NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN CHURCHES
Folk Art in Communities of Faith
SEASON OF GRATITUDE

What a year! Who could have guessed what 2020 and this pandemic would bring? With people around the world experiencing illness, loss, and disruption, this has been a year that I think few would care to repeat. And yet our association has much to be grateful for. In spite of temporarily shutting the door to the archives, we are fielding reference questions, making accommodations for researchers online, and adding major collections to the archives. We are digitizing materials, and we recently learned that we received a Minnesota Historical and Cultural Heritage grant to digitize the O. E. Rølvaag Collection in 2021.

We are transferring legacy data to a new content management system and supervising the work of student interns. We are publishing the next volume of Norwegian-American Studies as scheduled. We are holding events online, allowing us to better connect with members across the nation, in Canada, and overseas. In so many ways, we are moving forward.

In my biennial meeting report, I shared my gratitude for our Lifetime members. The contributions of these members created the O. E. Rølvaag Memorial Fund, which fuels our operations and makes carrying out our mission possible, even in difficult times. In addition to the generous housing of our collection provided by St. Olaf College, the Rølvaag Fund allows us to move forward despite the challenges this year has brought. To those Lifetime members who may have missed my comments during our biennial meeting, a heartfelt thank-you for what your past support has made possible—and a special thank-you to those who still actively support us today.

I am also grateful for the leadership of the association. The dedication and skill of outgoing president Dennis Gimnesdal has helped us through a period of major transition and into a new era. And with the departure of our term-limited board members, new leaders will take the wheel. I want to congratulate our new president, Scott Knudson, and the six new board members who were elected at our biennial meeting. I look forward to the new perspectives and ideas they will bring to our work.

Finally, I am grateful to the entire staff, board, and membership of NAHA. Your interest, support, and engagement are the heartbeat of our association. You make our mission possible: to locate, collect, and interpret the Norwegian-American experience, and to preserve these priceless materials for generations to come.

Be well,
Amy Boxrud
Executive Director

GIFT IDEAS:
HISTORY FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Ole Hendricks & His Tunebook, Book and CD
Archivist and musician Amy Shaw has preserved the works of Norwegian-born farmer, fiddler, and band leader Ole Hendricks with a project about his life and music. Hendricks settled in Minnesota’s Red River Valley. Shaw’s book paints a picture of rural immigrant life there and the role of music in the community. More than 100 transcribed dance tunes from Hendricks’ rare 1890s tunebook are included. University of Wisconsin Press (2020), 264 pages, $28.95, uppress.wisc.edu. The companion CD includes 20 lively dance tunes from Ole Hendricks’ tunebook, revived and reimagined by Nordic dance musicians. Available at store. vesterheim.org, $15.

Photo Preservation Box Album Kit
Home archivists can enjoy the same supplies professional archivists use, such as this one-piece, hinged clamshell album. It comes with interior plated O-rings to hold polypropylene album pages. The pages and a pencil for safely marking photos are included. $80.50. For a full range of supplies and tools available for the home archivist, visit gaylord.com.

NAHA Gift Membership
Share a gift that will be enjoyed all year long, while supporting our association. Along with notification of your gift, recipients receive your choice of a NAHA tote bag or mug. Throughout the year, members enjoy four issues of Currents and an online and print subscription to Norwegian-American Studies. The journal is published annually each fall and is available digitally on JSTOR. Regularly $55 ($40 for students). Save 10 percent with the code GIFT2020. Order by December 18 to ensure delivery by December 24, naha.stolaf.edu.

ONLINE ACCESS TO OUR JOURNAL

Norwegian-American Studies, the scholarly journal of the association, is now published in cooperation with the University of Minnesota Press. In addition to print copies, members of NAHA have access to the journal online, including all digitized back issues, as a benefit of membership. Watch for an email from JSTOR with instructions for creating a JSTOR account and accessing the journal. If you don’t receive the instructions, send an email requesting help to service@jstor.org with “Attn: Hanai” in the subject line. Mention in your note that you are a member of the Norwegian-American Historical Association.
NEWS FROM THE BIENNIAL MEMBER MEETING

Members across the United States, Canada, and Norway came together for the 2020 biennial member meeting. Held online on October 24, the event included a keynote presentation from Erika Jackson, professor of history at Colorado Mesa University, titled “Becoming White: The Case of Scandinavians in Chicago.” A discussion followed, moderated by NAHA Editor Anna M. Peterson. Following the presentation, the association held its biennial business meeting, including updates from the staff and board, recognition of the association’s Lifetime members, and election of new board members. The association also thanked board members Dennis Gimmestad, Dave Holt, and Bruce Willis for their service.

