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# Currents

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION | SUMMER 2018 VOLUME 169





# LETTERS REVEAL PAST, INFORM PRESENT

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## on the cover

Ole Rølvaag with his fishing buddies, photographed circa 1905 in Northfield, Minn. From left: an unidentified man,

Ole Rølvaag, P.G. Schmidt, and Erik Hetle.

This winter marked the completion of NAHA's multivolume publication *From America to Norway: Norwegian-American Immigrant Letters 1838-1914*. Members received the fourth and final volume this spring.

The series, edited and translated by Orm Øverland, includes 762 immigrant letters. They were written in places across America (spanning 27 states) and were sent to farms and homes throughout Norway. Today they are part of the extensive collection of "America letters" held at the Norwegian National Archives. NAHA Editor Todd Nichol directed the publication project.

Volume Four, the slimmest of the series, comprises six indexes, facilitating access to the letters for both the scholar and the casual reader. But before you shelve this volume for future reference use, let me suggest that you take a look at its introductory essay.

Here, Øverland interweaves the story of NAHA's beginnings in the 1920s with the story of the discovery of the immigrant letters. His essay traces the new awareness of their value as historical documents as well as the initial efforts to locate and preserve them. It's a fascinating account of six key individuals who worked on both sides of the Atlantic to establish an important collection.

Interestingly, such letters, written by a largely uneducated rural population, had not been regarded as important sources for scholarship. Yet with a then-emerging interest in social and immigration history, they provided invaluable perspectives and information. Similarly, as NAHA continues to build its archives, we will need to be attentive to different types of documentation and to new research fields and questions. Only then can we be confident that our collections will not only document Norwegian America, but will also shed light on the broad patterns of human migration, past and present.



Dennis Gimmestad, President



## NAHA WELCOMES NEW EDITOR

The Association is pleased to name Anna M. Peterson as its new editor. For the past decade Anna has been an active scholar in the field of Norwegian-American history. She currently serves as assistant professor of history at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa — a position she will keep while she holds the NAHA editorship.

Anna earned a B.A. in Scandinavian Studies at Concordia College, Moorhead. As an undergraduate, she also studied at Hedmark University College in Norway. She holds two graduate degrees in history: an M.A. from the University of North Dakota and a Ph.D. from Ohio State University. As an American-Scandinavian Foundation Fellow in 2012–13, Anna was a visiting scholar at the Center for Gender Research at the University of Oslo. In 2016 she was the first American historian to receive an award for the best and most innovative contribution to *Historisk Tidsskrift* (the Norwegian Journal of History).

Anna has served as a member of the NAHA Board of Directors since 2014. She also serves as Luther College liaison to Vesterheim Museum and as a board member to the Nordic Studies and Women and Gender Studies programs at Luther.

In her role as editor, Anna will oversee the redesign and relaunch

of NAHA's journal, *Norwegian-American Studies*, which is anticipated for the fall of 2019. The roots of the journal go back to 1926, when the Association released its first issue of *Studies and Records*. Since then, NAHA has published a total of 36 volumes of studies. The name of the series has changed over the years, but the intent has remained the same: to encourage and support scholarship in the field by offering a peer-reviewed platform.

"I look forward to sustaining and developing NAHA's relationships with authors and showcasing the best scholarship in Norwegian-American history, culture, and life in our publications," she says.

Anna believes the NAHA publications program can play a significant role in cultivating and sustaining scholarly interest in the field of Norwegian-American migration history. "The journal has the potential to energize the field of Norwegian-American studies and attract attention to this important area of scholarly inquiry. This will ultimately enhance our understanding of the interconnected histories of both Norway and the United States," she says.

There have been only four pre-



"I AM HONORED for my name to be listed alongside the accomplished past editors of NAHA. I intend to uphold the reputation for academic excellence that they established."

— Anna M. Peterson

vious editors in the Association's 93-year history: Theodore Blegen, Kenneth Bjork, Odd Lovoll, and Todd Nichol "I am honored for my name to be listed alongside the accomplished past editors of NAHA. I intend to uphold the reputation for academic excellence that they established," she says.

