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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION | SPRING 2021 VOLUME 179



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HISTORIANS
ON WHY
**THE PAST IS
ALSO THE
PRESENT**



OUR WORK AHEAD

This is my first column as president of NAHA, and I look forward to sharing with you news from the association as well as highlighting some of the projects we will work on this year.

NAHA received great news in October, when the Historic Resources Advisory Committee for the State of Minnesota approved the association's request for a state Historical and Cultural Heritage Grant. The \$87,169 grant will allow the association to digitize a portion of the Ole E. Rølvaag papers, the organization's largest and perhaps most important collection. Several years ago, voters amended the Minnesota Constitution to dedicate part of the sales tax collected by the state to certain cultural activities, including qualified preservation projects.

The Rølvaag project will focus on digitizing three parts of the collection: correspondence with Norwegian-American leaders, including scholars, ministers, teachers, publishers, and family; manuscripts of Rølvaag's novels, with annotations; and family photographs. The grant has enabled us to hire Marisa Campanaro, who is serving as a dedicated imaging archivist for the duration of the project. NAHA Archivist Kristina Warner will oversee the project, which is expected to be completed in early 2022.

NAHA got its start in 1925, the centennial year of the first organized migration of Norwegians to America. The year 2025 will mark the bicentennial of the arrival of the sloop *Restauration* to this country. An ad hoc working group, including NAHA, Vesterheim Museum, Bygdelagenes Fellesraad, and several other Norwegian-American organizations, is collaborating on ways to commemorate this milestone.

One of the main ways that NAHA plans to contribute to the commemoration is by hosting an academic seminar in cooperation with its sister organization, NAHA-Norge, and NORTANA (the Norwegian Researchers and Teachers Association of North America). The conference will be held at St. Olaf College in June 2025. Stay tuned for more details as we approach the date.

While we navigate what we hope is the final chapter of the pandemic this year, we will continue to offer virtual events for our members and the public. We hope you will join us. See the facing page for news about our virtual Member Meetup this spring, and keep an eye on our website for more event announcements. If you missed either of our online member events in 2020, those are still available to you. You'll find the archived videos on the "Events" page at naha.stolaf.edu.

All the best,

Scott Knudson, President



on the cover

A replica of the Gokstad Viking ship arrives in New York City in June 1893, after sailing from Norway on its way to the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Today's understanding of Viking history and culture is very different from what was presented at the exposition 128 years ago.

in brief



"I see my granddad in that picture," one Instagram user posted in response to this 1925 photo of NAHA founders.

GET MORE NEWS FROM NAHA ONLINE

Stay informed between quarterly printed issues of *Currents* with digital news from NAHA. We recently began sending a monthly email newsletter to members. Here are three more ways to get the latest information about events, new archive collections, and other developments.

Visit Our New Website

Our redesigned site shows announcements on the homepage and offers past issues of *Currents* and presentations from our events. The new "Publications Shop" makes it easy to buy books from our backlist—members save 25 percent. Our work to move information about our collections to the new

website is still underway, but search capabilities are already functional. Help is also available by contacting Archivist Kristina Warner (naha-archivist@stolaf.edu). Our web address remains naha.stolaf.edu.

Like Us on Facebook

Find us with a Facebook search for "Norwegian-American Historical Association" or click the Facebook button on the homepage of our website.

Follow Us on Instagram

The Instagram button on our website will link you to the NAHA account, or do an Instagram search for "nahaarchives."

JOIN US FOR THE SPRING MEMBER MEETUP

Save the date for this year's online Spring Member Meetup, Sunday, April 11, 2 pm (CDT). Our featured speaker is Kyle Ward, who will discuss the forthcoming book *Viking Battalion: The Norwegian-American's War Against Hitler*. A collaboration between Ward and former NAHA Editor Odd S. Lovoll, it was featured as a work in progress in *Norwegian-American Studies*, Volume 38, 2020. Ward is a faculty member at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where he teaches history and is director of social studies education. He serves on the board of directors for the 99th Battalion Educational Foundation.

This event is free and open to the public, but preregistration is necessary. For details and to register, visit naha.stolaf.edu.



