

The Norwegian-American Historical Association

Northfield, Minnesota

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NEWS LETTER

FROM
THE SECRETARY'S OFFICE
TO
THE ASSOCIATION MEMBERS

The Norwegian-American Historical Association will celebrate its tenth anniversary Monday, October 7, at St. Olaf College.

The first program will begin at ten o'clock Monday forenoon. In order to give the faculty and the students an opportunity to be present at this first session, the chapel hour at the college will be changed to coincide with the time of the meeting. Reverend D. G. Ristad, the vice president of the Association, and Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, the managing editor of the Association, will be the speakers.

The afternoon session will begin at three o'clock. This will include addresses by Dr. Paul Knaplund of the University of Wisconsin, Dr. Laurence Larson of the University of Illinois, and Dr. Knut Gjerset of Luther College, Decorah, Iowa.

In the evening there will be a dinner meeting at the St. Olaf Boarding Club. Mr. Birger Osland, the treasurer of the Association, will be the toastmaster.

Visitors should note that the forenoon and afternoon programs will be held in the college gymnasium.

The St. Olaf faculty has elected Professors Erik Hetle, Agnes Larson and Theodore Jorgenson to act as the steering committee for the celebration. And this committee has in turn appointed six committees to have charge of the various details. Space will permit us to mention only one of these committees. This is the committee on lodging, which consists of the following members. Professors Wm. C. Benson, Esther Gulbrandson and Peter Fossum. All requests for arrangements for lodging should be addressed to Prof. Wm. C. Benson, 907 St. Olaf Ave., Northfield, Minn. For the convenience of the members a card for making reservations will be inclosed with this letter.

October seventh will be an eventful day. Start now making your plans to be present.

Report of Norwegian American Historical Association's meeting at Winnetka, Illinois, April 29, 1935, by Mrs. Sigrid Hakstad (Chicago Public Library) translated from Norwegian by Mrs. Gudrun Nomedal, Chicago.

*"Oh, ne'er should we forget our
sires wherever we may be."*

It is in Northumberland that they sing this song about their forefathers, the Norse vikings; a thousand years have not been able to blot out the memory of the Norse blood. A thousand years hence, will there then be any one in *this* country who is conscious of his Norwegian blood? Is the last rest of the memory going to be buried under century-old dust in the

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archives at Northfield or will the publications of the Norwegian-American Historical Association lie in state like the Old Norse manuscripts in the Royal Library of Copenhagen—sacred, precious, irreplaceable?

On Monday, April 29, the Historical Association held its annual board meeting at Winnetka, Illinois, followed by a public banquet in Chicago Norwegian Club. The most important part of the agenda was a survey of the publications which are ready for the press or nearly so and those which belong to a little more distant future. The book of "Emigrant Songs and Ballads" could go to press next week if *money were available*; but there just isn't money for it. One gets the impression that to be a member of the Board of Finance of the Historical Association means not only to conjure funds out of the ground, but also personally to give in a pinch. The decenary existence of the association must have been a constantly renewed draft on "In God we trust," but with that all similarity ends between the lilies of the field and the fowls of the air on one side and the Historical Association on the other. Fifteen volumes have seen the light of day in these ten years (the fifteenth will appear shortly), and it is a labor of love that these men perform. If they at some time should give their work a runestone, the inscription would most likely have to read like this: "We, a handful of men, raised this memorial to the Norwegian American people."

As Dr. Blegen unfolded his plans and described the publications now in the making, my thoughts as by an association of ideas went back to Saint Olav and his vision on the battlefield of Stiklestad: "Then I had a vision . . . and the longer this vision remained before my eyes, the farther I did see, until I looked out over the whole earth. . . . And I saw those places which before I have never seen . . . developed as well as undeveloped . . ." To Dr. Blegen's listeners it seemed as though they saw those places in Norwegian-American life and history which they had never seen before, and he himself might well be a Saint Olav, for he has the divine fervor.

The emigrant songs mentioned above will be printed in Norwegian with complete English translations. They reflect the entire movement of emigration and they have something of the same naive and touching in their tone as the longspun ballads which in olden days were relegated to the regions of the kitchen, but which now of a sudden are coveted by literary collectors. The value of Hans Christian Heg's letters to his wife during the Civil War is quite evident; they will be published during the summer. And as soon

as a large enough sum of money comes down from heaven, Carlton C. Qualey's book "The Norwegian Settlements in the U. S." will be printed. This book is the first connected survey in English of the spreading in this country of the Norwegian race, and makes use of a great deal of material from absolutely new and unknown sources. The title "The Changing West" of Professor Larson's contribution to the publications of the Historical Association in the near future, invites to many conjectures. Dr. Blegen himself is working on a volume which is to tell about the fate of Norwegians in the American society, their contribution in the various fields of endeavor, their gain and their loss. To many this volume will probably be the one for which they have waited with the greatest expectation—in it there should be related facts disheartening enough to hold the braggadocio in check, and facts encouraging enough to give foothold to our failing Norwegian-consciousness. But still further ahead lies the project for a volume which is to follow up the importance of Norwegian engineers and architects. Finally, the work on a very interesting diary kept by Soren Bache in the thirties and forties, is already far advanced. "Dream and Reality" might be the superscription on the function of the Historical Association. All that which today is reality, was once a dream; and all that which today is only a dream, will sometime be reality. "This is my dream," Dr. Blegen says. "History casts its shadows far into the land of song," Longfellow sings. Was that the reason and was it because history to such a great degree is a matter of feeling, an obsession, a rapture, that this day of the Historical Association had an undertone which transported me to the town of my childhood with its peculiar undertone of history?

