

The Norwegian-American Historical Association

Northfield, Minnesota

NUMBER SIX

AUGUST, 1937

NEWS LETTER

FROM THE SECRETARY'S OFFICE TO
THE ASSOCIATION MEMBERS

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THE RYNNING CENTENNIAL

The Rynning Centennial, announced in our last issue of News Letter, was a great success. We recognize that this was not a title that would attract as much attention as would an Ole Bull festival or a Nansen celebration, but from the historical standpoint we felt that the event commemorated was of such importance as to merit our best efforts. We had no trouble enlisting the aid of Professors Laurence M. Larson and Theodore C. Blegen—they understood. The program throughout the day was enjoyed by everyone present. Dr. Larson, always scholarly in his historical analysis, gave us a fine chapter of Norwegian-American history, and Dr. Blegen spoke of his intimate knowledge of all the events connected with the Rynning episode. We feel certain that we made history on May 15th last. Probably it would be more correct to say that we officially recorded a very essential and interesting chapter of our history on that day.

It was also our official celebration of the Seventeenth of May. The afternoon program was dedicated to "Norges Frihetsdag" and it was a memorable occasion. To enhance the day for us the United Norwegian Male Singers of Minneapolis were here in a body to sing the spirit of the day into our hearts. A Seventeenth of May without a Male Chorus would be unthinkable among us. They sang three times during the program. Professor Frederick Wick directed.

Mr. P. O. Bugge of Bisbee, North Dakota, had written a prolog in honor of Ole Rynning. After the singing of "Ja, vi elsker," Rev. Fridtjof Eide of Ostrander read the prolog in his most beautiful Norwegian.

In the absence of Mr. John Skavlan, president of Snaasalaget, Mr. Bugge, historian of the same, presented to St. Olaf a replica of the Rynning monument which was erected at Snaasa parsonage on July 4th, 1937. The memorial was given by Snaasalaget and other friends in commemoration of the Centennial.

The festival address was delivered by Dr. D. G. Ristad of Manitowoc, Wisconsin. It was most fitting. Dr. Ristad, the first president of the Norwegian-American Historical Association, has been a leader in the whole movement of popularizing our history in America. He has for years been the president and moving spirit in Trønderlaget, and it was here the Rynning celebration idea first took form. All the addresses on this occasion ought to be printed; Dr. Blegen's address appears in this issue. Next to the famous 1925 observance of the beginnings of Norse-American emigration, we have marked no more important mile post than this one—The Ole Rynning Centennial.

OLE RYNNING: IMMIGRANT LEADER

Address delivered by Dr. Theodore C. Blegen at Rynning Centennial Program.

Today 1937 looks back to 1837, across the gulf of ten decades, and at first we seem "to see through a glass, darkly." Schoolbook memories stir our minds, however, and we catch a few outlines and forms, however vaguely: Andrew Jackson, gaunt and stern-eyed, emerging from the White House to make way for wily Martin Van Buren; the collapse of banks and business in a terrible financial panic; and across the waters a girl of eighteen succeeding to the throne of England, inaugurating the Victorian era. But it is all faraway, remote from modern life, its reality only that of cold print and quaint pictures.

Can we somehow bring the pictures to life, dispel the dimness, and know the people who lived and had their being? What of the people, men and women who tasted the joys of earth, knew sorrow, worked, played, died? "The people, yes," as Carl Sandburg, a poet of the people, expresses it. Perhaps if we think of the people, the mists will lift a little. And our vision will also gain in clearness if we remember the flow of life, which has run steadily on, with never a break, from that day to this. By that flow 1837 touches 1937. Our lives are projected from the lives of our parents, and theirs from our grandparents, so that only a few steps carry us back and relate us, through streams of life and blood, with the world of a hundred years ago. A few days ago newspapers told us of a mother, living today, who was a child of four in 1837. Call 1837 remote, if you will, but one human heart has continued to beat through all that incredible space of a century. But if we really would pierce the mists of time, we must recall yet another fact. The life of a hundred years ago left its imprints in records and its influence upon its posterity. The challenge to us today is to know the records and to understand the influence. That challenge we can meet by using the second sight of history.