COVER: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, DETROIT; PUBLISHING COMPANY COLLECTION

IMAGES: ABOVE, NAHA; LOWER RIGHT, 99TH INFANTRY BATTALION PATCH, MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEW LINDGREN ENDOWMENT HELPS NAHA SHARE ITS STORIES

I first learned of the Norwegian-American Historical Association when my husband and I were planning our first trip to Northfield, for the St. Olaf Christmas Festival,” says NAHA member Denise Lindgren. That was more than five years ago, and it led to a relationship with NAHA that now includes the Nathan and Denise Lindgren Endowed Fund for the NAHA Archives, a \$50,000 gift that will support an array of archival activities, including the acquisition, preservation, processing, and sharing of collections.

Denise Lindgren made the gift to honor the memory of her husband, Nathan, who died in February 2020 of complications from Alzheimer’s Disease. Nate Lindgren graduated from St. Olaf College in 1963 with a major in physics. He received the college’s distinguished alumni award in 2019.

The couple had wanted to round out that first trip to Northfield by spending more time in the region—“which for us usually meant time to visit areas of interest



Denise and Nate Lindgren shared a conviction that everyone’s history should be remembered and honored.

for family history,” Denise says. A seasoned genealogist, she knew that the Midwest had resources for Nordic research that New England, her home base, did not. Local archives, libraries, and historical and genealogical societies can be goldmines of material that isn’t accessible elsewhere. She searched for repositories near Northfield and was pleased to discover NAHA, located right on the St. Olaf campus.

On that first visit to NAHA, Nate and Denise focused their research on his maternal grandfather, the Reverend Nels Jonsson Løhre, born in 1873 in Dakota Territory to Norwegian immigrants. Reverend Løhre was general secretary of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America and its predecessor synod for some three decades and was a

Lutheran pastor in the Haugean tradition. “Family lore has it that, unlike his brothers, he asked his father for his inheritance in education rather than in land,” Lindgren says. Løhre went on to become president of the now-defunct Jewell Lutheran College in Iowa, where he met his wife, Caroline Annette Eek. He died in Minneapolis in 1933.

Denise Lindgren had discovered all of these facts in earlier research by using vital records, censuses, city directories, newspapers, and the like. She even knew the specific churches where Reverend Løhre had served. But the research that she and Nate did in the NAHA archives helped to complete the family story in significant ways.

“The most striking thing that the NAHA archives held, which I hadn’t found elsewhere, were relevant denominational bulletins and newspapers, as well as [clippings from] Norwegian-language newspapers,” Lindgren says. The Associated Press had reported that Løhre died of a heart attack, but Norwegian-language papers included more detail.

“He had been up all of the night before giving pastoral attention to an individual who was ill, yet continued his usual business the next morning—perhaps precipitating his death,” Lindgren explains. “Outpourings of sympathy and remembrances were published, which gave me insight into his and his wife’s character that I wouldn’t have found elsewhere.



The Reverend Nels Jonsson Løhre and Caroline Annette Eek on their wedding day.

“MATERIALS SUCH AS THOSE HELD BY THE NAHA ARCHIVES ENABLE ALL OF US TO PLACE OUR ANCESTORS IN A CULTURAL CONTEXT—TO FLESH OUT THEIR LIVES BEYOND THE MORE STERILE DATA RECORDED IN GOVERNMENT RECORDS.”

— DENISE LINDGREN

“Family historians dream about finding such first-hand accounts,” she adds. “I was moved nearly to tears, even though these are not my ancestors.”

Since her husband’s passing last winter, “I have been thinking about ways to honor him, and I have concluded that helping to preserve memories of his shared Norwegian-American heritage is especially fitting, given how he died,” Lindgren says. With her gift to NAHA, she wants to make it easy for others to access the stories housed in the association’s archives.

“Materials such as those held by the NAHA archives enable all of us to place our ancestors in a cultural context—to flesh out their lives beyond the more sterile data recorded in government records,” she says.

“We do not necessarily need to have our farmer-ancestor named [in records] if we can learn what it was like to farm in the Midwest during the time our ancestor farmed, or to be a parishioner of a particular church. What kinds of issues were of concern to the women in this time and place?”

Most family historians are interested in the stories behind

the bare names and dates in their lineage, she adds. Knowing the culture enables them to infer the stories, even of ancestors who never gained prominence or fame.

