

The Sons and Daughters of Norway

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Everyone who has ever traveled to Norway knows from firsthand experience that the usual travel writers' clichéd adjectives and phrases—of alpine meadows, snow-capped mountains, majestic fjords, quaint villages, breathtaking vistas—must all have been originally invented to describe Norway. Try to describe Norway without using the word beautiful once. It's hard to do.

So why does a country with a population of only 5.3 million (that's about the same as Cook County, IL) have 4.6 million of their multi-generation offspring here in the United States? Why did Norway lose so many of their sons and daughters to a land thousands of miles away? Why did they come, and why did they stay? Where did they go; what happened to them? Do any of them still speak Norwegian?

Why they came

Because come, they did. In the century of 1825-1925 over 800,000 Norwegians flooded into the U.S. That was one-third of their total population back then. Other than the Irish, no other country contributed a larger share of their community to the U.S. than Norway.

• Some came for religious freedom.

This could mean many things, including nothing more than pastor who had a conflict with his bishop, and decided to lead his congregation to North America where they could deviate from authorized dogma. In Norway, the Lutheran Church had a state-protected monopoly on worship, and if you disagreed with the establishment, life could be made difficult for you. The church was even called the Church of Norway, and it was established by the Constitution of Norway. For the most part, the Norwegian immigrants remained Lutheran in North America, although

some became Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, and Mormons.

• **Some came because they were hungry.** More than once, famine ravaged Norway. In the middle of the 19th century, the Irish potato blight spread to Norway, and 50,000 Norwegians died of starvation and disease. What was incredible is that entire countries were so dependent on one vegetable, one food product.

Because of the terrain, farms in Norway were quite small, and the agricultural revolution was slow to arrive. Norway had an ancient and rather strict policy of primogeniture, or *Åsetesrett*, when it came to inheritance, and this protected the family farm from being repeatedly fragmented by divisions among all the children of each generation. Each such generational division would in time reduce the farms to postage stamp size. This law was suitable for the family farm and good for the firstborn, but the other siblings often had to find other things to do.

• Some of them went to North America, where land was being given away to homesteaders who agreed to clear and farm it, improving its value.

As the Norwegians arrived in the U.S., they usually gravitated to locations where earlier arrivals had settled. They moved progressively westward, following the offers of land grants.

• **Some left because they couldn't find work in Norway,** and the Second Industrial Revolution was ramping up in the U.S. They generally settled near industrialized communities and spread out when they acquired land. When available, they preferred climate and topography that reminded them of their farms back home.

Today, over 30% of the population of North Dakota is of Norwegian ancestry. Minnesota, a much more populous state with a similar climate, boasts 16% of Norwegian descent, but that 16% is almost a million people.

Over half of all Norwegian Americans live in the Midwest, in order from top to bottom: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington, Iowa, South Dakota and Montana.

Many immigrants from other European countries felt safer crossing the Atlantic if there were Norwegians on board, who were known as skilled seamen.

During the first 14 years of the 20th century, up to the outbreak of WWI, Norwegian as a spoken language was at its peak, with over a million people claiming it as their first language. There were over 3,000 Lutheran churches in the Upper Midwest that used Norwegian as their sole language in church services. More amazingly still, there were over 600,000 homes that subscribed to at least one Norwegian newspaper! *The Norwegian American* out of Shoreline, WA is currently published every other Friday and has both print and online editions. It claims to be America's only remaining Norwegian American newspaper.

Sons and daughters of Norway you may know

Norwegian Americans have had a much more significant influence on our lives than we might imagine. They fought (and many died) in America's conflicts: the Mexican War, the Civil War, World War I, and World War II and every conflict since then. Many first generation Norwegian Americans enlisted for a variety of reasons, including a desire to identify with their newly adopted country. Some expressed a desire to give back because of the free land. Most (but not all) of the Norwegian Americans during the Civil War lived in the industrial North, and they fought on the Union side.

