we are poor now, but when I grow up, I'll be next to the king." These were prophetic words, and they literally came true; for even though Knute Nelson did not attain a rank next to the king, he did attain to be more than king as governor

of a large and prosperous state and for years stood next to the president of the United States as an esteemed and trusted counsellor for over a quarter of a century. At the age of seventeen he enlisted in the Union Army and fought in some of the bloodiest engagements of the Civil War. When he was discharged in 1864, he was both wounded and broken in health. His Viking spirit was, however, still unbroken. He took up the study of law and was admitted to the bar in 1867. The following year he was elected a member of the state legislature of Wisconsin. He moved from Wisconsin to Minnesota in 1871 and located at Alexandria to practice law. Here he was soon elected to the office of state's attorney. Then he became a member of the state senate, where he served for four years. For six years he served in the national congress as member of the house of representatives. In 1892 he was elected governor of Minnesota and re-elected two years later. In 1895 he was chosen U.S. senator by the Minnesota legislature, an office which he held till his death in 1923. His deep sincerity, honesty of purpose, breadth of vision, sound judgment, loyalty, patriotism, and great capacity for work and leadership made him highly respected by men both within and outside of his party. As a statesman of unusual ability he rendered his country many a distinguished and signal service. His is a noble example for every immigrant boy, rich or poor, to follow.

"The other outstanding figure, Dr. H.G. Stub, was born at Muskego, Wis., one of the earliest Norwegian settlements in this country, in 1849. He is now in his seventy-seventh year and still actively engaged in the discharge of his many and often difficult duties as president of a large church body, carrying

on a great work both in this country and in heathen lands. He is noted as an educator and churchman of the highest rank, and has rendered his countrymen an inestimable service in these capacities. In recognition of his services, he has also been signally honored at home and abroad. Besides holding the highest ecclesiastical office in the gift of his countrymen, he has received the doctor's degree from three different institutions and been thrice knighted by King Haakon of Norway, the third time being in 1922, when he was awarded the "Great Cross" of the Order of St. Olaf."

"This certainly is interesting. Now I understand what the Norse-American Centennial is all about. Would you mind telling me something about the Centennial celebration itself?"

"No, indeed not; I shall be delighted to. This great festival will take place at the State Fair Grounds, St. Paul, Minn., and will be attended by at least 250,000 or 300,000 persons of Norwegian descent. President Calvin Coolidge will be present, as well as representatives from the Norwegian and Canadian governments. Excellent programs and fine exhibits have been arranged for. This celebration will be under the auspices of a number of Norse-American patriotic societies. The date is June 6-9, 1925."

"The Norwegian Lutheran Church of America is also busily engaged in preparing for special memorial services which will be held in practically all of her 3,000 congregations on Sunday, July 5, 1925. A Centennial History, covering this century of Norwegian immigration, struggle, and achievement will be published. A memorial cantata to be sung at the

various congregational memorial services and the Fair Ground festivities, has also been prepared. The music for this cantata has been written by Dr. E. Melius Christiansen, the director of the famous St. Olaf Choir.

"The whole undertaking is a gigantic one, but by the hearty and loyal cooperation of all the various committees in charge of the different features and the general response of a large and enthusiastic constituency, I am sure that the undertaking will be one grand success from beginning to end, demonstrating in an unmistakable manner what the Norse-American has done during the past century as well as what he can and will do in the future."

My visitor rose, shook my hand very warmly, saying: "I am very grateful to you for this interesting and profitable conversation. Judging by what you have told me of the Norse-Americans, I am certain that their Centennial Celebration will be a great success and a lasting tribute to their undaunting spirit, remarkable enterprise, and marvellous achievements in an adopted country during the space of one hundred years."