The Smithsonian Institution has called itself the “nation’s attic,” Lindgren notes. She believes NAHA serves a similar function for Norwegian-American history.

“Materials in the NAHA archives, though, are different than that jumbled box of mildewed papers in Grandma’s attic. Grandma may have treasures in that box, but they are not accessible ... [because] Grandma’s materials are unlikely to be preserved or organized.”

NAHA Executive Director Amy Boxrud says, “To organize and preserve the materials entrusted to NAHA and to make them accessible to future generations” is the heart of the association’s mission. “This generous gift from the Lindgrens is an important step toward the association’s goal of increasing its endowment for the archives. Earnings from the endowed fund will provide a steady source of funding for the archives and will continue to grow over time.”

NAHA LAUNCHES LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

The NAHA Development Committee announces the formation of its new Leadership Circle. The group is designed to recognize the generous donors whose cumulative lifetime gifts to the association have reached \$10,000 or more.

“We created this circle as a way to honor those members whose gifts over the years have made an incredible impact on NAHA,” says Kim Kittilsby, who chairs the development committee and also serves as vice president of NAHA. “Their generosity is an inspiration to us all.”

The Leadership Circle recognizes charitable gifts that have been received, which includes the tax-deductible portion of Sustaining and Patron membership fees. The Leadership Circle is a complement to the existing Legacy Circle, which honors members who have included NAHA in their estate plans.

Look for more information on these groups in the 2020 Annual Report, which will be mailed to members later this year.



LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

IMAGES: DENISE LINDGREN



THE PAST IS NEVER REALLY SETTLED. FOUR HISTORIANS EXPLAIN WHY. BY DENISE LOGELAND

In *My Minneapolis*, a 1956 history by Carl G. O. Hansen, the city teems with the accomplishments of Norwegian Americans. There are cultural societies, charitable efforts, monuments, festivals, and civic and religious leaders of Norwegian heritage.

Hansen came from Trondheim, Norway, in the 1880s and he had a front-row view of events in his adopted city. For nearly 40 years, he was a journalist for the *Minneapolis Daglig Tidende*, then an education director at the headquarters of Sons of Norway. He also directed the city's Norwegian Glee Club for decades. (The glee club's papers and some of Hansen's are in the NAHA archives.)

Hansen's history of Minneapolis comes well larded with ethnic pride. It was a style of writing common in his era. In his epilogue, though, he praises diversity. He's had the pleasure of knowing "many people of other national backgrounds," he says. "It is this mingling of races and this nationalistic tolerance that makes America great."

A different account of the city's past, covering mostly the same decades as Hansen's, comes from historian Kirsten Delegard and a team of specialists in property records, geospatial data, and mapping who began working together at the University of Minnesota five years ago. Their project: to show how racial covenants in home sales segregated the city.

The first such covenant appeared in Minneapolis in 1910. The deed for Nels Anderson's new bungalow on the city's south side stipulated the "premises shall not at any time be conveyed, mortgaged, or leased to any person or persons of Chinese, Japanese, Moorish, Turkish, Negro, Mongolian or African blood or descent."

That same year, Hansen tells his readers, Norwegian language classes were first offered at Minneapolis South High School, where many students were children of Norwegian immigrants; the school was in "the most Scandinavian section of the city." Delegard and her

Norwegian Americans in Lanesboro, Minnesota, embark on a trip back to Norway, circa 1910. Transnationalism, the relationship between emigrants and their home country, is an area of growing interest for migration historians.

colleagues explain *why* the neighborhood remained so white and homogeneous for decades to come. Racial covenants spread through large parts of Minneapolis and adjacent suburbs in the 1910s, '20s, '30s, and '40s. The covenants were rendered unenforceable by court rulings and legislation beginning in 1948, but they changed Minneapolis in ways that remain visible today. People of color are still concentrated in certain neighborhoods, mostly away from the city's lakes. Their rate of home ownership lags far behind that of whites.

The University of Minnesota team produced Mapping Prejudice (mappingprejudice.umn.edu), a website and interactive map of a city where, counter to Hansen's sunny declaration, the races didn't mingle so much after all. Similar work has been done in Seattle (Segregated Seattle) and Richmond (Mapping Inequality).

