

# The Norwegian-American Historical Association

Northfield, Minnesota

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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

### EXECUTIVE BOARD

Meeting November 14 in the Chicago offices of President Arthur Andersen, the Executive Board outlined an ambitious publications program for 1940. It was decided that the Treasurer, Birger Osland, should draw upon accumulated funds, if necessary, for the publication of *Studies and Records*, volume XI, and the second volume of Dr. T. C. Blegen's history of *Norwegian Migration to America*. It was also agreed at this meeting that Dr. Kenneth Björk should be subsidized by the Association for one year to gather data about Norwegian-trained technicians and begin the preparation of a volume dealing with their life and work in America.

Present at the meeting were Mr. Andersen; Major S. J. Arnesen; Dr. L. W. Boe, Vice President; Mr. Birger Osland, Treasurer; Mr. H. J. Williams; Professor J. Jørgen Thompson, Secretary; Professor C. Martin Alsager, local vice president; and Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, Managing Editor.

Reports were read by the officers of the Board and by the Managing Editor, Dr. Blegen. Since most of the activity of the Association is focused on publications and since Dr. Blegen's report was endorsed by the Executive Board, it was decided that it should be printed in full in this issue of the *News Letter*. The report reads as follows:

#### REPORT OF THE MANAGING EDITOR Chicago, November 14, 1939

##### I. L. M. LARSON: THE LOG BOOK OF A YOUNG IMMIGRANT

The year 1939 witnessed the appearance of the twenty-first publication of the Association. This was Laurence M. Larson's *The Log Book of a Young Immigrant*, a work of 318 pages issued to the members on September 1. It is a wide-ranging autobiography that looks at the story of the Norwegian people in America from the point of view of one man's career. It may be described as the saga of "the intellectual and spiritual migration of a human being from the status of a young immigrant, living in dugout and cabin and knowing at first hand the ordeal of prairie pioneering, to that of a mature American scholar, rich in learning, broad in outlook, skilled in the art of the spoken and written word." It is a solid contribution not only to Norwegian-American history but to general American history and biography. That the author was one of our colleagues, whose wisdom contributed not a little to the Association, adds to the charm of the volume. It has been well received by the members and undoubtedly will serve to strengthen the work of the Association.

##### II. STUDIES AND RECORDS, VOLUME 11

I am glad to be able to announce that volume 11 of our series of *Studies and Records* has been assembled, the edit-

ing virtually completed, and that we will be in a position to send it to press when its publication is authorized by the Executive Board. It may be noted that the preparation of such a volume of special articles and documents is no easy or simple matter. It involves a certain constructive imagination in order to discern potential fields and subjects, careful planning, correspondence with possible contributors, and persistence in carrying ideas into action.

The general scope of the proposed volume 11 may be indicated by the following tentative table of contents:

1. Norwegian Emigration to America in the Nineteenth Century  
By Ingrid Gaustad Semmingsen—translated by Professor Einar Haugen of the University of Wisconsin
2. Stephen O. Himoe, Civil War Physician  
By E. Biddle Heg (a great grandson of Colonel Hans Christian Heg)
3. Jørgen Gjerdrum's Letter from America, 1874-1875  
Translated and edited by Carlton C. Qualey
4. Scandinavian Students at Illinois State University  
By Henry O. Evjen
5. A Doll's House on the Prairie: The First Ibsen Controversy in America  
By Arthur C. Paulson and Kenneth Björk
6. The Unknown Rølvaag: Secretary of the Norwegian-American Historical Association  
By Kenneth Björk
7. The Sources of the Rølvaag Biography  
By Nora O. Solum
8. A Pioneer Norwegian-American Church Library  
By Professor H. Fred Swansen
9. Some Recent Publications in the Field of Norwegian-American History  
By Jacob Hodnefield
10. The Introduction of Domesticated Reindeer into Alaska  
By Arthur S. Peterson

It is evident that the volume as a whole will prove an interesting and valuable addition to the Association's publications.

##### III. THE INDEX TO THE FIRST TEN VOLUMES OF STUDIES AND RECORDS

The large task of compiling an index to the first ten volumes of *Studies and Records* is now well under way. The material in these volumes, which total 1,594 pages, constitutes a rich mine of historical information in the general area of the Association's interest. Its permanent value will be enhanced by an analytical index as a convenient tool in making the information readily available. The work of compiling the index is being done by a trained historical scholar, Dr. Gertrude Jacobson of Minneapolis, and present plans look to the completion of the task by the summer of 1940.

