Bethany Indian Mission

An encounter between American-Indian and Norwegian-American Cultures
As I look at this issue of Currents, I’m reminded of the vision statement that our board crafted during our recent strategic planning process. We aim “to be the leader in the stewardship of Norwegian-American stories and experiences, relevant to other immigrant cultures, and in recognition of cross-cultural encounters.” The pages of this newsletter illustrate some of the ways our vision plays out in our work.

Stewardship has been the work of NAHA from the start. Our founders began collecting letters, journals, photographs, and other materials to preserve the history of the Norwegian-American people. We continue to gather and care for diverse materials. See page 3 to learn how a recent summer internship has focused on caring for the papers of the Bygdelag—organizations based on common ties to a specific home district in Norway. Pages 10 and 11 highlight other archival collections that contain the work of creative writers. Their poems and stories were donated to NAHA for safekeeping and to make them accessible to later generations. On page 5, Dale Hovland tells about the experiences of the husmenn, or cotters, in Norway, laborers who had no land or only small holdings on larger farms. Many were among the emigrants who left Norway with a dream of owning land in America.

Their settlement on lands in the United States and Canada links the story of Norwegian Americans to the story of American Indians, who were inhabitants of these places. Encounters between the two groups were varied, but NAHA Editor Anna Peterson shows us one example in her article on page 6, about the Bethany Indian Mission. This boarding school near Wittenberg, Wisconsin, was a place where Norwegian Lutherans—relative newcomers to the United States—sought to Christianize and Americanize Indigenous people. Peterson unpacks some of the school’s history and its ties to Luther College in Iowa.

Thank you for being a Currents reader and for your support of NAHA and its mission of stewardship of Norwegian-American experiences. After you have finished reading, consider passing this issue on to a history-loving friend, along with an invitation to become a member.

In appreciation,

Amy Boxrud, Executive Director
BYGDELAG COLLECTION IS FOCUS OF SUMMER INTERNSHIP

Katie Bergquist has worked this summer as a NAHA intern, helping to process, catalog, and create promotional materials for the Bygdelag papers housed in our archives. A St. Olaf College student (’25) majoring in history and English, Bergquist also has taken several semesters of Norwegian—a helpful skill to have for working with this collection.

The bygdelag are clubs (lag) whose members come from or descend from a particular region in Norway. (The other part of the name comes from the word for a rural settlement, or bygd.) Immigrants to the United States from Norway organized the bydelag beginning around the turn of the 20th century, so some of the lag are now well over a century old. The first one, the Valdres lag, formed in 1899. That lag and others still exist. The bygdelag papers at NAHA also include materials from the groups’ common council, or fellesraad.

The bygdelag collection is one of the largest single collections at NAHA. It fills nearly 90 archive boxes, plus another dozen boxes of unprocessed material.

“Since the collection is so large and has grown so much through the years, reprocessing it now allows us to better describe its contents,” says NAHA Archivist Kristina Warner. Among the materials in the collection are clippings, constitutions, correspondence, meeting minutes, financial records, pamphlets, pictures, programs, and reports that deal with the organizations’ leadership, special projects, and the Norse-American Centennial of 1925.

Thanks to Bergquist, it will all be easier to navigate, Warner says: “Researchers will now have a better understanding of what is included in the collection.”

“This internship fit perfectly with my interests,” Bergquist says. After her time at St. Olaf, she plans to pursue a master’s degree in library sciences or museum studies. Through her work at NAHA, Bergquist learned best practices for records management, archival processing, and public history, as well as skills in communications and digital media that are highly transferrable to other fields.

Fellowships Reminder

The deadline for two new NAHA fellowships is right around the corner. Applications and all supporting documents must be received by October 1 for funds that will be awarded in January, 2024. Funds should be used within two years. Find our research prospectus and fellowship details at naha.stolaf.edu, and send your questions to naha@stolaf.edu.

Archives Fellowship—Thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor, NAHA will offer an annual award of up to $2,000 for a specific research project. This fellowship promotes exploration to achieve new understandings of the Norwegian-American experience. Preference will be given to topics that are outlined in the association’s research prospectus and and projects that rely heavily on collections in the NAHA archives.