Different historians, different eras and perspectives, different tools and methods. Those are a few reasons why the history of a given place and time keeps changing. Here, four historians, all members and friends of NAHA, tell us more.

ANNETTE ATKINS

Professor Emerita of History, St. John's University/College of St. Benedict, Minnesota

Even though history is about fixed, factual events, history changes. The same events take on new meanings over time. When that happens, what is happening?

ATKINS: I start by questioning the premise that historical events are "fixed." Of course, events happened, but they didn't get fixed like a specimen in a natural history museum. They're gone. We have records of some events and no records of most.

Records of whatever kind always reflect the perspective of the reporter and are always partial. It's self-evident that letters have a perspective. The "America letters" written by Norwegian emigrants often aimed to reassure worried family members in Norway or to justify a decision to leave and were rosier than the conditions that many immigrants faced.

Census records only seem more factual. Sometimes people lie to census enumerators (see Martha Sandweiss's book *Passing Strange*), or they don't know for sure so they give one answer one year and a different answer 10 years later. Sometimes enumerators don't hear correctly. The census itself represents a point of view—it collects the information that someone deemed important. Censuses have not asked routinely about religion, for example, or sexual preference or height and weight.

Military, tax, birth, and death records all are crafted by the questions that were asked, the answers that were offered, sometimes the space allowed for answers, and not uncommonly, the compassion of a doctor (no doubt many a suicide was officially recorded as something else). Because of this evidence issue, the stories that any of us tell about the past will be partial, perspectival, and limited.

Stories also change because new documents become available or some other factor has changed. Sometimes stories change because of who tells them.

Generations of historians—mostly white men—populated the American West with white men. Ray Allen Billington wrote that Marcus Whitman, a missionary, arrived in Washington with a Bible, a plow, and a wife (unnamed). From the 1960s on, generations of women historians found and wrote about the many women in the West—wives, teachers, religious sisters, prostitutes, nurses, shopkeepers, and

homesteaders among them. As more people of color joined the historical profession, histories of the West, unsurprisingly, found lots of people of color. The West—indeed, the West—has come to be populated by people as diverse as the historians studying it.

Often, the stories we tell about the past change because we ask new questions or have a view freshened by our own lived experiences. A newly divorced person might revisit the "common knowledge" about marriages in the past and ask how people coped with unhappy relationships.

Good historians know that the stories we tell are based on partial information, our own historical context, and our individual perspectives and interests. We know, too, that

In the history of Scandinavian America, where have you seen re-examination and new meaning come about? Is there an example that's been of particular interest to you?

ATKINS: Let me come at this question by looking at Carlton C. Qualey, one of the "deans" of the Norwegian-American experience. Ninety years ago, he published "Pioneer Norwegian Settlement in Minnesota," in the journal *Minnesota History* (September 1931). In it, he traces the spread of Norwegian immigrants in the state. His immigrants, mostly farmers and mostly families, plant themselves and their crops and make a go of their new lives. Qualey shows that the state and its railroads actively



"MY HOPE IS THAT AS WE LOOK AT THE PAST IN NEW WAYS, WE WILL SEE OURSELVES IN NEW WAYS. SIMILARLY, THAT WHEN WE SEE OURSELVES IN NEW WAYS, WE WILL SEE THE PAST IN NEW WAYS."



our conclusions are not final or definitive. In the face of these variables, we commit ourselves to professional norms, including rigorous examination of primary sources, respect for evidence, an abiding commitment to fairness, review by professional peers, and a willingness to change our minds when new evidence requires it.

recruited Norwegian immigrants. He identifies obstacles to their settlement, but declares that Swedish author Fredrika Bremer's prediction—"What a glorious new Scandinavia might not Minnesota become!"—became reality in only one generation.

Qualey's story, like those told by many immigration historians of his era, is "fileopietistic," in other

IMAGE: MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

TERJE JORANGER

PhD, Director, Norwegian Emigrant Museum, Ottestad, Norway

Even though history is about fixed, factual events, history changes. The same events take on new meanings over time. When that happens, what is happening?



JORANGER: New trends in the field of migration and ethnic history, and greater awareness of international affairs and of countries' political development, pave the way for new perspectives.

