

The Norwegian-American Historical Association

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NEWS LETTER

FROM THE SECRETARY'S OFFICE TO
THE ASSOCIATION MEMBERS

Edited by J. JÖRGEN THOMPSON, Secretary KENNETH BJÖRK, Co-editor

Thank You!

As the members have sent in their 1942 membership dues, many have written letters of comment and appreciation which evidence a vital interest in the work of our Association. A number of them have given tangible expression to their interest by securing new members.

We would like to charge every member with the responsibility of securing a new member between now and the close of the year 1942. Those who join the Association from now on will be given credit for the year 1943. This request is made to you who are reading this News Letter. May we count on your fullest cooperation!

Our Influence

One of the most gratifying experiences for any historical organization is the observation that its publications are having an influence in the writing of general American history or fiction. From time to time we have called attention to specific instances in which the Association's work has had such an influence. Recently the publication of *The Long Ships Passing, The Story of the Great Lakes*, by Walter Havighurst, acknowledged the author's indebtedness to Knut Gjerset's *Norwegian Sailors on the Great Lakes*. Havighurst's earlier work, *Upper Mississippi, in the Rivers of America* series, also drew deeply from materials made available by the Association.

A Legacy

Before the death of Mr. Ola Johan Saervold of Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1937, he and his wife, Martha Saervold, drew up wills which were identical in terms, leaving the residue of their estate to the Norwegian-American Historical Association. Upon the death of Mrs. Saervold on July 5, 1942, the Court appointed Mr. Jacob Stefferud of Minneapolis executor. The estate is now in the process of probate. Our last word from Mr. Stefferud indicates that the affairs of this estate will be closed at an early date, when the net proceeds will be turned over to our Treasurer, Mr. Birger Osland.

Archives In New Quarters

The Norwegian-American historical collection and Archives have now been housed in the beautiful new library building of St. Olaf College. The entire seventh floor of the stacks has been given over to this collection. In addition, the College has designated a room as the Norwegian-American Historical Room which has already become the center for Norwegian-American cultural interests. The walls and the ceiling in the room have been finished in cypress; the floor is of Gothic oak. In designing the details of the room, the architect made a study of Norwegian architecture during the period from the eleventh to the fourteenth century. The room is not a replica or copy from any particular building or hall but one immediately senses that the architect has caught the spirit of these times

and has successfully brought this out in the various details.

Mrs. D. G. Ristad and her two sons have presented a beautiful painting, "The Last Furrow," by Sven Brendson, in memory of Rev. Ristad who was the first President of the Norwegian-American Historical Association. The friends of Professor O. E. Rølvaag have made possible securing the painting "September Evening in Lofoten" done by Carl Ouren. This painting has been placed in the Historical Room in memory of Mr. Rølvaag as the first Secretary of the Association.

From the Archives

During the past few months a great amount of material has been received for the Archives. A large number of gifts of individual books and documents has been sent to the Archives. In addition to these, special mention might be made of the Ola Johan Saervold Library which contained a little more than 700 volumes. Because of his extensive travels and many lectures, Mr. Saervold's interests covered a broad area; consequently his papers and letters which were received in addition to his books are considered very valuable.

On the invitation of Miss Karina Flugum of Lake Mills, Iowa, the Secretary was permitted to select from the library of her brother, the late O. N. Flugum, whatever books might be of value to the Archives. This gift amounted to 373 volumes.

Recently one of our members of long standing, Mr. Gustav Hanson of Canton, South Dakota, extended to us an invitation to look through his book collection. This will eventually come to the Archives and will be a valuable addition. Mr. Hanson has been an active participant in Norwegian-American male chorus work in this country. As a result he has gathered a splendid collection of "Mandskorsange," which he assures us will also become our property.

Several leather-bound, beautifully embossed greetings to the Norwegian-Americans on the occasion of the Norse-American Centennial in 1925 have been turned over to the Archives by the two remaining members of the Board of Directors of the Centennial, Mr. S. H. Holstad, the managing director, and Professor J. A. Holvik, the secretary. These greetings, in specially designed and hand-wrought editions, were sent by the following institutions and organizations:

Norges Storting og Regjering
Det Kongelige Fredriks Universitet
Det Kongelige Selskap for Norges Vel
Nordmands Forbundet
Norges Rederforbund
Norsk Presseforbund
Norges Landsforbund av Gutte og Ungdoms-
musikkorps (stiftet 1918)

Members of the Association sooner or later will have to face many problems associated with the Archives. It might be well to repeat several recent statements pertinent to this subject. In *A Review and a Challenge* members were reminded that "One of the needs of the Association that must be met before many years have gone by is a 'Guide to Norwegian-American Historical Records,' giving detailed analytical information not only about the Norwegian-American Historical Association's archives, but also about pertinent materials in other repositories throughout the country."