WELCOME NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Each of these new directors was elected to a four-year term at the biennial meeting.

ANNETTE ATKINS. Minneapolis, is professor emerita of history at Saint John’s University and the College of Saint Benedict. A teacher and scholar of Minnesota history, she is the author of Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out. She speaks widely at professional meetings, and for five years she was the on-air historian for Minnesota Public Radio. She is a past board member of the Minnesota Historical Society and the St. Olaf College Alumnae Club.

ESSAM ELKORGHLI. Urbana, Illinois, is originally from Tripoli, Libya, and attended the International Baccalaureate program in Flekke, Norway. He graduated from St. Olaf College and taught Norwegian language at the University of Washington while pursuing his master’s degree in Scandinavian studies. A doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, his research centers on neoliberal globalization, Norwegian teacher education, and Libyan educational changes after the 2011 uprising there.

TERJE LEIREN. Kenmore, Washington, is professor emeritus of Scandinavian studies and history at the University of Washington, Seattle. He has written or edited four books and more than 40 scholarly articles on Norwegian- and Scandinavian-American studies. From 1988 to 1999, he taught Norwegian history at the International Summer School of the University of Oslo. He has appeared in several nationally televised documentaries on Scandinavia and its history, and is a knight in the Royal Norwegian Order of Merit. He regularly leads tours of Scandinavia for the Smithsonian Institution and the University of Washington Alumni Association.

KAREN LILLEHAUGEN NASBY. Minneapolis, attended St. Olaf College and later earned her J.D. from the William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul. After working in parish education and serving two years in the Peace Corps in the Philippines, she served for 27 years as a public defender for Hennepin County. She is an active member of Trinity Lutheran Church in Hovland, Minnesota. She is also a member of the Friends of the Hong Kiergaard Library, which is housed in the special collections of Dulvaag Memorial Library.

SCOTT RICHARDSON. Northfield, Minnesota, has worked in community journalism and health care communications. A graduate of the University of Minnesota, he worked at the Northfield News for 18 years as a reporter, associate editor, and general manager. He finished his career as director of community relations for Northfield Hospital and Clinics. He has been active in the community, serving in leadership positions for the Northfield Area Chamber of Commerce, the City of Northfield’s Economic Development Corporation, Northfield Historical Society, Northfield Healthy Community Initiative, and Northfield Rotary Club.

KRISTEN WALSETH. Bloomington, Minnesota, is a retired teacher and reading specialist for at-risk high school students at Jefferson High School in Bloomington. A graduate of St. Olaf College, she co-chairs her class’s 50th reunion gift committee. She is a former board member of Norway House in Minneapolis and chaired its Midsummer Gala Committee for several years. For the past year, she has served on the NAHA Development Committee.

Executive Committee, 2020–22

In a session held immediately after the biennial meeting, the NAHA board of directors elected the following officers for the 2020–22 biennium.

President: Scott Knudson St. Paul, Minnesota

Vice President: Kim Kittilsby Seattle, Washington

Secretary: Ronald Johnson Madison, Wisconsin

Treasurer: Kylie Jansson Monmouth, Oregon

Representative at Large: Deborah Miller St. Paul, Minnesota

YOUR SUPPORT MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

Gifts to the annual fund make up more than a quarter of our operating budget each year. In 2020, we shared two free online events with our members and the public. Even though we were working remotely, we stayed connected to members and researchers, fielding dozens of questions via email. We also produced the 2020 issue of our scholarly journal, Norwegian-American Studies. These activities were possible thanks to the generous support of our members. Help us meet our financial goals during this unprecedented time by donating to the 2020 annual fund. Please use the envelope provided, or consider donating at naha.stolaf.edu. Thank you!

FINDING WOMEN IN GENEALOGY RECORDS

Name variations are common in church books and other records used for Norwegian genealogy, and there’s an added wrinkle when searching for women who married. Traditionally, a woman has taken the surname of her spouse. Not knowing her maiden name can make tracing her lineage difficult, but there are sources that can help:

• A marriage record, particularly a church record, might include the names of the fathers of both the bride and the groom.