When migration and ethnic history developed as a scholarly field in the first half of the 20th century, historians in Norway and in the United States focused on emigration and immigration, respectively, and not the entire migration process. Then in 1960, English historian Frank Thistlethwaite admonished scholars to view migration as a holistic process and to “perforate the saltwater curtain” to study the entire migration experience. This, along with the new social history movement of the 1960s, brought more focus on the roles of ordinary women and men in larger historical structures and processes.

In later years, increased globalization has led to a greater interest in transnationalism, i.e., the continued relationships between an emigrant population and its former homeland, including return migration.

Groups that were neglected have been gradually included in Norwegian-American historiography. The fight for women's rights in the second part of the 20th century led to more women in academia and more interest in women's rights in migrant populations.

I also wish to mention indigenous peoples, particularly the Sámi in Norway. The work of the United Nations, for example through the 1989 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, raised awareness of the rights of indigenous peoples. Countries, including Norway and the United States, have been coming to terms with their colonial pasts.

I envisage that the political climate will remain favorable for more studies of minority groups in relation to the majority population in Norway as part of the overseas migration experience, including Jews, Forest Finns, and others.

In the history of Scandinavian America, where have you seen re-examination and new meaning come about? Is there an example that's been of particular interest to you?

JORANGER: As mentioned, there is more study of interactions between Norwegian Americans and other groups, for example the complex relationship with the Native Americans. Betty Bergland, Karen V. Hansen, Orm Øverland, and others have started to fill the void that existed regarding Norwegian immigrant settler expansion, the cultural encounters it led to, and the consequences of those encounters.

Also, scholars in the past tended to view the 1925 centennial of Norwegian immigration to the United States as the high-water mark of Norwegian-American culture. But in the past two decades, they have portrayed Norwegian-American history and culture on a more extended arc, where the 1920s is part of a longer historical development over time.

How have the tools and methods of historical research changed in recent years?

JORANGER: There is a greater focus now—including in my own

work—on the complex processes of human nature in historical developments. Earlier scholarship studied individuals' activities as rational and more or less linear sequences of events.

Other methodologies have also become more prevalent: comparative methods, micro-historical approaches, the family reconstruction method, multidisciplinary approaches, and discussion of conditions in specific sending areas and their adaptation to specific destinations in America.

As we look at the past in new ways, do we reach an understanding that is more true or accurate than people used to have, or simply an understanding that is different?

JORANGER: I think that the many new perspectives in migration and ethnic history lead to an understanding of people that is more *nuanced* than earlier. And when we combine these perspectives, we can put the individuals' lives and experiences into a wider historical context than before. Their personal stories provide a broader sense of the migration experience on the personal level.

“THERE IS A GREATER FOCUS NOW ON THE COMPLEX PROCESSES OF HUMAN NATURE EARLIER SCHOLARSHIP STUDIED INDIVIDUALS' ACTIVITIES AS RATIONAL AND MORE OR LESS LINEAR.”

words, a loving homage to his own ancestors. And why wouldn't Qualey tell that particular story? He was born in 1904 in a Norwegian-American settlement and had two sets of Norwegian immigrant grandparents. He graduated from St. Olaf College in 1929 and earned an MA in history at the University of Minnesota in 1930. Two rising stars in immigration history were on the faculty at the time: George Stephenson, historian of Swedish Americans, and Theodore Blegen, whose *Norwegian Migration to America, 1825–1860* was published in 1931.

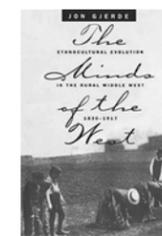
It was not Qualey's goal to explore the emotional costs of immigration, or to critique it (including Norwegian engagement with Native Americans or the U.S.–Dakota War). It would likely not have occurred to him to do so. Historians of his generation—and for the next century—depicted Native people as problems and the “Sioux Massacre” as an explosion of startling violence against innocent settlers. Perhaps Qualey should have seen it differently, but there was little in his context that would lead him to a 21st century understanding of settler colonialism and systemic racism.

Moreover, he was writing in the wake of Ole Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, published while Rølvaag was on the faculty and Qualey a student at St. Olaf. Rølvaag described his fictional Norwegian immigrant family as “poverty stricken and unspeakably forlorn.” So many of his characters were desperately poor or, like Beret, driven mad by loneliness or, like Per Hansa, killed by the weather. Qualey's work feels like a historian's corrective to Rølvaag's fiction—and perhaps even a defense of Qualey's own family, who were not poor.