**TO LEARN MORE** about Anna Peterson, visit [luther.edu/petean07/](http://luther.edu/petean07/).

## in brief

### QUANBECK IS SUMMER INTERN

Internships and research positions help students develop professionally and personally in ways beyond what they learn in the traditional classroom. This summer, about 100 students will participate in internships and research positions at St. Olaf College, including one for the first time at NAHA.

Anna Quanbeck will complete an eight-week internship with a focus on nonprofit management and membership. She will work closely with the staff and

the Membership Committee of the Board of Directors to carry out initiatives and improve systems that support membership in NAHA. In addition, she will gain exposure to many facets of nonprofit management.

A mathematics and French major, Anna plans to attend law school after she graduates from St. Olaf in 2019. "I hope to use my law degree in the nonprofit sector, using skills and knowledge that NAHA has helped me to develop," Anna says.

While Anna will fill a new role this summer, she is well acquainted with the Association. She has worked as a student office assistant at NAHA since she began her stud-



ies at St. Olaf. During the spring semester of 2018 she studied at the University of Oslo, where, among other subjects, she took a beginning Norwegian language class.

Anna says nearly six months in Norway has given her a new perspective on the NAHA Archives. "After spending three weeks traveling in Norway with my family and tracking down our relatives and our history, I have come to appreciate even more the service that NAHA provides in keeping the Norwegian-American experience alive," she says.

The internship is supported by the Sigvald Quale Fund, which supports undergraduate activities and was transferred to NAHA in 1976 by Det Norske Selskap.

## AUGUST TOUR EXPLORES SUPERIOR FISHING INDUSTRY

### North Shore Fisherfolk Tour Aug. 28-30

Join NAHA in exploring the history and culture of the North Shore commercial fishing industry in the late 19th and early 20th century. The North Shore Fisherfolk Tour will draw on the expertise of local residents with family and personal stories related to fishing on the shore, and local museums and historians who are working to preserve the archival and material record of this region.

Traveling by bus, the group will depart from the Twin Cities and take in the sights, sounds, and tastes of the North Shore from Duluth to Hovland. Stops include the North Shore Commercial Fishing Museum in Tofte, boat restorations in Knife River, and visits to the fishing villages of Grand Marais and Hovland. A lake cruise (weather permitting) will provide a fisherman's view of the shoreline, fishing grounds, and communities that formed the basis for this



chapter in Great Lakes history. Accommodations will be at the AmericInn in Tofte.

For many, the story of the immigrants who fished on the North Shore is not a familiar one. "It's a unique group of immigrants compared to those who came here primarily to farm. Although some of the issues of immigration were the same, many came from Norway with different life and work experiences and ended up in a very different environment here," says NAHA President Dennis Gimmestad.

More information, including an itinerary

and registration, is available at the NAHA website. Space is limited — to check availability, visit [naha.stolaf.edu](http://naha.stolaf.edu). For more information, email [naha@stolaf.edu](mailto:naha@stolaf.edu) or call 507-786-3221.

**\$495 per person** for NAHA members,\* double occupancy

**\$585 per person** for non-members,\* double occupancy

**\$120** single supplement

*\*Price includes bus transportation, lodging, lake cruise, museum entrances, and five meals.*

## NEW AND NOTEWORTHY

Enjoy the long and lazy days of summer with a new nonfiction release.

