

# The Norwegian-American Historical Association

Northfield, Minnesota

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## NEWS LETTER

BITS GLEANED FROM DR. BJORK'S FORTHCOMING BOOK ON THE NORWEGIANS OF THE PACIFIC COAST—Ed.

COL. HEG AS GOLD SEEKER

We are informed by Dean Blegen that the Forty-Niner Hans Heg, later of Civil War fame, "remained in the West two years, experiencing the usual vicissitudes of fortune of the gold miners." Like many another Norwegian-American, he had set out for California in 1849, in search of the golden fleece, and just when he was "beginning to have considerable success in his mining ventures," in 1851, he had word of the death of his father and returned to Muskego.

At least two of Heg's letters from the California gold fields have escaped the tooth of time. In the first of these—written at Weaverville, October 7, 1849—he relates that he and his companion, Magnus Hansen, had been digging in Weaver Creek, where they "found many fellow workers who . . . have done very well—but we also found many who were dissatisfied and disappointed in their expectations, partly because gold is never discovered in such quantities as they had imagined at home and partly because they found it much more difficult to live here than they thought would be the case." Heg had learned that "those who worked steadily could earn from a quarter to one ounce per day. Gold sells here for \$16 per ounce, despite the fact that this gold is worth \$20 an ounce in Philadelphia." He did not fail to include in his discussion the "few who have taken out several hundred dollars worth in one day."

Because of Heg's subsequent prominence in the public life of Wisconsin and as a leader of Scandinavian troops, his comments are of more than common interest. Furthermore, he possessed superior powers of observation. His description of the miner's life is therefore quoted at some length:

"We began our work by hauling sand from the dry river ravines (which are more or less rich with gold). This we found to be very difficult, for it was necessary to carry it three or four hundred steps in order to find water in which to wash it. We worked here for about a week, during which time we washed out about a half pound of gold. As the labor was exceedingly strenuous and we could not endure working in water, we both became sick and since that time have not been able to accomplish very much, nevertheless, we now feel better and plan to resume digging as soon as we have put up a house. A man can earn from 10 to 20 dollars per day, but then he must also pay 25 cents a pound for flour, 50 cents a pound for bacon, from 25 to 50 cents a pound for fresh meat. . . . Board and room at a boarding house cost from 20 to 30 dollars a week; tools for digging are priced ten times as high as in Wisconsin. All this must be weighed against the large daily wage. Nevertheless, one who is willing to work industriously can earn money faster here than among you; but

he also has many difficulties to survive—the trying and very perilous journey one must undertake in order to come to this 'Land of Canaan'; the trials one is subjected to after arriving are also not so few, and neither is one certain of making a fortune once he is here. . . .

"As for law and order, there is hardly a more peaceful place in the world; despite an absence of both law and court, murder or thievery never occurs—at least I have not heard of any since I arrived; things remain safely lying where you lay them.

"A little town has recently been laid out at the mouth of American Fork; its name is Sacramento City, and to it you must address your letters and send us *NORDLYSET*—if it is still alive.

"I have not had time to look around much since I came here, but from what I hear from others I do not think that it makes much difference where one digs for gold. Gold is found here in every rock, brook and dale. Water is now the outstanding need . . . we cease operations when the wet season begins, usually early in November.

"The enclosed gold dust, about 50 cents worth, is of the finest grade. We generally find pieces worth from 25 cents to one dollar each; nuggets weighing several pounds are also discovered. There is said to be a nugget in San Francisco now that weighs 26 pounds. In a panful of sand we might find as much as is enclosed in this letter.

"Yesterday we sold a yoke of our oxen for 85 dollars."

Heg wrote again from Weaverville the following spring. "We have been," he explained, "very actively engaged the whole winter in digging gold. But it is becoming scarce, and little is found." He and Hansen had built a log house the previous fall; this was "ten feet square in size, equipped with a good fireplace, etc." The two friends had "saved one thousand dollars" besides expenses, which amounted to "about three hundred dollars." Heg was convinced that "the best part of the gold crop" had "been harvested" and that "those who came out next year will find themselves much disappointed."

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*Nordlyset, Emigranten*, and the Pacific Northwest

It will surprise no one to learn that the early Norwegian-American newspapers became excited over the reports of gold in California and that they gave considerable space to stories originating in the gold fields. But it is of more than casual interest that the same papers saw the promise of Oregon and Washington.

In the fall of 1848 *Nordlyset* ran a story about "Oregon Territory," and the following spring wrote an editorial under the caption "Oregon as Compared with California." The latter article took the position that so long as the prevailing hunger for sudden riches was dominant, distribution of land on the west coast would have to wait, as most of the gold seekers had no intention of farming, entering a business, or pursuing a craft. After discussing the current gold fever and its relation to the development of California, *Nordlyset* added these words: "How much more significant with respect to future happiness are . . . the present prospects in Oregon . . . which has been so quickly forgotten because of the brilliant and enticing appearance of its neighbor!"