Very well, taking advantage of that second sight, let us look at a few scenes in a story from a hundred years ago, a story of real life, a story centering about "the people, yes," a story that is part of our own backgrounds, a story that is a chapter in the history of America. Our first scene is neither White House nor palace, but a little sailing vessel out in the middle of the Atlantic ocean. Its name was the "Aegir," its captain Christian K. Behrens, and on board were eighty-four Norwegian emigrants. They were almost all farmers who had sold their farms in western Norway, packed up their chests and trunks, and assembled at old Bergen, from which, on April 7, 1837, they set sail for New York and the New World, intending to go to a wonderful place called "Illinois" far out to the West in America, where some of their pioneering countrymen had already settled. There were rumblings of economic and social discontent in the old country; ever since Cleng Peerson and the sloopfolk had gone to America in the twenties rumors and reports of the marvels of life in the United States had been spreading; and now

after the middle thirties the unrest was reaching the point of decision and departure, with whole shiploads of people setting out. These emigrants on the "Aegir" were not sailors and many of them promptly got seasick. But they soon got accustomed to the salt air and the pitching of the vessel, and they seem to have had a merry time on board. When I was in Norway some years ago I found an interesting account of their voyage which tells how they got on after the seasickness was over. "With its passing," I quote from the account, "all anxiety seemed to disappear. Farmers who had never before seen the ocean saw that it was calm, lost all fear of its terrors, and saw the ship sailing on toward milder regions. The fiddle was brought out, and every evening sailors and young people danced to it with lusty abandon until the captain was forced to ask them to give it up, since the ball-room floor (the deck) was being seriously damaged by the huge nails in the soles of the dancing slippers of the young gallants and their ladies; unless they were willing to dance in their stocking feet."

On May 8 the emigrants had an exciting and dangerous experience. An English ship, the "Barelto," crashed into the "Aegir" broadside, and for a time it seemed as if the emigrant vessel would go down. But the damage was soon repaired, and it sailed on. And on May 17, the terrors of the collision forgotten, all the emigrants celebrated the Norwegian national holiday. Since we are on the eve of Norwegian-American celebrations a hundred years after the time of that Atlantic crossing, perhaps it will be of interest to know how those immigrants of 1837 celebrated the day. At dawn there was a salvo of cannon. Everybody wore his best clothes, and in the morning there seems to have been a play performed. We don't know what that play was, but we are told that it was about the land they had left and also "of the hopes that smiled to them from the shore whither they were sailing." At noon there was a festive banquet and toasts were drunk to the Seventeenth of May, to the Fatherland, to Liberty, and to the King and his son. And then a song, especially composed for the occasion, was sung. I found the entire text of it in Norway, five stanzas, but I am going to give you only two of them in translation. Now you must have not only second sight but second hearing. See that group of emigrants on the "Aegir" and imagine you hear them singing these words:

Beyond the surge of the stormy deep,
The mists hide Norway's rocky shore,
But longings rise, their tryst to keep
With magic forests known of yore,
Where whistling spruce and glaciers' boom
Are harmonies to Norway's son.

Though destiny, as Leif and Björn,
Call northern son to alien West,
Yet will his heart in mem'ry turn
To native mountains loved the best.
As longs the heart of a lone son
To his loved home once more to come.

That Seventeenth of May festival ended in the evening with dancing and merriment, but this song makes it clear that there was an undercurrent of sadness. Looking west, there was the joy and courage of anticipation. Looking homeward, there was the melancholy of broken ties.

But who wrote, who composed, this touching and lovely song? None other than the man whose memory we honor today—Ole Rynning, young, talented, the trusted leader of the emigrant group, an unusual figure in immigrant pioneering. Born in the miraculous year of 1809 which gave Lincoln to the world, by what strange destiny was he now aboard the "Aegir" headed for Illinois, the state of Lincoln?

Rynning somehow broke away from the paths then customarily followed by young Norwegians of birth and education. His father, Jens Rynning, was a prominent and very able clergyman of the Norwegian state church, minister for more than thirty years at Snaasen, and Young Rynning was given every advantage, private tutors and an education at the national university in Christiania, with the road to success in church or state open to him. Yet for some reason he turned his back on all that and threw in his lot with humble farmers who dared the great venture of the New World. There were doubtless personal motives, but I have come to the conclusion that Rynning, democratic by instinct and critical of the state church of which his father was a typical member, had higher than merely personal motive. Profoundly in sympathy with the farming and laboring classes of Norway and keenly aware of their problems and burdens, he saw emigration and America as the solution, and was determined to join and to help a movement that was in league with the future. "Nothing," said one of his friends, "could shake his belief that America would become a place of refuge for the masses of people in Europe who toiled under the burdens of poverty."