• A Norwegian census record might show a woman’s maiden name; if that name includes a patronymic—Thorsdatter, for example, signifying that she is the daughter of Thor—then her father’s first name is known.

• An obituary will sometimes include the names of a woman’s parents and when or where she was born.

Spelling variations also must be considered in searches for anyone, female or male. A search for Tarand on genealogy sites returned records with all of these valid spellings: Taran, Tarand, Taran, Tarrand, Tharan, Thrand, Tharan, Tharran, and in America, Tarand was known as Trina. FamilySearch.org automatically includes spelling variants in search results unless you specifically narrow your search to one spelling. FamilySearch, Ancestry.com, and the digital archives of Norway at DigitaltavNet.no, also allow the use of “wildcards” in searches, represented by an asterisk. A wildcard stands in for zero or more characters. For example, a search on Ancestry using “T*ar*an*” will find any of the spellings above (except for “Trina”).

Continued on page 11
Imagine a pioneer church on the prairie, its steeple a beacon for miles around. Or a church serving workers in the iron and copper mining regions of the Upper Midwest. The exterior is clad in wood or sheeted with local brick or stone, constructed by local craftmen who are church members. The bell summons congregants to services that bind them with ties of faith, ethnicity, and community. The building is a place for worship and socializing, but it is also something more. Churches are places where communities invest precious resources in decorative arts. They express local aesthetics and heritage through textiles, paint, glass, wood, stone, and metal.

In historic Norwegian-American churches, decorative arts and artisanship typically reflect a mix of sources. Congregations often used professional artists and architects. They purchased mass-produced items like pews, altars, pulpits, light fixtures, and stained glass from the catalogs of companies catering to churches. But they also used local folk artists and craftpeople whose work more directly expressed longstanding community ideas of what was useful, appropriate, and pleasing.

Folk artists and artisans created work that was familiar rather than groundbreaking. They used cherished, time-tested forms and motifs, some with roots in Norway and others from America. The skills they shared with their congregations were learned informally by trial and error; by imitating examples created by friends, neighbors, or family members; through apprenticeships; or at a folk school that was part of the Romantic Nationalism sweeping through Norway and others from America.

The skills they shared with their congregations were learned informally by trial and error; by imitating examples created by friends, neighbors, or family members; through apprenticeships; or at a folk school that was part of the Romantic Nationalism sweeping through 19th-century Norway. These artists donated their talents or received pay from church members to create something both beautiful and functional. Perhaps most important, their work reflected the touch of their hands.

This article examines the folk artistry found in four historic Norwegian-American churches. It draws on seminal work done in this field by Kristin Anderson, professor of art history and archivist at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, and the late Marion Nelson, art historian and long-time director of the Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa (see “Further Reading” on page 10).

Each of the four churches is part of the Preserving Nordic-American Churches Project (norwamericanchurches.org), an initiative of the nonprofit Partners for Sacred Places.

Old Muskego Church

Original name: Wind Lake, Wisconsin; now at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

“Folk architecture” describes building types and designs that emerge from a particular geographic or cultural region and use local materials. The designs and methods are transmitted by observation, imitation, and practice. Few Norwegian-American folk churches still exist. One notable exception is Old Muskego, a rare example of traditional Norwegian log construction and woodworking.

Old Muskego dates to 1843-44, not long after the first groups of Norwegians arrived in Wisconsin Territory. Those involved in its simple two-story log construction—more like a gabled-roof house than a church—used familiar hewn log techniques (laftet tømmer) learned from erecting farm outbuildings and homes in the Old Country. Of note are the extended log ends at the corners—a Norwegian characteristic—and the so-called meddrag: This Norwegian practice of scribing or grooving logs longitudinally so that they fit tightly together without mortar, is described by both John J. Hackett in the 1974 National Register of Historic Places nomination for the church and by Reidar Bakken in his 1976 book “The Norwegian-American Church.”

The church walls bear the marks of adze and axe yet today. The master craftsman supervising Muskego’s construction was likely Halvor Nelson Lohner, a native of Telemark. The immigrant farmers of early Norwegian-American communities knew how to make tools, cabinets, and other utilitarian objects. Those with special expertise—such as Lohner—took leadership roles.