Hans Christian Heg

The most famous of the Norwegian soldiers in the Civil War, he was appointed the colonel of a



PHOTO: TODDKLASSY.COM

Statue honoring Civil War hero Colonel Hans Christian Heg in front of Wisconsin's State Capitol building.

Scandinavian Regiment. He died in the Battle of Chickamauga, 10 miles from Chattanooga, TN. The regiment he led was purportedly 90% Norwegian.



PHOTO: NORWEGIANHISTORY.NO

James Arness (*Gunsmoke*)

Born in Minneapolis, his father was Norwegian. James dropped the "u" in his name when he began acting, becoming James Arness, aka Marshal Matt Dillon in *Gunsmoke*, one of the longest-running shows in television history. A mediocre student in school, James was a decorated (and wounded) soldier in WWII and was recruited and mentored by John Wayne for his role in *Gunsmoke*.

Peter (Arness) Graves (*Mission Impossible*)

The older brother of James Arness, Peter changed his name to his mother's family name, to honor them and to distinguish himself from his younger



PHOTO: THESTAR.COM

brother. He portrayed Jim Phelps on CBS' *Mission Impossible* for its original run and later for its revival.



PHOTO: COLLECTOR.COM

Joe Foss

Joe was a Norwegian on his father's side. He was a flying ace and WWII hero. He became the governor of SD, the first commissioner of the American Football League, the president of the National Rifle Association, and hosted several national TV shows.

Conrad Hilton

His father was Augustus Halvorsen Hilton. The Hilton family name was derived from the name of a farm in Klofta, Norway. Conrad was deeply influenced by his German Catholic mother, who told him prayer was the best investment he could ever make. He went to military school as a kid and served two years in the Army in WWI. He built the successful Hilton



PHOTO: PINTEREST

hotel chain and died leaving an estate of something over two billion dollars. When interviewed on television and asked by Ed Sullivan, given his vast television audience at that particular moment, what would he like to share with his listeners, many of whom had stayed at a Hilton, Conrad laconically replied: "The shower curtain should be on the inside of the tub."

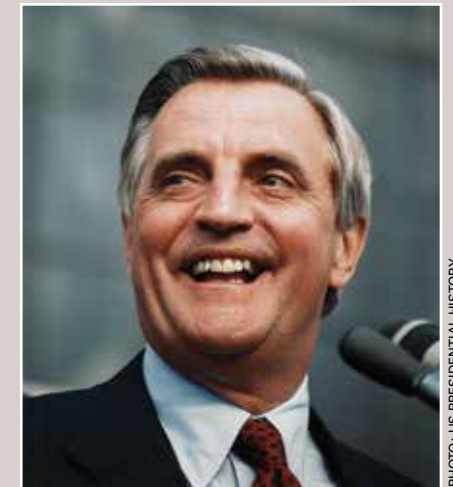


PHOTO: US PRESIDENTIAL HISTORY

Walter Mondale

42nd Vice President of the U.S. and lost a bid for the presidency to Ronald Reagan in 1984. Walter's paternal grandparents were both Norwegian. His father, Theodore Sigvaard Mondale, was a Methodist minister.

Knute Rockne

Knute was born Knut Larsen Rokne in Voss, Norway. His father was a wagon maker, and the family moved to Chicago when Knute was five years old.