But let us watch this man and note his fibre in the second scene of our story—out in the Illinois country, in the Beaver Creek settlement, some seventy miles south of Chicago. The "Aegir" had duly arrived at New York on June 9, just two months and two days after it had sailed out of Bergen harbor. The immigrants had spent a week in New York, then gone by steamer on the Hudson to Albany, continued by boat on the Erie Canal to Buffalo, and there caught a vessel that took them to Detroit. After a wait of five days at that place, they somehow got places on a crowded boat that carried them down to Chicago—then an infant Chicago just emerging from village status. Here a hard blow fell upon the party. All this time the intention had been to proceed to Cleng Peerson's colony in the Fox River Valley, but scarcely had they reached Chicago when they received very unfavorable reports about the Fox River country. On no account must they go there. And as they gave up their cherished plans, profound discouragement settled upon many of the immigrants. Little wonder their confidence was shaken: Fox River had been the goal they had crossed half a world to reach; here they were in a strange country, their plans gone awry. But, wrote one of them, in this situation the "greatness of Ole Rynning's spirit was revealed." The records show Rynning comforting those in despair, counseling with those in doubt, calming everyone with his own coolness and courage. The upshot of it all was that, after a committee had gone down to investigate the Beaver Creek region, oxen and wagons were purchased and most of the immigrants, led by Rynning, went to that place.

So the "Aegir" immigrants settled down in the Illinois country, building log houses, grappling with hardships, and meeting the sacrifices that attended a first year of pioneering in a strange land. These things were a part of the frontier experience, but worse lay ahead. Beaver Creek was to be the scene of stark tragedy, for the lands selected, dry and tillable as they seemed to be in the fall, were to prove low and swampy once spring and summer came, and the colony was to be swept by a dreadful scourge of malaria and typhoid. Throughout the winter, however, Rynning was thinking about the problems and needs of his countrymen in Norway. "A great and good idea," wrote his friend Ansten Nattestad, "formed the central point of all his thinking. He hoped to be able to provide the poor, oppressed Norwegian workman a happier home on this side of the sea, and to realize this wish he shunned no sacrifice, endured the greatest exertions, and was patient through misunderstandings, disappointments, and loss." And so we come to the most interesting thing that

happened that winter in Beaver Creek. Nattestad gives us the setting, explaining that Rynning was contented with little "and was remarkably patient under the greatest sufferings." Let this friend of Rynning, who was there at Beaver Creek, tell the story: "I well remember one time when he came home from a long exploring expedition. Frost had set in during his absence. The ice on the swamps and the crusts of snow cut his boots. He finally reached the colony, but his feet were frozen and lacerated. They presented a terrible sight, and we all thought he would be a cripple for life." It was while in this condition, crippled, sick, and confined to his bed, that Ole Rynning wrote his book, *A True Account of America for the Information and Help of Peasant and Commoner*, calling in his neighbors as he finished each chapter so that he might read it aloud to them and profit by their criticisms and suggestions. The man rose above personal misfortune and local circumstances, took a broad and remarkably fair-minded view of America and its conditions, and addressed himself to his fellow-men of the Old World. He signed his preface on February 13, 1838, stating that his purpose was "to answer every question that I myself raised, to make clear every point in regard to which I observed that people were in ignorance, and to refute the false reports which came to my ears, partly before my departure from Norway and partly after my arrival here."

Now, before looking into that book, we must picture a third scene in our story. This time the hero is Ansten Nattestad, for in the spring of 1838, taking Rynning's manuscript with him, he set out for Norway, going down the Mississippi to New Orleans and then sailing by way of Liverpool. To make a long story short, he got to Norway, published Rynning's book at Christiania in 1838, and found himself looked upon as a sort of Marco Polo, some people traveling as far as 140 miles to see him and talk with him about America. Meanwhile the book was being read with greatest interest in many parts of Norway. The "America Book," they called it. "Many who were scarcely able to read," said one immigrant, "began in earnest to practice in the America-book." A second edition came out in 1839 and it was soon reprinted in Sweden, so that in a sense it became the "America Book" for the Scandinavian North.

There can be no doubt that Rynning's compact, informative little volume, crammed with shrewd observation and sound sense, played an important and influential role in the development of early Norwegian migration to America. The book alone makes the man one of the founding fathers, so far as Norwegian-American life is concerned, and gives him a secure place among American immigrant leaders. What was the scope of the volume? In thirteen short and concise chapters, each headed by a definite question or group of questions, Rynning takes up such topics as the climate, soil, and products of America; the cost of land and provisions; the nature of the American government; religious conditions in the New World; the problems of language and education; the story of the earlier pioneers from Norway; and general prospects for immigrants. With quiet common sense he disposes of absurd rumors and silly assertions that had been given currency in Norway by enemies of emigration. He praised the freedom and equality of America, but denounced the slavery system of the South. And he closed with a chapter of advice about all the details of the journey to America: vessels, routes, food and supplies, medicines, and the like. A fourteenth chapter in Rynning's manuscript, though written, was never printed. It was a chapter criticizing the Norwegian state church ministers for intolerance and for inactivity in advancing the welfare of the people in economic and educational matters. This chapter was read by a state church minister who didn't like it and therefore threw it out. Today we honor the courage of Rynning in writing the chapter and

we are obliged to regard the Reverend Mr. Kragh of Eidsvold, who excised it, as a narrow-minded zealot.

