

FROM AMERICA TO NORWAY

Norwegian-American Immigrant Letters, 1838-1914

VOLUME ONE: 1838-1870

INDEX

A NOTE ON INDEXING IMMIGRANT LETTERS

In the period covered by these volumes, names and the spelling of names were not stable, neither in North America nor in Norway. For the entire period most people in Norway did not have a formal family name, while a family name was required in the United States. Their last name was usually their patronymic (father's name), written with the ending *sen/son* for males and *datter* for females. Most people lived in rural areas, and here they were further identified by the name of the farm on which they resided. This help true even for laborers on these farms. Further complicating matters, this name changed if a person moved. The spelling of both given names and farm names was also unstable, due to the differences between the Dano-Norwegian written language and the spoken dialects. A name could thus be written *Svend* but pronounced *Svein*. Both forms are currently in use, and the former form is the more common in family names such as Svendsen.

Immigrants soon discovered that their names did not always work well in their new environment. Some had their names changed upon arrival, as when an unpronounceable farm name was replaced in favor of a patronymic such as Olsen/Olson. For instance, when immigrants realized that the farm name they spelled Lie had unfavorable associations in English, they often changed the spelling of their American family name to Lee, which retained the pronunciation they were used to. In the indexes to these volumes of letters, names may therefore have different spellings in the two countries. A name like Nørstebø probably caused such problems that members of this family from Dovre in Oppland took the name Norsby, while immigrants from the farm Vigerust in the same township simply took the name Olson after their father, whose name was Ole. Not only did members of the same family on different sides of the Atlantic have different family/farm names and patronymics, but members of the same family in the United States wrote their names differently.

Even though many immigrants Americanized their names, they would often use the Norwegian form of the name when writing letters to their homeland. When the American name of a letter writer is known, this is used in headings and notes, even though a name may be different in the letter itself. In some cases, it is highly probable that the name used in a letter is not the official American name, but in such cases we must nevertheless identify the person by the name we know.

Orm Øverland

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