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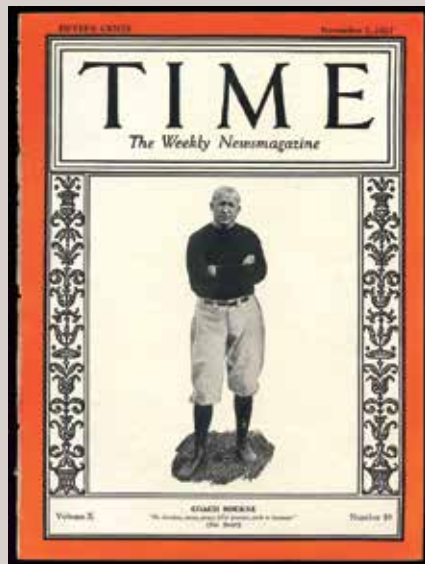


PHOTO: BST-AUCTIONS.COM

Knute Rockne, continued from page 35
At 22 years, he went to school at Notre Dame, where he became a pharmacist, but quit to coach football in Akron, OH. He is widely regarded as one of the best college football coaches ever, and probably the most enduringly famous. He died in an airplane crash at age 43.



PHOTO: SCIENCEBLOGS.COM

Dr. Sally Ride
Astronaut, physicist, and engineer, Sally was the youngest astronaut ever, at 32. After leaving NASA, she became a physics professor and participated in the investigation of both the Challenger and Columbia space shuttle disasters. Her maternal grandfather was from Stavanger, Norway, and her great maternal grandfather was from Lom, Norway. She died of pancreatic cancer at 61.



PHOTO: FAMOUS BIOGRAPHIES

Marilyn Monroe
(Norma Jean Baker)

Marilyn was the illegitimate child of a Norwegian father, Edward Mortenson, from Haugesund, Norway and her mother, Gladys Baker. Her father abandoned her mother before Marilyn was born. Norma Jean was sexually abused by the age of eight and in and out of orphanages and foster homes after her mother had a mental breakdown and was institutionalized. 20th Century-Fox saw her potential and signed her to a contract one step ahead of Howard Hughes.



PHOTO: CRIME MUSEUM

Eliot Ness
Both of Eliot's parents were 1st generation Norwegian immigrants who ran a bakery in Chicago. Eliot was a Prohibition cop known for his efforts to bring down Al Capone. His team of law enforcement agents was nicknamed

The Untouchables. His autobiography by the same name spawned TV shows and movies and granted Eliot immortality. He died of a massive heart attack at the age of 54.



PHOTO: O'REILLY

Arthur Andersen

Founder of one of the world's largest accounting firms, his parents emigrated from Norway in 1881. His mother's stern advice was: "Think straight, talk straight." He became the treasurer of the Norwegian-American Historical Association. He died at 61, long before his successors ran the business into the ground by compromising their founder's principles with client Enron.

Norwegian Americans organize
So far in this discussion, we have been referring to Norwegian Americans as the sons and daughters of Norway in the sense of multiple generations that emigrated here from their homeland. However, in time, the phrase "Sons of Norway" came to mean something similar, and yet different, in a more formal sense.

The Sons of Norway

On January 16, 1895, the Independent Order of the Sons of Norway was founded as a fraternal organization by 18 Norwegian men. Fraternal organizations, initially with only male members, were an outgrowth of medieval Catholic societies of men that lived apart from the main population and who came together for religious or secular purposes. They

called each other brother, or Frater in Latin (fraternal). Some kept their memberships and activities secret and developed rituals at their meetings. Perhaps the one characteristic that defined all such fraternities was the clear expectation of mutual support, and likely this is part of what motivated the founders of Sons of Norway as a fraternal order. One organization formed in Minneapolis and another one in Seattle, which later merged.

Their first objective was to provide life insurance to fellow Norwegian Americans and to insure each other when they were unable to procure insurance elsewhere. In the beginning, the purchase of insurance was compulsory for members. It helps to understand that back in parts of Norway, it was common for families to pay a small amount each week into a fund for "free" health care. So Sons of Norway starting in the insurance business in America was a natural outgrowth of common practice back home.

In time, they also decided to branch into other products that would facilitate long-term financial stability in Norwegian households. They were Norwegians looking out for fellow Norwegians in a new environment. Perhaps some of them found comfort in early American Ben Franklin's advice to his fellow colonists: "Either we all hang together, or we each hang separately." There were strength and comfort in unity with those who shared the same culture, a universal reaction among new immigrants. Also, as a fraternal order, as they built membership they were creating their own specialized, and rapidly growing, market—fellow Norwegians.