Let me give you a very few examples of Rynning's mind as revealed in his book. That he had judgment and foresight is clear when we read his prediction of the Civil War, written at his Beaver Creek cabin twenty-three years before that war came. After a vigorous description of the slavery system Rynning wrote this: "The northern states try in every Congress to get the slave trade abolished in the southern states; but as the latter always oppose these efforts, and appeal to their right to settle their internal affairs themselves, there will in all likelihood come either a separation between the northern and southern states, or else bloody civil disputes." In another chapter Rynning assures his Norwegian countrymen that America is not a land of heathens. "Every one can believe as he wishes," he writes, "and worship God in the manner which he believes to be right, but he must not persecute anyone for holding another faith." After describing the nature of the American national government, he adds, "For the comfort of the faint-hearted I can, therefore, declare with truth that in America, as in Norway, there are laws, government, and authorities. But everything is designed to maintain the natural freedom and equality of men." He has a word to say in yet another chapter about the status of women in America. "Women are respected and honored far more than is the case among the common people in Norway," he writes, and then adds, somewhat slyly, "So far as I know, only two or three Norwegian girls have been married to Americans, and I do not believe they have made particularly good matches. But there are many Norwegian bachelors who would prefer to marry Norwegian girls if they could." He mentions two classes who must not come to America. They are drunkards, "who will be detested, and will soon perish miserably," and "those who neither can work nor have sufficient money to carry on a business."

Several Vossings who emigrated to America in 1839 all took guns or rifles with them. They had read this passage in Rynning: "If a settler is furnished with a good rifle and knows how to use it, he does not have to buy meat during the first two years. A good rifle costs from fifteen to twenty dollars. The chief wild animals are deer, prairie chickens, turkeys, ducks, and wild geese." Rynning did not want immigrants to starve during the voyage. He advised them to include among their provisions pork, dried meat, salted meat, dried herring, smoked herring, dried fish, butter, cheese, primost, milk, beer, flour, peas, cereals, potatoes, rye rusks, coffee, and tea. There is much specific information about prices and wages and a variety of other subjects, precisely the kind of information that was needed and desired by prospective immigrants, information of a sort that warranted Professor Edward Channing's characterization of Rynning's book as "the work of a keen observer."

And so let us take leave of Ole Rynning's *True Account of America*. It carried an authentic picture of New World conditions to the common people of Norway; its circle of influence widened steadily; and its historical importance is established beyond cavil. Let us also have a last glimpse of Ansten Nattestad, the modern Marco Polo, the man who had seen America, and who was now preparing to lead a whole shipload of emigrants to the United States. He basked in the glory of his fame. "I remained in Numedal throughout the winter and until the following spring," he wrote. "The report of my return spread like wildfire through the land, and an incredible number of people came to me to hear news from America." With what authority could not the man speak who had himself made the long journey and with his own eyes viewed the wonderland of the West. Listen to the testimony of one Norwegian who went to see Nattestad: "Ministers and bailiffs tried to frighten us with terrible tales about the dreadful sea monsters, and about man-eating wild

animals in the new world; but when Ansten Nattestad had said Yes and Amen to Rynning's *Account* all fears and doubts were removed."

But we must return to Beaver Creek for the final scene in our story. Ole Rynning regained his health and the use of his feet, and once more he took up his work among the colonists. But the misfortune of the winter was as nothing to the disaster of the spring and summer. Not Utopia, not happiness and golden prosperity, but wet lands, the deadly attack of malaria, sickness, despair, and for many a miserable death: that was the fate of the colonists. We have glimpses of the leader, Ole Rynning, comforting the sorrowing, helping those in distress, and clinging to his belief in America notwithstanding calamity. And then, a quick ending: picture the University-trained scholar working for a month that summer of 1838 on the Illinois Canal, spade in hand, blistered, exposed to the elements, and then the dread malaria striking him. Close on its heels came typhoid, and so, late in September, still under thirty years of age, he died. The circumstances of his burial are reported to us by the founder of St. Olaf College, B. J. Muus, himself a nephew of Rynning, and he had the tale from the lips of a resident of Beaver Creek who knew Rynning. Only one person in the colony was well when Rynning was struck down by disease. This man, Muus tells us, went "out on the prairie and chopped down an oak and made a sort of coffin of it. His brother helped him to get the dead body into the coffin and then they hauled it out on the prairie and buried it." The grave, so far as we know, went unmarked. The Beaver Creek colony broke up. Many, but not all, of the colonists died. Some fled to the Fox River settlement, after the leader perished. The last of the settlers to leave was one Mons Aadland, who in 1840 managed to exchange his farm for a small herd of cattle and removed to Wisconsin. Few of the settlers had been able to sell their land, however. They simply abandoned it. "Only the empty log houses remained," we are told, "like silent witnesses to the terrors of the scourge, and afforded a dismal sight to the lonely wanderer who ventured within these domains."