The complaint is made that what the Historical Association has to offer, is dry material. Comparatively few persons have that love for historical detail and that sensitive reaction to historical atmosphere which the annual publications of the Historical Association offer in such abundance. But this material cannot be popularized and put into the form of a novel; it would thereby be placed on an entirely different plane, and its value to posterity would be doubtful. Rolvaag could grasp intuitively the essence of pioneer life and project it into relief, dramatically alive and unforgettable. In the publications of the Historical Association there is material for many a Rolvaag and many an Undset if they would only come, for where did Sigrid Undset get her Kristin Lavransdatter if not from old yellowed documents. Carlyle calls history "an imprisoned epic, nay, an imprisoned psalm and prophecy." Every volume emanating from the Association, is such an imprisoned epic.

Professor L. M. Larson in an article in the American-Scandinavian Review in 1925 makes the following statement about the number of Norwegians in the States: "... it seems a thoroughly safe conjecture to say that perhaps a million and a half are conscious of being, at least in part, of Norwegian blood." Of this million and a half the Historical Association has as its members only six or seven hundred. Rolvaag is reported as having stated that the association would never secure more than fifteen hundred members; he evidently knew his people. But the dues are two dollars a year or less than twenty cents a month.

The chairman of Bygdelagenes Fællesraad, Dr. Bruce, was present during the business meeting. This signified an approach which ought to result in increased membership for the Historical Association. We have learned that it is in the Norwegian farmer that the sense of kinship is found in its most intense form. At the dinner in the evening representatives from various societies and federations in Chicago were present. These men and women ought to start a real campaign for the Historical Association. The contrast is too

great between the more than twenty thousand members of the Bygdelags and the seven hundred members of the Historical Association. In the statutes of the former there is certainly something about the heritage of our fathers and Norwegian culture. Now there are many who feel that the work of the Historical Association should speak for it sufficiently and be its dignified, unaggressive spokesman. But the written word does not reach far, after all. On a trip around in the Norwegian settlements in the Northwest, Professor Qualey came to the conclusion that it is the personal stimulus that is needed. "Personal contacts are the best means of stimulating interest in the work of gathering records for the archives and in stimulating interest in Norwegian-American history. . . . To many of the people who were visited, the Association was a very remote organization; some had never heard of it." This was written in 1933, and there are people in Chicago in 1935 who have never heard of the Historical Association. The speakers at the banquet, Professor Larson, Dr. Blegen and Professor Knaplund pointed out the double task of the Historical Association; namely, to write the history of the Norwegian-American people and, in doing so, write the history of America. The task is really threefold, for the account of the life of the Norwegian-American group is for Norway the account of the expansion-urge of the Norwegian people. As it means something to our historical and national consciousness that Norwegians once upon a time emigrated to Ireland, Scotland, France, etc., and disappeared there, in like manner it will at some future time mean something that a million Norwegians took part in the building up of a country on the other side of the globe. It seems so everyday-like to us today; in a few hundred years it will appear in the same resplendent light as the viking expeditions do to us today, and it is in the archives of the Historical Association that the radiant fairy-tale will be found.

Last year the friends of the Historical Association met at Mount Horeb, where a sort of open-air museum created surroundings in the spirit of the pioneer days. This year the meeting took place in a modern, rich and beautiful home in Winnetka, where there was absolutely nothing that reminded one of the primitiveness of pioneer days, and not much that reminded one of Norway. But the host, Mr. Arthur Andersen, has shown by his hospitality and his generosity in other ways that here is one of the second generation who has not lost sight of the land of his forefathers. There is symbolism in the choice of these two places, for between that which they represent lies the entire span of time and development which it is the scope of the Historical Association to cover.

On the 7th of October this year the Historical Association will celebrate its 10th anniversary in Northfield on the grounds of St. Olaf College. There the generations should meet, from the Sloop people down to the most recent arrivals among us. So often we—that is, we who were born on the other side—have felt it as a bitter homelessness in our mind, that conflict which is created by belonging to two countries. Up there, I believe, we should be able to feel it as having great worth. Up there I believe also that the second and third generations might find values that would re-establish a sense of balance, if they do not already possess it, between that which their fathers and mothers had to give and that which their own country contributed. For it is only in the work of the Norwegian-American Historical Association that the interests of all generations meet. To the whole Norwegian-American people the Historical Association might say with Collett Vogt: "but first I'll strew my riches in thy soil—a little seed. Perchance it grows into a tree some day, whose southing chants thy song."