Publications Fellowship—An annual award of up to $2,500 is available for research in the field of Norwegian-American studies. While a candidate may propose any topic, priority will go to topics that meet the goals of our research prospectus. Applications also will be evaluated for their potential to produce work publishable by NAHA.
UPCOMING EVENTS

Sámi Collections and Sámi Museums in the Nordic Countries

October 4, 2023, 4 pm
Tomson Hall, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota

Author Barbara Sjoholm will discuss national museums in the Nordic countries with significant collections of Sámi material culture. The artifacts include sacred drums and altars taken by missionaries in the 17th century, along with sleds, furs, clothing, knives, and baskets procured by amateur collectors, ethnographers, and curators through the mid-20th century. Sjoholm will also discuss the establishment of Sámi museums in Norway, Sweden, and Finland in the past 50 years and their role in the renaissance of Indigenous Sámi music, duodji (handicraft), and language restoration. Nordic museums are currently repatriating thousands of objects acquired in the past from the Sámi homelands to these Sámi museums.

Sjoholm is the author of *From Lapland to Sápmi: Collecting and Returning Sámi Craft and Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023) and of the recently reissued *The Palace of the Snow Queen: Winter Travels in Lapland and Sápmi*. A translator of Norwegian and Danish, she is the recipient of fellowships and awards from the National Endowment of the Arts and the American-Scandinavian Foundation. She lives in Port Townsend, Washington.

This event is co-hosted by the St. Olaf College Norwegian Department and NAHA, and is free and open to the public. Visit the NAHA website (naha.stolaf.edu) for information on virtual access to the presentation.

NAHA Teams Up with St. Olaf Alumni and Family Travel

“Norway: A Thousand Years of Migration” will traverse Norway from Stavanger to Snåsa. Participants on this 10-day tour will explore the ways people have been on the move to, from, and within Norway over the past millennium, changing the course of transatlantic history. Topics will include migration within Norway, emigration to North America in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the return migration that followed, as well as the ways Norwegians have influenced the migration of other ethnic groups. We’ll investigate the voluntary and involuntary movements of the Sámi, Norway’s Indigenous people, and look at the role that Norwegians played in forced migration during the transatlantic slave trade while under Danish rule. Along the way, we’ll discuss two migration-themed novels, giving travelers the chance to learn more about modern migration to Norway and the shared experiences of immigrants.

August 4-13, 2024  Led by NAHA board member Kari Lie Dorer, King Olav V chair in Scandinavian-American studies at St. Olaf College, and Amy Boxrud, executive director of NAHA. This tour has filled, but a second tour with the same itinerary is offered a few days later.

August 7-16, 2024 At pretime, space remains on this second tour, which will be hosted by Tanya Thresher, visiting associate professor of Norwegian. Learn more at wp.stolaf.edu/travel/2024-norway/. Mention your NAHA membership to receive a discount.
THE NORWEGIAN HUSMANN SYSTEM

BY DALE HOVLAND

Primogeniture, the right of the eldest child to inherit wealth—had a significant influence on people’s lives in Norway. Historically, the eldest son was privileged in this way under the law, though it could be a daughter if there was no son. Farms were often kept whole and not divided into smaller pieces when they passed from generation to generation. When farms were divided, there was a limit to how far they could be divided and still provide sufficiently for the families living there. Eventually, the dividing had to come to a halt.

A strandsitter was like a husmann without land who lived on the coast. The life and work of a strandsitter were typically connected to the sea, as a sailor or fisherman.

Sometimes there was a formal contract between husmann and farm owner, but whatever form it took, their agreement benefited both of them. The husmann usually made an annual monetary payment for having his house on the land, and had to keep the house and fences in good shape. Generally, he and his family were required to do a specified amount of work for the landowner each year. If they did work beyond the requirements, the landowner paid them in goods and/or money. A husmann with land could raise crops or livestock on his little acreage, and usually was permitted to hunt and fish on the landowner’s property and gather wood there for fencing and fuel. He might also be allowed to use the landowner’s horse and equipment.