## IV. THE BACHE DIARY

The completion of the editorial work on the Bache Diary has proved a difficult and slow task. The diary was originally transcribed and translated into English by Professor Andreas Elviken of Temple University, Philadelphia. The revision of the English translation is being made by Professor Martin B. Ruud of the University of Minnesota, a member of the Association's Board of Editors. He reports substantial progress, and I am justified in stating that the work will ultimately be completed and made available for publication by the Association. It is well worth waiting for, since it is a detailed, day-by-day diary recording and reflecting immigrant life in America from the period of the 1840's. It is another of those documents that throw light not only upon immigrant conditions but also upon American history in general.

## V. NORWEGIAN MIGRATION TO AMERICA: VOLUME 2: THE AMERICAN TRANSITION

An arrangement has been made which placed the managing editor in the employment of the Association on a full-time basis for one year, beginning September 1, 1939.

The editor, under this plan, has conceived his task to be a broad one: to survey again the field of possibilities and objectives; to reach Norwegian-American scholars in all parts of the country; to set in motion various projects that will eventuate in studies, articles, and volumes; to travel to various centers to explore historical materials; to edit the Association's publications; to bring out volume 11 of *Studies and Records*; to direct the compilation of the general index for volumes 1-10; to keep in touch with the work on the Bache Diary; and to do many other things in the service of the Association.

One important task confronting the editor, as agreed upon with the President of the Association, is that of completing the preparation of volume 2 of *Norwegian Migration to America*. The emphasis in this volume will be placed upon the processes of immigrant transition to American life. It is too early to report in detail upon the subject matter of the volume, but it is not too early to report that the book is well under way. It probably will be completed by next summer or autumn; and its publication can be planned for the autumn or early winter of 1940-41. The book promises to be one of considerable interest for the story of the Norwegian people in America.

## VI. NORWEGIAN TECHNICIANS IN AMERICA

During the year a preliminary investigation was made of the practicability of preparing a book on the work of Norwegian-American engineers, architects, and, in general, professional technicians—a project that has been touched upon many times in the discussions of the Executive Board during the past ten years or more. The most promising man to undertake this difficult but promising job seemed to me to be Dr. Kenneth Bjørk of St. Olaf College, and I therefore asked him to explore the subject, to examine its possibilities, look up material, establish contact with engineers, and, if he found that it was an undertaking that could be accomplished adequately, to draft a proposal for presentation to the President and the Executive Board.

Dr. Bjørk threw himself into this matter with characteristic energy and initiative, and he reports that he is ready

to undertake the preparation of a book in this field for publication by the Association. He presents the matter to the Board in the following communication:

St. Olaf College  
Northfield, Minnesota  
October 9, 1939

Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, Managing Editor  
Norwegian-American Historical Association  
St. Paul, Minnesota

Dear Dr. Blegen:

I am informed that the Executive Board of the Norwegian-American Historical Association is to meet in the near future in Chicago. Would you be kind enough to submit the following proposals for the consideration of the members of the Executive Board?

The proposals are:

1. That the Norwegian-American Historical Association undertake to publish a volume of about 400 pages on Norwegian technicians in America.

2. That the Association make adequate financial provision for the research attendant on writing and publishing this volume.

3. That the Association also make provisions for copying pertinent records dealing with the technicians, and that these copies be preserved in the Association's Archives.

As you already know, I am both willing and eager to write the history of the Norwegian technicians in America. I should like to be relieved from teaching during the academic year 1940-41. This will be necessary both because of the time required for the work and because of the scattered nature of the source materials. During the present school year I shall continue to lay the foundation of the study by doing all the work possible at this point.

What I have in mind is something more than a collection of brief biographies. The book should make a solid contribution to our knowledge in the technical field. It should also be interesting from the point of view of the social field, dealing as it will with a city population and its peculiar problems. Since engineers are a vital link in the productive process, a book devoted to pioneering on the technological frontier should be of value not only to Norwegian-Americans but also to the larger American public. It is impossible, of course, at this date to be more specific.

You may use this statement as a basis for discussion at the Chicago meeting.