*Nordlyset* described Oregon's agriculture and resources in favorable terms and spoke of its population as "intelligent and industrious." Thereafter, such papers as *Democrat*, *Den norske Amerikaner*, and *Emigranten* gave occasional and favorable publicity to Oregon and Washington as well as to California.

*Emigranten* wrote warmly in 1854 of the future of Washington Territory, reminded its readers that one day a railroad would run from Chicago to Puget Sound, and prophesied that the "countless deep navigable fjords" would be "harbors for the largest ships," and that the streams flowing into the sound would provide power "for sawmills and flour mills"; it told, too, of great stands of timber, of coal mines, and of the treasures in the sea.

#### EXECUTIVE BOARD

The Executive Board met at the home of Birger Osland in Chicago, October 11, 1952. Our members will undoubtedly be interested in some excerpts from the report of this meeting.

#### FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR.

Dr. Blegen began his report by referring to Dr. Kenneth Bjork's book on Norwegian-American life on the West Coast. He stated that the book will probably contain about 600 pages, and that the time of publication would most likely be 1954.

Tentative publication plans call for Professor Arlow W. Andersen's study of the Norwegian Immigrant Press, which Dr. Blegen hopes to have ready for distribution during the first part of 1953.

Material for Volume XVIII of *Studies and Records* is well in hand and includes several interesting articles. This volume may be expected in 1953.

During the month of August a committee from *Fællesraadet* met with your Secretary to discuss the possibility of the *Bygdelags* and the Norwegian-American Historical Association cooperating in publishing a history of the *Lags*. No decision in the matter can be taken until this committee reports to the annual meeting of *Fællesraadet*, which will be held possibly in June 1953. Dr. Jacob Hodnefeld has made a study of the *Bygdelag* publications; this is largely in the form of a bibliography. The research work done by Hodnefeld will come up for consideration when the subject of a more complete history is discussed. The Board decided that the problem should be left with Blegen and Thompson for further study.

Fru Koren's diary, which has been translated by Professor David T. Nelson, was discussed without any definite action being taken.

Dr. Blegen mentioned as a possible future publication, "Letters of Mrs. Wærenskjold" which are being translated by the Verdandi Club of Minneapolis. These interesting

documents pertaining to Texas may possibly be included in Volume XVIII of *Studies and Records*.

Dr. Blegen further reported that newly found materials on Marcus Thrane are being microfilmed from the originals in the University of Oslo and that these materials doubtless will make possible some interesting publication, in the form either of early plays or of special studies.

#### TREASURER'S REPORT

Mr. Andrew E. Wigeland presented an interim Treasurer's report covering nine months, January 1, 1952, to September 30, 1952. He reported that there has been no change in the Association's investments consisting of \$20,100.00 face amount of bonds; cash on hand subject to check \$4,812.86.

N.A.H.A.—NEW MEMBERS, and CHANGES in status since reported in News Letter of April 1952.

#### LIFE

Soren Roinestad, Oakland, California  
(Changed from Sustaining to Life)  
Edvin Brye, Chicago, Illinois  
(Changed from Associate to Life)  
Norman E. Hagen, Milan, Minnesota—New

#### ASSOCIATE

C. T. Helgeson, Albert Lea, Minn.  
(Omitted from News Letter, April 1952)  
Ralph M. Thynnes, Whittier, California  
Norwegian-American Historical Museum, Decorah,  
Iowa  
M. O. Monson, South Wayne, Wisconsin  
Margaret Midelfart, Eau Claire, Wisconsin  
Sidney A. Rand, Forest City, Iowa  
William Rea Sampson, Estes Park, Colorado  
Albert M. Sivertson, New York City, New York.  
John A. Vieg, Claremont, California  
P. A. Hovland, Minneapolis, Minnesota  
Gerald H. Thorson, Minneapolis, Minnesota  
H. N. Stephenson, La Crosse, Wisconsin  
Clifford T. Hultin, Arlington, Virginia  
Henry J. Peterson, Denver, Colorado  
Arne Andersen, Sauk Centre, Minnesota  
Miss Dorothy Jean Burton, Cambridge, Massachusetts

#### NEW BOOKS

The North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, Fargo, North Dakota, is publishing a sequel to Miss Aagot Raaen's popular book, GRASS OF THE EARTH, which was published by our Association in 1950. The new book bears the title MEASURE OF MY DAYS, and is priced at \$3.50, postpaid.

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Two years ago the Wisconsin Historical Society brought out Erna Oleson Xan's book, WISCONSIN MY HOME, which also proved to be very popular. Mrs. Xan is continuing her story with a new title, HOME FOR GOOD. This is being published by Ives Washburn, Inc., 250 Park Avenue, New York 17, New York. The price is \$3.50.

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Professor B. H. Narveson has written a very interesting history of Luther Academy, which was located at Albert Lea, Minnesota. This book has been published by the St. Olaf College Press, Northfield, Minnesota. It is priced at \$3.00, postpaid.