For the landowner, there was the assurance of having help at busy times, such as haying or harvest, or having help to clear more land. As noted, the farm owner also got rental income from his husmann.

A husmann’s agreement could be in place for a lifetime, but the landowner had the right to have the husmann vacate the property. If the family moved, their house, which they owned, could be dismantled and go with them. Or the house could be sold to another husmann. April 14 was considered the first day of the summer-half of the year, and in 1687, King Christian V of Denmark and Norway declared that date as flyttedag or flyttedag, travel day or moving day. In modern Norwegian law, it is still the default moving day for agricultural renters, it no other date is chosen.

A husmann med jord, cotter with land, owned a house on the farm plus additional land for growing food or grazing animals. A husmann uten jord, cotter without land, had just a house. A husmannsplass was the cotter’s physical place on the farm, and a husmann was sometimes referred to as a plasmann. (In Norwegian, there are always multiple spellings possible, so husmand and plasmann also show up in records.)
NORWEGIAN AMERICANS AND THE BETHANY INDIAN MISSION

BY ANNA M. PETERSON

The Bethany Indian Mission operated near Wittenberg, in north-central Wisconsin, from 1884 to 1955. In many ways, the mission school was like other so-called Indian boarding schools. Starting in the late 19th century and continuing into the first half of the 20th, American Indian children were recruited or compelled to enroll in church- and government-run boarding schools so they could become assimilated in the predominant European-American culture, which included Christianization. What set the Bethany Mission apart from other Indian schools is that it was the only one run by Norwegian Lutherans.

Norwegian immigrants to the Upper Midwest were primarily engaged in agriculture, and this activity involved them in dispossessing American Indians of their lands. For the Norwegian Americans, recognition of their role in land-taking was one motivation for creating the Bethany Indian Mission in 1883. When Norwegian immigrant and Luther College graduate Even Johnson Homme first implored the Norwegian Synod to start a mission to serve American Indian tribes in Wisconsin, the synod rejected his proposal. But one year later, the synod reversed its decision, stating among its reasons that it “is right to begin a mission among the Indians since we occupy the land which was once their land, and we are obligated to them.”

Led by the Church, Supported by the Government

Another Luther College graduate, Erick Olson Morstad, answered...
The Norwegian Synod and Its Successors

Norwegian Americans are known to have endured a lot of church conflict in the late 19th century when the Bethany Indian Mission was organized. There were doctrinal differences as well as disagreements over how much influence the Lutheran state church of Norway should have over Norwegian Lutheran congregations in the United States. As a result, there were several different synods of Norwegian Lutheran congregations in the late 1880s.

The Norwegian Synod, which founded the Bethany Mission, suffered a schism within itself over the question of whether a person’s salvation was predestined. About a third of the synod’s pastors and members left and merged with other synods to form the United Norwegian Lutheran Church. A later merger brought the UNLC into a new body called the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, or NLCA. After 1917, it was the NLCA that was responsible for running the Bethany Indian Mission. Further changes in church structure and naming during the 20th century made the NLCA part of today’s ELCA, or Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. —A. P.
Indigenous families sent their children to boarding schools in increasing numbers in the 1930s. In addition to economic factors, there were racial and social ones. Some Indigenous families preferred Indian boarding schools over public schools because of the intense racism that many of their children faced during the early years of integrated schooling.

After the boarding school ceased operation in 1933, the Bethany Mission’s final superintendent, Ernest Sihler, found other ways to continue the assimilation of local American Indians until the mission closed altogether in 1955. Sihler implemented new programs, such as opening a religious summer school for Indian youth. He also cultivated relationships with Norwegian-American Lutheran colleges in an effort to connect former students from the mission with opportunities for higher education. In all, Sihler assisted 13 students in this way, the majority of whom were Ho-Chunk and attended Luther College.