### **Folksongs of Another America: Field Recordings from the Upper Midwest, 1937-1946**

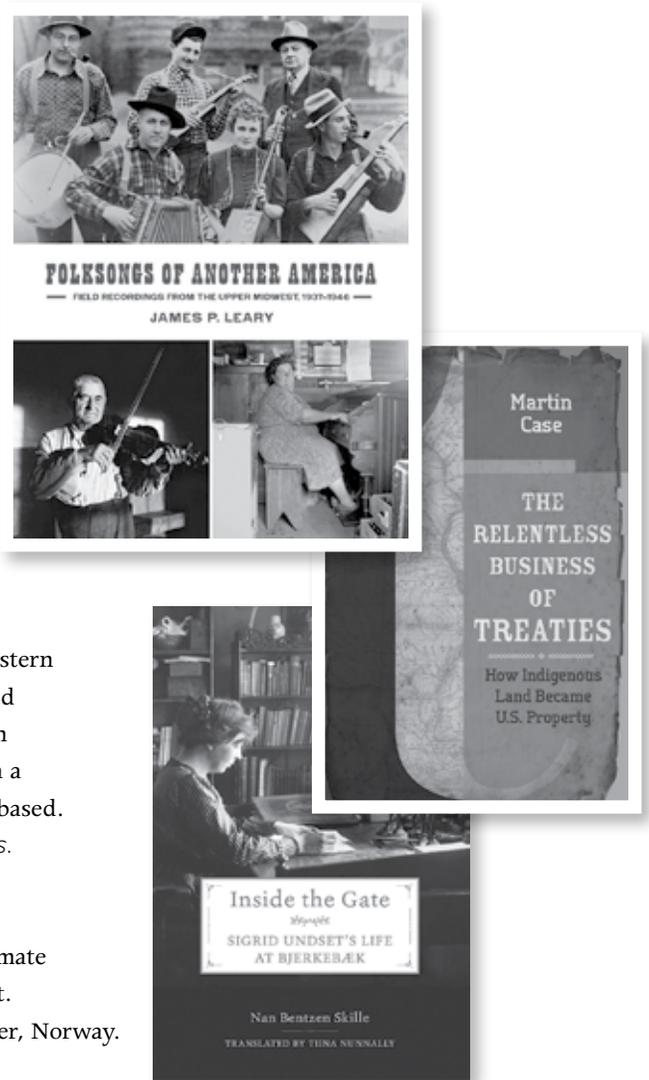
Professor Emeritus of Scandinavian studies James Leary offers a broader look at American folk music from immigrant, Native American, rural, and working-class people of the upper Midwest. The new paperback edition is accompanied by musical tracks and a documentary film that are freely available through the University of Wisconsin Libraries' Digital Collections Center. University of Wisconsin Press (2018) \$24.95. [uwpress.wisc.edu](http://uwpress.wisc.edu).

### **The Relentless Business of Treaties: How Indigenous Land Became U.S. Property**

Using Minnesota as a case study, author Martin Case explores the story of western expansion and how U.S. government agents, by deceit and by force, persuaded Native Americans to sign away their land rights. Case argues that land cession treaties essentially replaced indigenous kinship relationships to the land with a property relationship — the organizing principle upon which U.S. society is based. MNHS Press (2018) paperback, \$17.95. E-book \$9.99. [mnhs.org/mnhspress](http://mnhs.org/mnhspress).

### **Inside the Gate: Sigrid Undset's Life at Bjerkebak**

Drawing historical documents as sources, Nan Bentzen Skille presents an intimate portrait of the notoriously private Nobel Prize-winning author, Sigrid Undset. Her home, Bjerkebak, is now a museum and national landmark in Lillehammer, Norway. University of Minnesota Press (2018) \$19.95. [upress.umn.edu](http://upress.umn.edu).



## IN MEMORIAM

### **Elaine Kringen 1923-2018**

Former NAHA Assistant Secretary Elaine Holst Kringen passed away on March 18, 2018, at the age of 94. Elaine was born on



Dec. 23, 1923, in Chicago, Ill., and attended St. Olaf College from 1941 to 45. In her family history, she recalled her

college days, writing "to be thrust into this Norwegian-Lutheran community was like coming home." At St. Olaf she met Duane Kringen, and the couple married in 1944. Elaine taught in the St. Olaf women's physical education department for three years before the birth of the couple's first child.

After raising a family, Elaine served as assistant secretary at NAHA, a job that combined her administrative skills,

interest in history, and love of all things Norwegian. "Elaine was most efficient and well-organized in her many responsibilities, but she always found time for a pleasant conversation and to give advice and encouragement. I was most grateful to her." says Professor Emeritus of Norwegian and History Odd Lovoll, who served as NAHA editor during those years.

Elaine is survived by her husband, a brother, three children, five grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.

## in brief



AARS President Loraine Jensen (left), runologist Henrik Williams, and Mary Hegge enjoy the social gathering before the program.