So the scenes fade away, and the story seems to end, a stark tragedy, like some Greek drama. But that is only in the seeming. For Ole Rynning's voice was not stilled when the log coffin was lowered into the Illinois prairie soil. His book was an "articulate audible voice" to a generation of Norwegian people, and it sounds across the decades to our ears. Tragic indeed was the fate of the immigrants who sailed so blithely in the "Aegir," but the Emersonian compensation of gain for loss accompanied the tragedy. For the courage and patience and sacrifice of Ole Rynning and his fellow immigrant pioneers were a contribution to our people and to America. They are a precious part of our common heritage, living and warm. These things are a part of the ceaseless flow of life. They seem to me to come close to the heart of "the people, yes." And so 1937 looks back to 1837 with a sense of living realities and common humanity, of kinship and vital bonds, of an unbroken unity.

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OUR "SEMINARISTS"

In writing the history of a people it is necessary to choose those things to write about that have had a part in making history. The preachers among us have been written up, the professors have come in for a mention, now and then a reference is made to the "Master Farmers," and they all deserve it. But there is a class of men from our pioneer days that have been sadly neglected. They did a man's job for very poor pay. They worked sometimes thirteen months a year at \$25.00 a month and board. I refer to the professional religious-school teachers.

As a rule they had their training in Norway. The two-year Teachers' Training School—known back there as "Lærer-seminariet"—gave those men a thorough training in the rudiments of pedagogy, especially as it applied to the religious instruction of children. It is a marvel how efficient they were. The art of catechisation—we can hardly speak of the science of it: that term is of a more recent injection—the art of catechisation was one of the great assets of this class of teachers. To be able to frame questions in such a way as to make boys and girls forget where they were and what they were doing, as the interest in the situation developed, and to draw out of them answers to their questions, that was a real art.

A number of such seminary trained men were induced to accept ordination in order to meet the dire need for preachers among the people. And some of them became good, very good pastors. Others stuck to their last and taught children by the hundreds through a period of 40 to 60 years and more. As a foundation factor in our pioneer history this activity cannot be overestimated. They were the real trainers of the mothers of the future, and when you talk with middle-aged men of today and they tell of their mothers, how they took their boys and girls and set them at their knees while they spun, sewed or engaged in any one of their dozens of urgent duties and occupations, and kept them at it until they knew their lessons thoroughly, that is a chapter in rural pedagogy both unsung and unrecorded.

These same mothers were trained under the stern eye of some "seminarist" and knew their part well.

I want to mention a typical case, and hope the party will accept it in the spirit in which it is intended. The man in question is very well known. He passed his 85th birthday on March 19, 1937. Svein Strand is his name. He had the two-year course at Asker Seminary and taught parochial school both in Norway and in this county from 1875-76. The need for preachers here was great and after a two-year course at Augsburg Seminary he was ordained. In 1907 he became a teacher at our teachers' seminary at Madison, Minnesota, where his influence was felt by hundreds of future teachers. Good catechists always made good debaters and Strand excelled and was in his element when he could argue an important issue on the floor of our Church conventions.

How much we owe our seminarist, parochial school teachers we shall never be able to express in values. It is a fact that, up to quite recently, there were very few Norwegian names on the rosters of our state penal institutions—and when we saw one there, we blushed with shame—and is it too far fetched a conclusion to say that, doubtless, such a situation can be largely ascribed to the well trained, religious-hearted, earnest Christian mothers that made up our pioneer groups?

Let us hope that when stars are to be distributed for the diadems to be worn in glory by these consecrated men who labored here for \$25.00 a month and board for 30-60 years, that a righteous Judge up yonder will see fit to reward them much more generously and justly than we have done.

That "their place shall know them no more" is literally true. They are gone, as a class. But we shall for long feel the benefit of their labors. Their works surely do live after them.

P. M. G.