In the early 20th century, the secrecy and most of the rituals of the Independent Order of the Sons of Norway were jettisoned, apparently at the insistence of Reverend Hans Gerhard Stub, a Lutheran theologian who eventually served as the Bishop of the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America. Today membership is open to anyone of Norwegian descent, or who consider themselves friends of Norway. The application to join provides four



Demolished Sons of Norway Headquarters, located in Minneapolis, Minnesota.



Ryan, Weidner rendering of new Sons of Norway Headquarters facility, being built on the same property as the earlier demolished building was on.

In 2018, the Sons of Norway Headquarters building and surrounding land in Uptown Minneapolis, sold for \$16.8 million in a deal that allowed Ryan Cos. US Inc. and Weidner Apartment Homes to begin their 317-unit apartment project, which will include office space for Sons of Norway. After demolition of the previous headquarters was accomplished, construction is currently underway, with a completion target date of February 2020. The organization has moved temporarily to Minnetonka, Minnesota, until construction is completed.

categories to choose from in answer to the question "Norwegian or Nordic by"—Birth, Descent, Marriage, Interest.

A nonprofit organization

The Sons of Norway is a nonprofit 501(c)(8) fraternal benefit society. As such they are organized as a business that sells financial products with the

intention that there will be revenue left over after the expenses of operation are deducted. In a standard corporation, this excess revenue is called profit; in a nonprofit, revenue-after-expenses can be called net assets. In either type of organization, if there is no income-after-expenses, sooner or later

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the organization will financially die. Income-after-expenses, by any name, is the cost of doing business tomorrow.

The primary difference between a for-profit organization and a nonprofit organization, apart from tax treatment, is the intended use of that income-after-expenses. In both organizations some of that income-after-expenses is reinvested in the operational needs of the organization, usually to finance new growth. In the for-profit, some of that net income is distributed to shareholders as dividends. In a nonprofit, some of that net income (called by a different name; net assets) is deployed to benefit charitable causes.

The purpose, then and now

Communications Manager of the Sons of Norway Rebecca Swanson, provides us with this published mission for the organization:

Sons of Norway, a financial services and international cultural organization headquartered in Minneapolis, began with shared values and a simple promise of financial security when like-minded people came together to protect their families, celebrate their culture and strengthen their community. For 124 years, we've lived our mission to promote and preserve the heritage and culture of Norway, celebrate our relationships with other Nordic countries and provide quality insurance and financial products to our members. Now 50,000 members strong, we play an active role in communities throughout North America and Norway.

By 1914, Sons of Norway had 12,000 members. It reached its peak membership in 1995 with 90,000. In 2010, fifteen years later, membership was down to 64,186, and currently is about 50,000 in 360 lodges (approximately 1% of the estimated Norwegian American population). It also has \$743,000,000 of life insurance on its books. It remains the most active voice in Norwegian American culture. The Sons of Norway website is "network central" for Norwegian American social/cultural events throughout the year. Since its

founding in 1966, the Sons of Norway Foundation has distributed \$1,375,000 in scholarships, \$390,000 in grants, and over \$500,000 in humanitarian aid. Their website lists 12 different scholarships available. In 2017, the most recent year online with such information, there were 26 scholarships awarded to 25 women and 6 to men. *Viking* monthly magazine is one of the most popular benefits of membership in Sons of Norway with news, culture, and cuisine from Norway. A unique feature for a magazine of its type is a regular column that discusses and promotes specific financial products for its readers. Of course, life insurance and related products and promotion of Norway have been tightly integrated from the founding of this fraternal organization. The profits from the insurance side of Sons of Norway make the publication of *Viking* magazine possible.