Sincerely,  
KENNETH BJØRK

As managing editor, I cordially endorse this proposal, and I trust that the Board will authorize me to make arrangements with Dr. Bjørk for carrying these ideas into action. We have talked about a work on the engineers and architects for many years, but nothing has been done. We now have an opportunity to have a competent job done in this field. We should accept the challenge and make the necessary funds available.

## VII. PROSPECTS AND POSSIBILITIES

Where does the Association stand today?

We have made a good record. We have a row of twenty-one publications to our credit. Under Mr. Arthur Andersen's presidency we have brought out seven of these twenty-one—one-third of our production, in the period of 1936-39.

Our problem is to realize that, however interesting and even important our editorial progress has been, we are still confronted by much of the extensive challenge that was put before us in the *Review and Challenge* that President Andersen sponsored a year and a half ago. Mr. Andersen called upon us not to postpone the essential task that faces us; and he put an appeal not only to historians and edu-

cators, but "also to those of us who are engaged in agricultural, business, and professional pursuits."

What is this essential task? There are scores of important things to be done. There are areas that have been little probed—not just given subjects like the engineers, political development and contributions, the saga of the Norwegians on the Pacific Coast, the story of the Norwegian-American factor in the East, and a dozen other subjects that could be named. There is the problem of documentary material, with scores of possibilities before us. There are biographical, historical, economic, and political researches that need to be undertaken. The *Travel and Description* series should be resumed.

But perhaps the most important thing is that we must grapple more closely than we have with the whole range of Norwegian life and activity in this country. Recently I had occasion to discuss this problem with Professor Haugen of the University of Wisconsin. I had mentioned to him certain fields in which the Norwegians undoubtedly have made rather significant contributions to general American history. Professor Haugen answered me in these words:

In a broader view we cannot be satisfied with just these items. Our group is an American group, and regardless of whether its activities and its culture have left a perceptible impression on specific American activities, its life has been a part of the American life during the period that it has existed as a group. We must see the Norwegian-Americans from two sides: their life among themselves and their life in relation to their American neighbors. The interplay between these two sides of their mentality is to me the most fascinating part of their existence. We cannot overlook the many important problems related to the group life of the immigrant in America, those organizations which enabled him to feel at home in the new land and which constituted the assimilative links between him and his Norwegian and his American existence.

This view of the Norwegian-American involves a close attention to his cultural life in this country: the press, the church, the literature, the language, the schools and colleges, a variety of social and cultural institutions—in short, all the imponderables which in the final analysis are the most important.

Professor Haugen's general conclusion is that, having followed the story of the migration itself, it is time for us to probe more deeply than we have done heretofore into the significance and results of the migration in human terms.

I endorse this position of Professor Haugen. In the work that I have been doing on my second volume thus far, I have felt again and again the lack of adequate studies in various parts of the Norwegian-American field. Another thing is being impressed upon my mind more and more, and that is the adequate and thoroughgoing study of the contributions in more limited fields, like politics, depends for its effectiveness upon understanding the whole background out of which those contributions, big or little, emerge. Otherwise we get just the kind of thing we have had—a listing of leaders, senators, governors, politicians, names, with only a superficial setting for analyzing and interpreting their services and contributions, and often without critical insight into their significance. The background is the whole wide range of interplay between the Norwegian-American and his American environment, precisely as Professor Haugen has suggested, and that range of interplay is something on which relatively little fundamental work has been done.

To my mind we stand at the crossroads. I believe that we should now take the road toward a frank and energetic acceptance of the larger challenges and problems before us. I believe that there are almost unlimited possibilities ahead of us. What we have done thus far is good, but we have a chance to do something so distinguished that it will set a standard and pattern for every other immigrant group in America. We are getting additional advantage all the time from our own momentum as an organization. If we keep our hands steady, if we push ahead on a program of advance, if we take that broad view that President Andersen has urged not once but many times, we can do something so big that it will surprise our own people.

I am for accepting this challenge. Through what we have done, we have got our foundation. We must now tackle the building of a superstructure—not on a small, but on a big, scale.

One reason why I have given my energy to this Association is that I have believed in it as a big thing backed by drive and persistence—an organization that had a broad program and also a persistence like that of the pioneers themselves in facing frontier problems. I have also supported this Association as an organization which takes its stand above every line of division among the Norwegians in this country—above creed and sect and group and special bias. It must continue to take that stand.