## SPRING MEMBER MEETUP

Eighty members and friends of NAHA gathered at Norway House in Minneapolis for a Spring Member Meetup on April 11. During the social hour, attendees enjoyed Nordic-inspired appetizers and refreshments while viewing the photography exhibit by Oslo-based photographer Nancy Bundt in the Norway House gallery.

The evening continued with updates to the membership from NAHA President Dennis Gimmestad and Executive Director Amy Boxrud. The highlight of the program was a talk by runologist Henrik Williams of Uppsala University: "The Importance of Runic Inscriptions for History — And the Dangers of Fake History in Runology."

The event was held in cooperation with the American Association for Runic Studies (AARS). Thanks goes to Loraine Jensen, NAHA member and AARS president, for help in planning the gathering. For more information on AARS, visit [runicstudies.org](http://runicstudies.org).



NAHA Vice President Ron Johnson (center) and his wife, Janet (left), greet NAHA board member Cindy Olson.



Mariann Tiblin (left) enjoys conversation with NAHA members Birgitte and John Christianson.

## NAHA BIENNIAL MEETING TO FOCUS ON WRITING

Saturday, October 13: save the date for the NAHA 2018 Biennial Member Meeting. The event will be held at St. Olaf College and will focus on the craft of writing, especially family histories and memoirs.

Along with presentations on writing, NAHA will hold its biennial business meeting, provide updates on its strategic plan to the membership, and elect new members to the Board of Directors. A nominating committee is working this summer to prepare a slate of board member candidates. If you are interested in serving or have a suggested nominee, please forward those names to Amy Boxrud by Aug. 1.

Watch for your meeting invitation to arrive early this fall. Plan to attend and invite a friend — non-members are welcome. More information and registration will be available at [naha.stolaf.edu](http://naha.stolaf.edu) by August 1.



Ole Rølvaag (right) with his son, Karl

# RØLVAAG'S WRITING CABIN

BY JEFF  
SAUVE

"I know I'm doing a great work ... You have never heard me so positive about any of my books before, have you?" Ole E. Rølvaag wrote in a letter to his wife, Jennie, in 1923. From early September through October of that year, Rølvaag remained alone at the family's wooded cabin in northern Minnesota on Big Island Lake near Marcell, Itasca County. There he undertook writing his iconic novel,

"Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie." First issued in Norway as two volumes in 1924 and 1925, and later translated into English and published in the United States in 1927, the novel profoundly affected his final years and established his legacy as one of the most acclaimed American immigrant writers.

Only a few decades earlier in 1896, Rølvaag had emigrated from the windswept island of Dønna,

just south of the Arctic Circle in Nordland, Norway. When the 20-year-old fisherman arrived in Elk Point, S.D., the few worldly possessions he carried included an American dime and a stale loaf of bread.

In the years ahead, Rølvaag sought an education, first enrolling in the academy at Augustana College in Canton, S.D., in the *continue on page 8...*



Rølvaag (left) with relatives

fall of 1899. In 1901 he began his studies at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., where he graduated with honors in 1905 at the age 28. After spending a year of graduate study at the University of Oslo, Rølvaag began teaching at his alma mater in the fall of 1906.

In 1908 he married South Dakota native Jennie Berdahl. They had four children: Olaf, Ella, Karl, and Paul. Leading up to the spring of 1922 when the cabin was built, Rølvaag established himself as the head of the department of Norwegian at St. Olaf, authored several books, and earned the respect of many within Norwegian-American circles.

## BUILDING THE CABIN

The June 9, 1922, edition of the St. Olaf student newspaper reported the summer plans for the faculty. Rølvaag and family had already departed by train on Saturday, June 3, for Marcell with plans to build a cabin on the 238-acre Big Island Lake. The

SUMMERS AT THE CABIN provided the simple, blissfully peaceful life Rølvaag sought.



Ole Rølvaag (in suspenders) and his children, Karl and Ella (right), picnic with visitors.

writer pondered, “What he will do the remainder of the time is not known. May we look for a book?”