The late Laurence M. Larson, in his essay, "The Collection and Preservation of Sources," saw very clearly the needs of the Archives. "As members of this association," he wrote, "we have certain serious duties from which we are not absolved by the payment of dues . . . it is the duty of every member, and, for that matter of everyone who is interested in the task that we have undertaken, to examine his own treasures and to deposit in our archives any book, pamphlet, newspaper, journal, or other document that may in any way add to our knowledge of what Norwegians have done these hundred years in the New World. This is a duty that he owes first of all to the race from which he has sprung; but he also owes it to our Association, as almost the only body thus far organized that has for its purpose the preservation of the memorials of the Norwegian people in this land."

"Much," Professor Larson continued, "has been achieved in every field that lies within its [the Association's] purpose. Important books have been written and published; the archives have grown to respectable proportions. *But these achievements must not blind us to the fact that our work has only just begun.* It must be continued throughout the entire field of our history and much of this activity must in the future as in the past be concerned with the collection and preservation of sources."

The Norlie Norvegia-Americana

It will undoubtedly be of interest to all the members of the N.A.H.A. to know that Dr. O. M. Norlie, who is at present archivist and classifier at the St. Olaf College Library, has, over a period of many years, gathered what is possibly the largest collection of Norvegia-Americana to be found in this country. This collection has now been moved from Mr. Norlie's private library building in Decorah to the library at St. Olaf College. The Norlie library consists of books, pamphlets, manuscripts, and letters. The total number of titles aggregates fifty thousand. When once this collection has been classified and cataloged, it will become one of the important sources of information in its field.

Together with the rapidly-growing collections of the Norwegian-American Historical Association and the St. Olaf College archives, the Norlie Library will greatly aid in making St. Olaf College a center of Norwegian-American study.

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The Index

It will be recalled that in *A Review and a Challenge* the suggestion was made that we should prepare an index of *Studies and Records*. Dr. Blegen recently arranged with Mr. Alf Houkom, librarian at St. Olaf College, for the indexing of the first ten volumes of the series. Mr. Houkom informs us that he has completed about one-half of this valuable work. Members will be surprised at the volume of interesting and worthwhile information that has accumulated in *Studies and Records*.

Our Twenty-Fifth Volume

The Editorial Board of the Association is putting the finishing touches on the twenty-fifth volume to be published since the Norwegian-American Historical Association was organized in 1925.

Members of the Association will soon receive a copy of the thirteenth volume of *Studies and Records*, according to our Managing Editor, Dean Theodore C. Blegen.

One of the principal contributions to be included in the forthcoming volume is a reminiscent account of "Pioneers in Dakota Territory, 1879-1889," told by Carl M. Grimstad and edited by Professor Henry H. Bakken of the University of Wisconsin. This account, condensed

from a lengthy manuscript of memoirs, is one of the most vivid descriptions of Dakota pioneering that has yet come to light. It tells of travel, land claims, prairie customs, the founding of social and pioneer leaders, and many other aspects of the frontier, all related in the first person by a man who was himself a pioneer in the period described and who retained a vivid and lively memory of what he observed and experienced.

Another article in the volume is "Memories from Little Iowa Parsonage," by Caroline Mathilde Koren Naeseth (Mrs. C. A. Naeseth), a daughter of Dr. Ulrik Vilhelm Koren. It was translated from the Norwegian by Professor Henriette C. K. Naeseth of Augustana College.

Dr. P. M. Glasoe has contributed an essay on "A Singing Church," in which he tells of the place of choir and congregational singing among the Norwegians in America.

A long and interesting "America letter" sent to Norway from Wisconsin in 1868 has been translated and edited by Professor C. A. Clausen under the title "A Norwegian Schoolmaster Looks at America."

Dr. A. N. Rygg of Brooklyn contributes an account of a pioneer Norwegian settlement in Missouri founded nearly a hundred years ago, a chapter in immigrant history that is little known.