The sanctuary also replicated traditional Norwegian design. What we see today is a reconstruction from 1964, when the old log church was moved to its present site in St. Paul. The combined altar-pulpit is particularly striking. As Kristin Anderson notes in “Altars in the Norwegian-American Church,” altarpulpits originated in 18th-century Germany and spread to Scandinavia. The Old Muskego altar is a vernacular interpretation of the Empire style of cabinetry, then popular in Norway, with clean lines, solid massing, turned corners, and smooth finish.

The barrel-shaped pulpit, with vertical boards in contrast to the horizontal ones found elsewhere in the sanctuary, suggests the craftsmanship of a cooper. Paul Daniels, archivist for Luther Seminary, points to another example of Norwegian folk art at Old Muskego: the rosemaling on the altar surround.
members of the congregation sense that connection, too? A more obvious Norwegian tradition occurs in the altarpiece. The authors of Norwegian-American Wood Carving of the Upper Midwest, the 1978 exhibition catalog from the Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum exhibit of the same name, note that multicolored paint decoration, as is the case here, reflects Norwegian antecedents. This contrasts with varnished wood or white-and-gold painted examples that are more common in the U.S. The Old Stone Church altar is simpler than most Norwegian examples, with tones of black and green contrasting with red and gold accents. The maker crafted a triptych with the Ten Commandments and Norwegian text from John 3:16. For the church’s Norwegian-American members, their building referenced their Old Country roots while being firmly grounded in their Minnesota homeland.

Bethania Lutheran Church

ORIGIONALLY IN NORTHWOOD, NORTH DAKOTA; NOW AT VESTERHEIM NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN MUSEUM, DEORAH, IOWA

This vernacular frame church (1900-03) is not a folk design but rather a local builder’s interpretation of the then-popular Gothic Revival Style. Architecturally, little distinguishes it from countless Norwegian heritage churches across the Midwest. What sets Bethania apart is the remarkable carved altar by the prolific Norwegian-American carver, Osten Pladson (1846–1914). A native of Nes, Hallingdal, Norway, who emigrated in 1868, Pladson was a carpenter and cabinetmaker of exceptional skill. He designed churches and built the furnishings for as many as 65 churches in parts of Minnesota, Iowa, and the Red River Valley, according to his biographers. William C. Teie, Andrew John Teie, Julie Pladson Stroh, and Judy R. Craig in The Pladsons of Newburgh Township (Deer Valley Press, 2013).

Some of the best examples of Norwegian-American religious folk art involve carved pulpits, altars, and altarpieces. The Norwegian-American Wood Carving of the Upper Midwest exhibition catalog is still the best single source on these works. As the authors note, the most distinctively Norwegian style of altar carving comes from the acanthus tradition, a type of folk carving adapted from the Baroque acanthus. It features variations of relief-carved scrolled acanthus leaves and palmetto. Acanthus carving originated in Guadranndalen and spread throughout the country.

Norwegian-American carpenters used their creativity to make decorative pieces for churches and homes based on memories of acanthus carving in Norway. Pladson was among the most creative, using “turned work, bandsaw work, moldings, and fretwork” to produce “the Byzantine opulence of [his] church interiors.”

Pladson’s crowning achievement was the altar frame and railing he built in 1903 for Bethania Lutheran. Here, acanthus motifs appear in the fanciful finials and in the side panels. His artistry and woodworking process are illustrated in a remarkable photo that shows Pladson with the treadle-powered scroll saw that he used to shape his masterpiece. Although he imaginatively created his own variant of acanthus motifs, the Bethania congregation would have recognized and understood his use of this Norwegian folk tradition.

Canton Lutheran Church

CANTON, SOUTH DAKOTA

The congregation of Canton Lutheran Church erected a Gothic Revival building (1908–10) that was “a monument to the honor and glory of the Norwegian Lutherans of Canton and Lincoln County,” said the Dakota Farmers’ Leader when the church was dedicated. This is not folk architecture. The congregation wanted and achieved a more formal, grandiose, architect-designed building.