An Era of Reconciliation
I have thought it important to explore the entwined histories of Luther College and the Bethany Indian Mission at this moment in time, when other institutions of higher learning are reckoning with their own pasts. Harvard and Georgetown universities, for example, are attempting to reconcile with their communities over the schools’ past ties to slavery. At the same time, news of the discovery of mass graves and abuse at former Indian boarding schools is in the headlines.

What is clear from the research I’ve done is that Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, played a significant role in the history of the Bethany Indian Mission in Wisconsin. Both were founded and supported by people engaged in the work of building the Norwegian Synod and its missions at home and abroad. The college educated many of the pastors and teachers who served in instrumental positions at Bethany. In doing so, Luther College founders, faculty, students, and alumni supported a system designed to convert Indian youth to Lutheran Christianity and assimilate them into white culture, thereby distancing them from their own beliefs, cultures, languages, and communities.

Indigenous families also had a role in shaping the relationship between the Norwegian-American and Indian communities. They were not passive recipients of the church’s missionary work or of Luther College’s contributions to that work. They made use of the resources that were offered and cultivated the special relationship that developed between Luther and the Bethany Mission. For example, the nine Indigenous youth who pursued degrees at Luther College made use of the missionary context in which their families lived and of Sihler’s connections to Luther to attain a level of education that was uncommon in their communities at that time, in the 1940s and ’50s. While at Luther, they overcame challenges and adapted to the majority-white culture of the campus, but they also created support systems for themselves that helped them remain true to their tribal communities and identities, thereby reshaping their higher-education setting.

Luther College has been supportive of my scholarship on this topic. It has funded my research, including a year-long sabbatical. The college also has hosted my lecture on “Bethany and the Indian Mission,” and published in its liberal arts’ magazine, Agora, an article based on that lecture. My hope is that my research will inform the college and be a useful tool as Luther grapples with its past.

Anna Peterson is editor for the NAHA book program and the NAHA journal Norwegian-American Studies. She is an associate professor of history at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.

A Lutheran Truth and Healing Initiative
In 2016, the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) officially repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery, which has its roots in the pre-Reformation Catholic Church. For centuries, the Doctrine of Discovery has been the religious, political, and legal justification for seizing land not inhabited by Christians in 1493 and colonizing the peoples there.

In accordance with the repudiation, ELCA Bishop Elizabeth Eaton commissioned a Truth and Healing task force (elca.org/truthandhealing). The group is charged with understanding Lutheran participation in the Indian boarding school system, and particularly the Bethany Indian Mission. The task force began its work in 2022. So far, it is focused on research, gathering primary and secondary sources related to Lutheran involvement with boarding schools, which the task force will then share with the church, the federal government, and the impacted Indigenous tribes. —A. P.
In the late 1910s and early 1920s, the mission raised awareness of its work and raised funds for its operations by selling souvenir pamphlets, first a Norwegian-language edition (top left), then an English-language version (below). Images of Indian students and of the mission campus were also made into post cards.

FOR FURTHER READING
Sources consulted for this article
➤ A Brief History of the Bethany Indian Mission at Wittenberg, Wisconsin, Luther Seminary, St. Paul (1944)
➤ Brenda Child, Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900–1940, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln (1999)
➤ Ernest Sihler, “Christ for the Indians,” pamphlet, Historical and Publicity Material, vol. 1, Bethany Indian Mission Collection, ELCA Region 3 Archives
➤ Margaret Connell Szasz, Education and the American Indian: The Road to Self-Determination Since 1928, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque (1999)
➤ C. Ylvisaker, Christian Anderson, and G. O. Lillegard, eds., Grace for Grace: Brief History of the Norwegian Synod, Lutheran Synod Book Company, Mankato (1943)

Archival Collections Related to the Bethany Indian Mission
Several archives house materials related to the history of the Bethany Indian Mission. Among them are the archives at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, the Evangelical Church in America in Elk Grove, Illinois, and NAHA. Relevant collections housed at NAHA include:
➤ P0683 Knut Gjerset Papers: Mission Institutions
➤ P0532 Wittenberg Schools & Indian Mission papers
➤ P0796 Torgeir Halvorson Haugen papers, 1864–1915

—A. P.
Currents, Fall 2023

The Neumann collection includes written stories, poems, and plays by George Neumann, who was born in 1859 in Trondheim, Norway. He first worked in a rope factory, and later carried bricks to build a church in Trondheim. At the age of 15, he went to sea and worked as a cook on many ships, including the steamboat Michael Krohn and the steamer Vidar. Neumann later sailed as a steward on the Einar and spent 18 months making two trips to Buenos Aires, Argentina.