Other important papers will be included in the volume, but details about these articles can not yet be announced. The volume as a whole promises to be one of the most colorful and valuable in the entire series of *Studies and Records*.

R. A. NESTOS

Many people the country over were saddened by the recent death of R. A. Nestos, regional Vice-President of the Association and former governor of North Dakota. After a considerable period of failing health, the prominent attorney died in a Minot hospital on July 15, the victim of a stroke. His interest in our activities and his never-failing good humor will not be forgotten, and his loyal work will be missed in the years that lie ahead.

Nestos's life story is the peculiarly American story of the poor immigrant boy who became governor by dint of sheer ability and character. He was born in Voss, Norway, the home of so many prominent Americans, on April 12, 1877. His father was a small farmer and lay preacher who enjoyed a local reputation as an orator. His mother, who devoted herself unselfishly to her ten children, instilled in her son a sense of right and a simple nobility of character that were to remain with him to the end. Nestos's early education consisted of about three months' schooling each year, and instruction was mostly in Bible history and Luther's Catechism.

The desire for more adequate educational opportunity offers the answer to the question why Nestos came to America. He had heard that here one could study and work at the same time, thereby acquiring the same thorough training available to the financially more fortunate youth. He had reached only the fifth grade in Voss when he left for the United States on a ticket sent to him in the form of a loan by an uncle in Buxton, North Dakota. He was sixteen years of age and he traveled steerage.

Arriving in Philadelphia in July, 1893, knowing no English and with only eighty-five cents remaining of his modest travel fund, he set out on the four-day train ride

to Dakota. His first experiences in the wheat country were with the panic of 1893 and the depression that followed. Despite hard times, however, he managed to earn his board by doing chores and on Saturdays he worked in his uncle's harness shop. As might be expected, he entered the first grade of the Buxton public school in the fall of the year. The friendly interest of the school's superintendent led to extra instruction necessitated by the boy's poor command of English. His talents as an orator were first shown in the school's debating society. In later life Nestos was famed for his command of English, colored by a slight accent, and his forcefulness as a speaker.

Nestos's subsequent experiences included farm work, a period in the lumber camps at Hawkins, Wisconsin, various jobs in Minneapolis, school teaching, and graduation from the normal school at Mayville, North Dakota. During vacations of his college years he worked on farms, kept books, and peddled goods. During the school term he also worked at various jobs and, together with several other young men, rented a room and cooked his own meals. His faith in America was justified.

For a short time after graduation it seemed that Nestos might turn to farming; in the summer of 1900 he filed on a homestead in Pierce County, but in the fall of the same year he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, from which institution he was graduated in 1902. His extracurricular work included the starting of a literary society known as Olympia and vigorous participation in debate. During the school year he waited on table, collected laundry, and did other work; summers were given to the sale of books in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois. His experiences thus far—in Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois—gave him a wonderful opportunity to study at first hand the problems of an immigrant group and he became thoroughly identified with the Norwegian element in America.

Following his graduation from Wisconsin University he enrolled in the law school at the University of North Dakota, graduating two years later. Admitted to the bar, he immediately entered a law partnership with C. A. Johnson in Minot. He remained a resident of this city until his death in 1942.

Nestos's long political career began with the state campaigns of 1908 and 1910, at which time he was asked to enter the race for lieutenant governor. Powerful interests dangled this tempting offer before his eyes, but on one important condition: he must desert his law partner or at least refrain from supporting him. Flatly refusing the offer, Nestos supported Johnson's campaign for governor, losing by a close decision. Nestos was himself elected state's attorney of Ward County in 1912 and in this position won a reputation as an enforcer of the law. In 1908 he also began an active work as a member of the North Dakota Tax Association. In 1911, as a member of the state legislature, he sponsored the tax commission law and other similar legislation. He also served as chairman of the house committee on taxes and tax laws. In 1920 he lost out as a candidate for governor; after his defeat he campaigned lustily for his former opponent. The election over, he visited his parents in Norway, and because of the speed with which he was forced to return to the political arena—he came back again in steerage on a crowded ship.