Upon arrival in Marcell, the Rølvaags made their way to an acquaintance who sheltered them for the next month. During this time, Rølvaag cleared the future cabin site of trees and brush, and assisted two woodsmen with construction. One family story told of Rølvaag’s impatience for a delivery. Rather than wait, he

walked six miles on trails through the woods (as there were no roads) to Marcell. He returned carrying windows, several pounds of nails, and a week’s supply of groceries. The finished balsam cabin measured 28 x 24 feet with a spacious veranda of 12 x 24 feet.

Situated on a point overlooking the lake, the family cottage of peeled and oiled logs was vividly described in 1936 by daughter Ella as “glistening golden in the sun, the

red roof contrasting with the green trees." She added, "the snugness of the cabin, all made us feel richer than kings in castles. White birch and fragrant pine woods stretch for miles on either side."

The family moved into the cabin on July 11. Jennie noted that it was less impressive than other cabins nearby: "no fancy furniture, nor fussy cleaning needed. No telephone, newspapers, or radio — a good place to work." In fact, the sparse furniture and two boats were built by Rølvaag too.

## A WRITER'S RETREAT

Summers at the cabin provided the simple, blissfully peaceful life Rølvaag sought: particularly undisturbed time devoted to writing. The family enjoyed a stronger intimacy through the seasonal activities such as berry picking, fishing, swimming, and boating. Ella reflected on hiking: "Father had an unerring sense of direction — a heritage of his seafaring days — and it was always fun to go with him on expeditions into the woods, to see what we could see, or to look for berries, or to hunt for big trees."

Besides fish for nearly every meal, the table included waffles, rice porridge, and pies from pails of bountiful wild blueberries. Milk and butter were secured from a neighbor's cow. Jennie wrote that the vacation was not complete without at least one meal of creamed onions on toast — a favorite of Rølvaag's.

Rainy or cold days were spent indoors, where the family sat near the big range and cozied around a fire of crackling poplar.

A gramophone and a varied collection of wax cylinder recordings provided entertainment. Apparently, whenever Jennie wanted Rølvaag to quit fishing and come in for dinner, she played one of the tunes. The wafting music over the lake signaled to him that supper was ready.

## WRITING "GIANTS IN THE EARTH"

In the spring of 1923, Rølvaag learned that Johan Bojer, a popular Norwegian novelist, was contemplating a book about Norwegian immigration to America. Rølvaag was convinced that he, not Bojer, was singularly meant to tell the story of Norwegians settling on the American West frontier. After all, Rølvaag had experienced life as an immigrant and had lived among the pioneers — particularly the Berdahls — who shared their stories of life on the prairie and its many triumphs and tragedies. He sought and was given a one-year leave of absence from St. Olaf in the fall of 1923 to pen what would eventually emerge as "Giants in the Earth."

At the end of their second season at the lake, Jennie and the children parted with Rølvaag on Aug. 30. For the next two months the novel's two main characters, Per Hansa and his wife, Beret, kept him company. To Rølvaag, the luxury of solitude was earned. He stated, "Writing is hard, pains-taking physical labor." Almost  
*continue on page 10...*

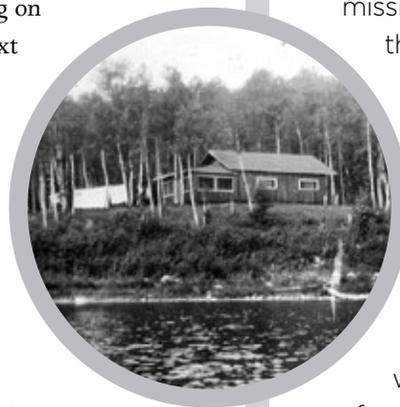


## VISIT THE RØLVAAG CABIN

After many years of enjoyment, the Rølvaag family donated its writing cabin to Heritage Park at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, S.D., where it was dedicated in 2002. The cabin is maintained by Nordland Heritage Foundation and is one of the park's four historic buildings, along with the Berdahl-Rølvaag House, Beaver Creek Lutheran Church, and the Eggers School House.

The Nordland Heritage Foundation was established in 1977 to encourage the preservation of Scandinavian heritage and to celebrate all frontier experiences of the northern plains and prairies. In addition to sustaining Heritage Park, the foundation fulfills its mission by hosting conferences and through its publications program.