If we push ahead in this spirit, we may find, as an incidental fruit of what we do, that we are making a bigger contribution than just the books we turn out or the archives we collect and administer. The Association itself, through its program, may prove to be one of the larger things in the story of the Norwegian life and contributions in America.

I propose that we march ahead—check up on our *Review and Challenge*, block out new programs, build up our support, increase our membership, push on with projects and publications, meet new challenges as we have met old, do a thing so big that men will be glad to support it with work and money. I want this Association to keep going forward. I want it to keep on achieving. I don't want it to be complacent, self-satisfied. I want criticism as well as the contribution of funds and of work.

Let us broaden our lines, not draw them in. This Association shall not be just another ephemeral effort, of which we have had so many, an effort not driven by purpose and persistence.

I frankly believe that this Association is going to go on for a long time. It is going to achieve much greater things than it has achieved. One by one we who have played some part in the job will naturally step out, just as Rølvaag and Ristad and Gjerset and Larson stepped out. But the Association will go on. Everybody who contributes to it becomes a part of its life as an institution. The four men I have named still live in the purposes and achievements of the Association.

I have talked about these things because I believe that the motivation of the Association is more important than particular items in our program. I close by asking the officers and board members, and also the general membership, to give renewed support to this cause.

(Signed) THEODORE C. BLEGEN

## TECHNICAL CONVENTION

The Association was represented at the fourth convention of the Norwegian-American Technical Society, which was held in Brooklyn, N. Y., over Labor Day week-end, September 2-5. Dr. Kenneth Björk, member of the Editorial Board, discussed plans for the publication of a volume dealing with Norwegian technicians in America. The convention went on record warmly endorsing the project and a number of engineers became members of the Association.

## LUTHER VALLEY

Luther Valley, one of the oldest settlements in southern Wisconsin, and an important center of Norwegian cultural life in America, celebrated its hundredth birthday on August 26-27.

Representatives of the Association were present at the centennial services. Mr. Birger Osland, Treasurer, Dr. L. W. Boe, Vice President, Dean J. Jørgen Thompson, Secretary, Professor S. S. Reque, curator of the Norwegian-American Museum at Decorah, Iowa, and Dr. Kenneth Björk of the Editorial Board took part in the program.

An important meeting of the Association's representatives was held in the basement of the Luther Valley church on August 26. At this meeting it was urged that a meeting of the Executive Board be held in the Grand Forks, North Dakota, region in the near future.

One of the heartening aspects of the celebration was an increased interest in the work of the Association.

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

One of the greatest spirits in the Norwegian Northwest was the late Reverend G. D. Ristad, pastor, poet, orator, prophet. Hardly a significant movement among his transplanted people escaped without in some manner bearing the stamp of his personality. Readers of the *News Letter* will remember that Ristad was first President of the Association and until his death one of its strongest champions.

Recently the Archives acquired the Ristad library and private papers. Students of the Norwegian element in America will find in this collection titles of about 126 printed volumes of direct interest, numerous copies of such periodicals as *Nordmands-Forbundet*, *Norden*, *Busletts*, *Trønderlagets Aarböcker*, and *Samband*; almanacs and calendars; and about 46 pamphlets on varied subjects. In addition there is a wealth of material in the private letters of this colorful personality.

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The Archives have also been enriched by a supplementary gift of books from the Laurence M. Larson library. Particularly interesting are a few books dealing directly with Norwegian-American life, but there are also a number of volumes on the Scandinavian countries and some on varied subjects written by Norwegian-American friends of the departed historian.

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There are, scattered throughout the country, innumerable documents of value to the Association. The owners of many of these documents are unwilling, usually for sentimental reasons, to part with them. Fortunately, copies can be obtained by film photography. The Association would derive considerable dividends by investing in a

good camera and projector, which would then become an inseparable part of our archival equipment. The ideal of a central repository for originals or copies of all pertinent documents is attainable through the medium of photography.

One of our most valuable historical sources is the Norwegian immigrant newspaper. By good fortune several fine newspaper collections have been preserved. The chief disadvantage to the researcher lies in the fact that the collections are widely scattered. In the not distant future photographic copies of all the newspapers should be made and housed in the Archives. Not only convenience to the student, but also precaution against destruction, especially where only one copy of a paper has been preserved, call for such action.

## New Members Since September 1, 1939

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Vilas Johnson, Wilmette, Illinois  
Alfred Vaksdal, Corning, New York

### ASSOCIATE

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