At age 18, on a voyage to Brunswick, Georgia, in the United States, Neumann and the ship’s carpenter left their ship. They hid in the pinewoods for over a week without much food and waited for their vessel to depart. Neumann stayed on the southern coast for some time, sailing from there to the West Indies and Rio de Janeiro. In 1882, he went to Chicago and sailed on the Great Lakes for several years. Once he quit sailing, he learned plate printing at William Freund & Sons. Finding that he enjoyed writing stories and poems, Neumann won several prizes and had many of his works published in Skandinaven, a Norwegian-language newspaper in Chicago.

The NAHA archives are home to an extensive manuscript collection that includes many types of written material: letters, diaries, journals, ledgers, and other items related to Norwegians in America. But the archives also contain writings that are more creative. We hold numerous collections regarding writers of poetry and short stories.

**GEORGE NEUMANN PAPERS**

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**MORE TO EXPLORE**

- Poems, 1840–1952, collection number P0316
- Papers of various authors in the NAHA archives, including Simon Johnson, Borghild Dahl, Waldemar Ager, Ole Rølvaag, Martha Ostenso
JOHANNES MAURITZSEN POEMS

Johannes Mauritzsen, born in 1823 in Bjerkreim, Rogaland, Norway, immigrated to America in 1850, at the age of 22. Once he arrived in the United States, he settled in Chicago, living there until his death in 1863. According to Lisabet Risa in Bjerkreimboka, Mauritzsen and his siblings emigrated based on correspondence between his father, Mauritz Halvorson, and Cleng Peerson, known as the father of Norwegian immigration.

Early in life, Mauritzsen created a book of poems, beginning at the age of 11, in 1839, and continuing until 1841. Throughout the book are a mix of his own original poems and poems by others that he copied out by hand. The texts are intermixed with drawings that are assumed to have been made by Mauritzsen, too.

TILDA AKERSMYR TOFTELAND FAMILY PAPERS

Tilda Akersmyr Tofeland was born in November 1896 in Lyngdal, Vest Agder, Norway, to parents Alfred Finkelsen Akersmyr and Rakel Reime Akersmyr. She attended school in Lyngdal and Framnes, and she worked as a secretary until her marriage on April 4, 1925, to Reinert Tofeland. A few weeks later, in May 1925, the couple came to Luverne, Minnesota. They farmed nearby, in the tiny community of Kanaranzi, until 1958. Tilda Tofeland was a prolific writer of poems and articles, and composed many songs. She produced numerous watercolor and oil paintings. She was also a charter member of the Agderlag, a group of immigrants and their descendants from Agder County in Norway. She served as the group’s secretary for 25 years.

(above) “Let me sing freely, as does the bird,” an illustrated poem by Tofeland, dated January 22, 1928
(right) Portrait of Tofeland seated, 1939

Pages from Mauritzsen’s leather-bound book.

(above) Drawings believed to be made by Johannes Mauritzsen are featured throughout his poetry book. The writing on the page indicates that it dates to 1841, when he was 13.
WHEN YOU MAKE A PLANNED GIFT TO NAHA, YOU BECOME OUR PARTNER.

Together, we inspire connections to Norwegian-American experiences through discovery, scholarship, and stewardship. Your gift benefits NAHA, the greater Norwegian-American community, and generations of researchers to come.

Have you already included NAHA in your estate plans? Thank you! We want to recognize your generosity by including you in our Legacy Circle.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, please contact NAHA Executive Director Amy Boxrud at naha@stolaf.edu or 507-786-3221.