Admission to the park is free and open to the public June–August and by appointment at other times. Docents are present Sundays 2–4 p.m., and an intern is present Wednesday–Saturday during summer hours. Visitors are welcome to view the buildings from the outside at any time. For more information about visit [nordlandheritage.com](http://nordlandheritage.com).





Jennie Rølvaag (center) with her sisters

daily he corresponded with Jennie, telling her of his progress with the manuscript and doings at the lake. Within the first three weeks, he had composed nearly 50,000 words in longhand while sitting at the table in the veranda overlooking the lake, where he averaged five to six hours of uninterrupted writing and rewriting per day.

By evening Rølvaag wrote by kerosene, often letters to family and colleagues. He noted, "I could scarcely have written the book if I had not had some intimate glimpses of pioneer life here. ... I like this hermit life a great deal." With humor, he mused, "I have saved at least 20 dollars in cigars since I came here this summer. I reckon also that I have saved 30 dollars on clothes."

His daily routine, like the rhythms of the lake lapping against the shoreline, gave him pause to contemplate the story. To Jennie it was clear "that many of the problems he had with his writing were solved on Big Island." He used to say to her,



Ella Rølvaag

"For the characters in a book are not exactly like other regular people." She added that the characters "didn't always want what he wanted. Sometimes he had a serious struggle with them. It was good that he got to be with them for a while, alone and undisturbed."

In a letter to Jennie, he recounted the struggle: "It is almost 5 p.m. and I have worked faithfully since 7:30 this morning; I have worked all day with a woman [Berit] who cannot endure the loneliness of the prairie — a good theme but not easy to manage so that it seems believable. But she will serve her purpose, wait and see!"

By Nov. 3, Rølvaag broke camp and headed home with a nearly

completed manuscript. To him it was "glorious to sit this way and create human souls and knit them together. I doubt that any joy can compare with that which an artist feels."

## BREAKING NEW GROUND

Upon acceptance of publication, a jubilant Rølvaag said, "This is the greatest day of my life. ... Here I stand, a poor Norwegian-American immigrant with a greater literary work than has hitherto been produced by any one of our people in the United States. The finest and the most critical publisher in Norway has accepted it."

When his friend, Birger Osland, learned that "Giants" would be published in America by Harper and Brothers, he prophesied to Rølvaag: "You will have done more toward the recognition of our race as a worthy and important element in our American nation than all the historical societies put together, because your books will go straight to the hearts of the masses of our people."

Since publication in America, "Giants" has remained in print, been translated into dozens of languages and issued in braille, read by millions throughout the world, and adapted for the theater and a Pulitzer Prize-winning opera.

Until his passing in 1931, Rølvaag spent several more summers at Big Island Lake.

*Jeff M. Sauve served as NAHA Associate Archivist from 2005–17. Special thanks to NAHA volunteer Dale Hovland for his research and translation assistance.*

Ole Rolvaag (right) with a friend



# new to the archives

KRISTELL BENSON, INTERIM ARCHIVIST

Some significant additions to the Archives over the past few months are listed here. We welcome donations from members and friends illustrating all aspects of Norwegian-American history and culture. Do you have Norwegian-American letters, diaries, photographs, family histories, and community and congregational materials at home? Do you know of such items in the hands of others? If so, please contact the archives at [naha-archivist@stolaf.edu](mailto:naha-archivist@stolaf.edu). Perhaps this list of recent donations will suggest some possibilities. We also have continuing interests in Canadian materials and in materials relating to the experiences of post-World War II Norwegian immigrants.

NAHA collection guidelines are available on the archives page on our website: [naha.stolaf.edu/archives/guidelines.pdf](http://naha.stolaf.edu/archives/guidelines.pdf). Please be aware that we do not collect Norwegian language books other than rare Norwegian-American imprints (books published in North America for a Norwegian-language audience), *bygdebøker*, and other printed genealogical material. The Archives continue to benefit from the generosity of members and friends who have made important donations, and we welcome your help in building the collection. Although we aren't able to acknowledge all donations here, we do appreciate every donation, large and small. Families may be sure that donations made to the NAHA Archives will remain open for future family consultations.