The cause of his hurried return trip was a strong political reaction against what many considered the "socialistic" experimentation of the past six years. Lynn J. Frazier, Nonpartisan League governor, was recalled from office—the first in our history to be so honored. Nestos was chosen to run for governor in October, 1921, and he received the support of the Independent Voters Association (IVA). Successful in the campaign, Nestos was the first governor to be elected in a recall election. But—as so often happens in political life—he was soon forced to administer the very thing he had been elected to curtail. The constitutional amendments and initiative measures proposed by the IVA, to make possible the program of retrenchment and curtailment, were all defeated. Nestos was reelected to a full term in 1922 and was defeated in a close election for the governorship by A. G. Sorlie, Nonpartisan candidate, in 1924.

What were the highlights of Nestos's term in office? He introduced a number of salutary changes in the administration of the Bank of North Dakota and instituted a number of general economies. He was able to announce that the state had been admitted to the national "registration area," by complying with certain standards concerning the registration of vital statistics. For the first time North Dakota got a full-time health officer. He is also reputed to have done much to build up understanding between the East and the Northwest. His striking appearance and fluent oratory created a notable impression in New York in November, 1923, when he delivered the chief address at the 165th annual banquet of the Chamber of Commerce in that city and made a strong plea for understanding.

In later years Nestos engaged in politics on a national scale, campaigning in numerous states for the Republican ticket during the years 1928, 1932, and 1936. He was elected a delegate to the national Republican convention of 1932 in Chicago and was a member of the committee on resolutions and also of the committee that drafted the platform adopted by the convention.

Important though his political career may seem, his activity in the broader nonpolitical field of human relations was even greater. He was one of the leading lay figures in the work of the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America, taking a special interest in the work with young people in the capacity of teacher and superintendent of Sunday school. He was also a member of the church's national board of education, and he served on the national council of the YMCA as well as the state executive committee of the same organization. For many years he crusaded against illiteracy and served as a member of the national advisory committee on illiteracy that was appointed by President Hoover. A keen student of international affairs, he spent some time in 1925 at Geneva attending sessions of the League's assembly. Locally he played an important part in getting the state normal school at Minot and in starting the city library. He served for thirty years on the city library board and was president of the state library association.

Already long, this list does not include all of his many activities. Perhaps had he been asked which gave him the greatest pleasure, he would have answered, his work with the Boy Scouts. Unmarried, he gave much of his spare time to the boys in his community. Beginning on a small local scale, his work soon grew to national and international proportions. He became a member of the Boy Scout national council and of the national committee on rural scouting. In May of this year he was given the Silver Buffalo award and citation for distinguished service by the national council—an award reserved for outstanding service to scouting in the national or international fields. It was characteristic of Nestos that his particular contribution should be with the less fortunate boys. The citation reads in part:

"He organized the first intensive demonstration on the use of neighborhood patrols as an effective medium for serving isolated groups of rural boys. He developed demonstration districts which later served as a model for the extension of rural scouting throughout the United States.

"He established a correspondence course in scouting, to provide effective training for leaders unable to attend council-conducted training courses which provided the basic pattern for the correspondence training and assisted in making effective a plan of cooperation between the American Federation of Lutheran Brotherhoods and the Boy Scouts of America."

Looking back on his career, one realizes that whatever the activity, his purpose in all cases was the same—to achieve what Nestos considered to be honest and worthwhile. One looks in vain over the list of political figures in the Northwest for a person with loftier ideals or finer character. When he retired from political life in a period characterized by a bitterness and viciousness rarely equalled, he enjoyed the respect even of his strongest enemies. It can be said of him that he bore no malice and sought no personal gain. His simple honesty and quiet dignity will long be remembered in Dakota circles.

One might be tempted to assume that with Nestos—as with many idealists—all activity was a struggle of good against evil, right against wrong, but such was not the case. While he retained a low opinion of the character of some of his political rivals, he never failed to grasp the broad impersonal forces that led to the Nonpartisan and other movements. In a conversation with the writer only a few weeks before his death, Nestos discussed the Nonpartisan League with remarkable objectivity and saw it simply as a part of a wider agrarian tendency, which in turn was the result of conditions—social and economic—that were inherent in America's growth.

This ability to take the long-time view, plus his strong feeling of racial loyalty, had much to do with his support of the Association. Along in the work from its start, he was an active regional Vice-President. Not a few of the members in the Minot area have joined as a result of his enthusiasm and the prestige of his name. A true friend and splendid representative of the stock from which he came, he leaves many to mourn his loss. —K. B.