The interior décor also lacks any reference to Norwegian folk art. What is traditional here is the workmanship of Norwegian-American artisans who acquired their craft through apprenticeship. The carpentry and millwork of this era was not the hand-tooled craftsmanship of Old Muskego, or even the foot-powered saw artistry.
of Osten Pladson. Rather, Canton Lutheran was built in the golden age of millwork, when small local operations used steam- or gas-powered machines. Both John L. Millie, the general contractor, and the Satrum brothers, who designed and produced much of the interior oak woodwork, and scroll work as well as unique custom pieces for clients. For Canton Lutheran, they created a masterful display of milled oak artistry, with Gothic arches, quatrefoil designs, cutwork, curved balconies, fleur de lis, dentils, grape vines, and turned pilasters. While these were common decorative motifs of the period, the skill employed by local Norwegian-heritage artisans would have been a source of pride for the church and community. These four churches illustrate the range of aesthetic choices made by artisans and congregations transitioning from newly arrived Norwegian immigrants to Norwegian Americans. Many churches lack records on the artisans who built them, but at the time of construction those craftspeople were known and valued members of the community. Their work appealed to their neighbors and fellow worshippers. It was meaningful, and remains so today, because of its human touch and local connection.

Laurie Kay Sommer is an independent consultant in folklore and historic preservation and was project manager (2017–20) for the Preserving Nordic American Churches Project. In addition to the sources cited in the article, she wishes to thank others who aided her research: Alex Akre, Bob Jaeger, Rod Oppegard, and Tim Prizer.

American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation records, 1973–2007
NAHA has acquired a portion of the American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation records and will work with the foundation to transfer more records in the future. We are excited for this partnership with the Birkebeiner organization, whose collection complements others in our archives, including those from Ski for Light and the National Ski Association of America.

The American Birkebeiner was started in 1973 by Tony Wise, a founding member of the Worldloppet federation of cross-country ski marathons. The race is held in February in Hayward, Wisconsin. America’s Birkebeiner, also called the “Birke,” is named after Norway’s Birkebeinerrennet. That race commemorates an important historical event. In 1206, a party of Birkebeiner soldiers, who fought for Sverre Sigurdsson and his descendants in the Norwegian civil war, journeyed on skis to smuggle the son of Norway’s King Håkon V off to safety in Trondheim.

Women in Records, from page 5
As you look for women from your family’s past, consider clues like the ones found in Mrs. Anders Hellerdal’s obituary. It is part of the Rowberg Collection at NAHA, which includes clippings of biographical articles about Norwegian Americans from newspapers and other publications. The obituary includes her first name, Ingeborg, her parents’ first names, Helge and Margit, and the date and place of her birth: 5 April 1860 in Flaa (Flå), Hallingdal, Norway.

Knowing those things enables a search of the baptism records for the Nes, Hallingdal, parish. There, her parents’ full names are revealed: Helge Pedersen, from the farm Stavnsbraaten, and Margit Vilhelmsdatter. According to the obituary, Ingeborg emigrated from Norway in 1879, going first to Orfordville, Wisconsin. Norwegian emigration records show that an unmarried girl, 19-year-old Ingeborg Helgesdatter, left Oslo on 18 April 1879 aboard the ship Hero with the destination Orford (later Orfordville), Wisconsin. Ingeborg and Anders were married in Minnesota, the obituary tells us, and ultimately they lived in Alberta, Canada. In 1900 U.S. Census record for the family, from Assiniboine County, Minnesota, Ingeborg is listed as Belle and has children who were born in Minnesota and Idaho. After a later census record from 1921 for Ashmont, Alberta, Canada, says the family immigrated in 1912 and were naturalized in 1920.

The graves of Anders/Andrew and Ingeborg are in Bawlf, Alberta, where her gravestone is marked Ingeborg Hellerdal.

FOR FURTHER READING


Material Culture and People’s Art of the Norwegians in America. Marion John Nelson, editor (Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1994); see especially the chapter by Kristin Anderson, “Altars in the Norwegian-American Church: An Opportunity for Folk Expression”

Crossings: Norwegian-American Lutheranism as a Transatlantic Tradition. Todd W. Nichols, editor (Norwegian-American Historical Association, 2003); see especially the chapter by Marion Nelson, “Folk Art and Faith Among Norwegian-Americans”
Ole Rølvaag with his wife, Jennie, son, Karl, and daughter, Ella, in front of their home. The Craftsman-style house was built in 1912 for the Rølvaag family at 311 Manitou Street in Northfield, Minnesota, near St. Olaf College, where Ole Rølvaag taught Norwegian and writing. He wrote most of his literary works at the Manitou Street house, which remained his home until his death in 1931. Ella went on to teach in the Foreign Area and Language Study program at the University of Minnesota. Karl became a diplomat and politician. He served as the 31st governor of Minnesota.