## DONATED OCTOBER - DECEMBER, 2017

### MANUSCRIPTS AND PUBLISHED MATERIAL:

- "Preus, Koren, Brandt, Ellefsen? A Mystery Name on the Luther College Founders Monument" or "Erik Ellefsen Slæn: A Microcosm of Norwegian American Immigration" (2018). A paper researched and written by Carol A. Hasvold and Paul M. Hasvold about Erik Ellefsen Slæn, a Norwegian immigrant who was actively involved in his communities. He was a teacher, farmer, politician,

church layman, business owner, county supervisor, justice of the peace, notary public, and homesteader. He lived in northeastern Iowa, Wisconsin, and the Dakota Territories and is an ancestor of one of the writers, Carol Hasvold. **Added to P0436 Articles: Pamphlets, Reprints and Clippings.** Donated by Carol Hasvold.

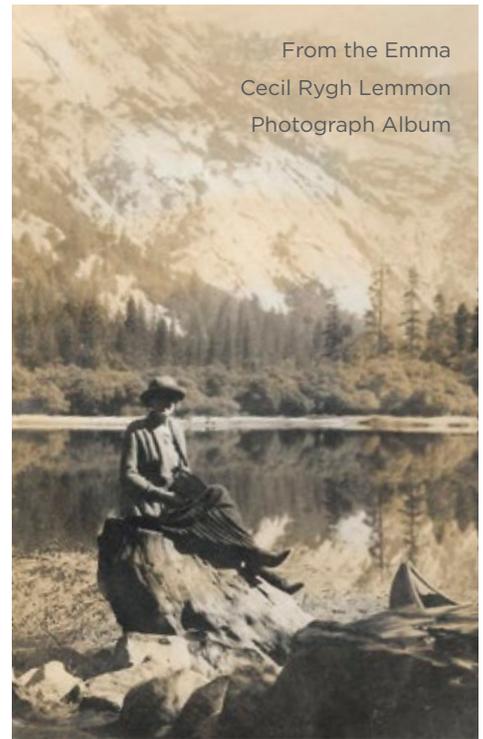
### PHOTOGRAPHS

- Smith Cabinet Cards (ca. late 19th century/early 20th century). Five

cabinet cards (photographs) presumably depicting six different members of the Svendson family. Four of them are named: Karl, Julius, Annette, and Dorthea. The photographers (named on the back of the cards) are Müller-Linde, R. Nyblin, Gihbsson, and Rosenland, all from Skien, Norway. **Added to P0655 Photograph Collection.** Donated by Jason Smith.

- Emma Cecil Rygh Lemmon Photograph Album (ca. early 20th Century). Photograph album of Emma Lemmon, a

From the Emma Cecil Rygh Lemmon Photograph Album



member of the Boraas/Rygh family. Some of the photographs appear to be taken in California. Emma was born in 1876 and married Arthur Glimme, who died in the flu epidemic of 1917. Emma moved to California and married Dr. Theodore Lemmon, residing in Los Angeles. The photo album was eventually passed down to Emma's sister, Julia Rygh Boraas, and then to Julia's daughter, Vivian Boraas Lundeberg, and then to Vivian's children, Andrea Ross and Philip Lundeberg. **Added to P0823 Julius Boraas Papers.** Donated by Philip K. B. Lundeberg.

- Hardanger Laget Digital Panoramic Photograph (1913). 34.5 MB TIFF image of the 1913 Hardanger Lag meeting in Lee, Ill., Sept. 17-18. **Added to P0655 Photograph Collection.** Donated by Gary Krahenbuhl.



NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN  
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# Currents

**The Newsletter of the  
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Historical Association**

Volume 169, Summer 2018

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IMAGE COURTESY OF NAHA ARCHIVES

**1905**

Michael Jakobsen Stolee served as a prominent missionary in Madagascar from 1901 to 1909. Here, his wife, Martha Knutson Stolee, teaches sewing skills to a group of Malagasy women while their husbands attended teacher training. The Stolee Collection of family papers and glass negative photographs offers a unique glimpse into the life of a Norwegian-American missionary family abroad and later in the United States.