Encounters between indigenous people and Norwegian Americans—and the cultural ramifications that followed—were long ignored. Now they are an area of focus for historians. Clockwise from left: Models for Powers department store in Minneapolis wear coats inspired by native designs in 1925; Princesses Astrid and Ragnhild, sisters of Norway's King Harald V, play in Native American costumes in 1939; A native woman, likely Santee Sioux, in 1895; Goodhue County, Minnesota, where she lived, was an area of heavy Norwegian settlement.

Jon Gjerde, a son of Norwegian immigrants, was born nearly 50 years after Qualey. He also did graduate work at the University of Minnesota, but under the direction of social historian Rudolph Vecoli, a specialist in Italian immigration. Gjerde's two most important books, *From Peasants to Farmers* (1985) and *The Minds of the West* (1997), certainly built on Qualey's work, but took immigration history in new directions. In *Peasants*, he follows particular Norwegian immigrants from their homes in Norway to the American Midwest. He eschews familiar generalizations about land-starved immigrants and locates



Jon Gjerde's *The Minds of the West* combines quantitative and other methods.

the decision to migrate in larger, structural changes in Norway and northern Europe. He explores how the migrants adapted—and didn't. In *Minds*, he focuses on the culture, ideas, and values that immigrants carried with them; how those intersected with Yankee mind sets; and how and why those differences mattered. His is an analysis of how immigrants understood themselves and their world.

Gjerde deployed a combination of quantitative analyses, photographs, house and village plans—details all the way down to piano ownership and clothing—to track cultural

IMAGES: ABOVE, LEFT AND LOWER RIGHT, MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY; UPPER RIGHT, PUBLIC DOMAIN, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NORWAY

ERIKA K. JACKSON

Professor of History,
Colorado Mesa University, Grand Junction

Even though history is about fixed, factual events, history changes. The same events take on new meanings over time. Why?



JACKSON: In teaching, I emphasize perspective and the position from which an author is interacting with an event. For example, John L. O’Sullivan coined the term “manifest destiny” in an 1845 editorial. I ask students to consider the context, content, and significance of what he wrote. We discuss how Americans conceived of “democratic” ideals differently in the 19th century, and how a concept like manifest destiny gained popularity among white Americans.

I also show differing perspectives. First-hand accounts of indigenous people pushed off their land

by the forces of manifest destiny raise important questions: Who is “destined” to settle western lands and why? Has this land not already been “settled”? What does “civilized” mean in this context?

In the history of Scandinavian America, where have you seen re-examination and new meaning come about?

JACKSON: When I began researching my book *Scandinavians in Chicago: The Origins of White Privilege in Modern America*, I read studies of Nordic migration to America by pioneers like Ulf Beijbom and H. Arnold Barton. They were published before the influence of whiteness studies in the 1990s. Nordic exceptionalism in America was often assumed.

But the way Scandinavians were received in America illustrates the complexities of whiteness in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I was influenced by Matthew Frye Jacobson’s notion of a “fracturing of whiteness”—ethnic stereotypes became a staple of American culture, reflecting fears of a flood of “strange” folk. Jørn Brøndal’s examinations of filiopietistic and nativist literature from that period also confirmed the messiness of the notion of a racial hierarchy.

As we look at the past in new ways, do we reach an understanding that is more true?

JACKSON: I would not say our understanding is more “true” now, rather it is far more inclusive of people not previously considered.

TERJE LEIREN

Professor Emeritus of Scandinavian Studies and History, University of Washington, Seattle

Even though history is about factual events, those same events take on new meanings over time. Why?



LEIREN: The historical understanding of Norwegian America is built in the same way Norwegian America itself was built, one generation after another. Accounts like Rasmus B. Anderson’s *America Not Discovered by Columbus* were an early expression of ethnic pride and a desire for acceptance into the mainstream of America.

With the establishment of NAHA in 1925, professional historians became more central as interpreters of the Norwegian immigrant story. They

relied primarily on written sources, which they analyzed and interpreted. Objective facts and subjective understanding combined to create a historical account. Over time, as new sources became available, the emergence of new understandings was inevitable.

Where have you seen re-examination and new meaning?

LEIREN: In his two decades as editor of *Norwegian-American Studies*, Odd Lovoll expanded the field exponentially through recruitment of young scholars, often offering new understanding, especially by emphasizing the urban story of Norwegian immigration. Since the majority of Norwegian immigrants settled in

rural areas, the story of the urban culture took longer to be told.

Another example: Norwegian-American newspapers included literary fiction from writers such as Waldemar Ager and Ole Rølvaag. In the 1970s, Dorothy Burton Skårdal led a program on Norwegian-American writers at the University of Oslo, expanding the understanding of immigrant culture.

As we look at the past in new ways, do we reach an understanding that is more true?

LEIREN: It is not a matter of true or not true. We can only hope to understand the past based on the evidence we have and our ability to make sense of it. I, for one, am still learning and love the experience.

shifts and continuities. Finally, while Qualey focused on Norwegians to distinguish them from other immigrants, Gjerde used his Norwegian communities to illuminate the broader texture of immigrant life.

I am grateful for Qualey’s work—and, indeed, for that of many early immigration historians—but I am challenged and enriched and made more thoughtful by Gjerde’s work. Each historian was doing generational work, responding to particular circumstances, and working in a particular national and academic context.

NAHA hosted an event last year that used the lens of race to re-examine past events. What other lenses have become more prevalent in recent years?

ATKINS: Many historians are grappling with “intersectionality,” the fact that each of us partakes of many identities. I am a historian, yes, but I’m also a woman, I’m white, I’m a Norwegian-Scottish-Irish-other mix. I’m the sixth of 12 children in a working-class Catholic family from South Dakota, and I could name more that defines me and shapes my experiences and my perspectives.

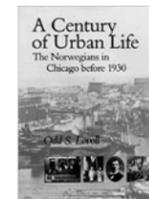
Coming to terms with this kind of multiplicity, we can allow people in the past to have richer and more complex lives. Historians of my generation, particularly, have rejected the notion that people in the past lived simpler, slower, quieter, more emotionally tranquil lives.

How have the tools and methods of historical research changed in recent years?

ATKINS: The biggest change in tools and methods during my



The role of women in westward expansion and settlement, like these South Dakota (top) and Montana homesteaders, was mostly overlooked until more women became historians.



Odd Lovoll drew attention to less-studied urban immigrants from Norway.

mapping the direction of advice giving and receiving, et cetera. Then I turned away. Not only did I not feel any particular aptitude for statistical analysis but, crucially, it made me deaf to the skills I do have: a capacity to listen to people, to see the world from their perspective, to fathom their choices, limitations, ambitions, and fears.

So, I boxed up my computer printouts and tuned in to the families whose letters I was reading. The result was my book *We Grew Up Together* (1991).

I took another turn, too, thinking more about the audience I wanted to address. My ambition has become to show people that they are themselves historical actors, that history is about each of us, not just “important” people. If people can see that what is thought to be “natural” is in fact historically shaped, they can give themselves more choices. At its best, history can teach us empathy and to understand that other people see the world in entirely rational—and entirely different from our own—ways.

As we look at the past in new ways, do we reach an understanding that is more true or accurate than people used to have, or simply an understanding that is different?

ATKINS: Any time we’re more inclusive, our accounts of the past become more accurate. I also think that they’re truer the more complexity we allow into our stories.

Yes, we reach different understandings as we look at things over time and across disciplines, but not just different for the sake of difference, instead responding to different needs and different aims and aspirations.



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Currents

**The newsletter of the
Norwegian-American
Historical Association**

Volume 179, Spring 2021

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IMAGE: NAHA

1975

The American Birkebeiner ski marathon (*birkie.com*) has been held annually in Hayward, Wisconsin, since 1973. The 34-mile race is inspired by Norway's Birkebeinerrennet. Both races draw on a pivotal event in 1206, when two soldiers—called “Birkebeiner” because of the birchbark leggings they wore—skied Norway's infant Prince Håkon to safety during the country's civil war. The American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation, formed in 1985, recently donated a portion of its records to NAHA. The collection includes administrative records, but also photos, ephemera, and race rosters.