Corrie Maki Knudson, Foundation Director

The Sons of Norway Foundation Director, Corrie Maki Knudson, not surprisingly, has a background in the insurance industry before moving into fund development securing significant gifts for Loyola University Medical Center, the Masonic Cancer Center-University of Minnesota and *Be The Match Foundation*.

Daughters of Norway

Between 1895 and 1905, several lodges of both Sons of Norway and Daughters of Norway were opened in the Midwest and on the Pacific Coast. From 1905 to 1907, three lodges were organized that became part of Daughters of Norway of the Pacific Coast (DNPC) in 1908, of which the Grand Lodge served as the

governing body. The Midwest lodges were called Daughters of Norway of the Midwest. These two groups operated separately and independently of each other.

The Daughters of Norway were considered auxiliary organizations to the Sons of Norway, and where such auxiliaries did not exist, Sons of Norway began admitting women directly into Sons of Norway, as early as 1910. The Daughters of Norway of the Pacific Coast (DNPC) remained separate from Sons of Norway and also distinct from the Daughters of Norway of the Midwest. In 1950, the Daughters of Norway of the Midwest opted to merge with Sons of Norway. The Pacific group, DNPC, however, declined to follow suit.

With their sister group, Daughters of Norway of the Midwest, merged with the Sons of Norway, in 1956 the Daughters of Norway of the Pacific Coast simplified their name to Daughters of Norway. They dropped out of the insurance business, and today they recruit strictly as a cultural and social sisterhood. They are a women-only organization, whereas the Sons of Norway is open to all. The Daughters of Norway have occasionally felt they were competing with the Sons of Norway for members, and have been aggressively recruiting. They now have 1700 members and according to their website, 31 active lodges.

Both organizations, Sons of Norway, and Daughters of Norway have conventions every other year.

Adapting to change

Driven by technology, ideology, and a vast generational transition from baby boomers to millennials, cultures in the West are in a rapid state of change. Many traditional cultural organizations have experienced losses of membership, circulation, attendance, and revenues. All are challenged to reinvent themselves, stay relevant, and yet persevere in advancing the cause of values that have helped them to survive, grow, and thrive. Scandinavian Press continues its review of service organizations that deserve your volunteerism and financial support because they promote Nordic values, heritage, and lifestyles.

A Brief Interview with

Eivind Heiberg, President, Sons of Norway

SP: Thank you for taking time from your hectic weekend to chat with us. Can we begin by talking about the differences between the Sons of Norway and the Sons of Norway Foundation?

Eivind: They are two different entities. The Sons of Norway is comparable to what used to be called a mutual insurance company. It was founded to help Norwegian immigrants, many of them farmers, who might come into need. Let's say if the father of a family died prematurely, the family could cash in a certificate of life insurance that would pay for the burial as well as help provide for the family. We use the proceeds from our operations to directly fund, assist, and support activities of our member lodges.

SP: You have expanded from simple life insurance in the early days, haven't you?

Eivind: Yes. The financial services industry is very competitive, and we offer a broad range of term, whole life, universal life, annuities, and so forth. We make very secure, long-term, low-risk investments so that the funds will be there when our members need them. As Norwegians, we are careful with money.

SP: Do you pass these earnings from your financial services operations on to the Sons of Norway Foundation for them to distribute?

Eivind: No, we spend this money, directly from Sons of Norway to the recipient(s). We contribute to the cost of Norwegian events, education, museums, publications, the arts, music, dance, literature. We often collaborate with local lodges on these activities.

SP: So what does the Foundation do?

Eivind: They fund and award the scholarships and grants from estate gifts and donations. Last year, we awarded about \$90,000 in scholarships to 23 students and another \$67,000 in grants. In addition to what we



did, some of the lodges provide scholarships of their own.

SP: In some histories of the early days, it mentions that there was some secrecy involved, with rituals and passwords at ceremonies of the Sons of Norway. What is that all about?

Eivind: My guess is it was a way to emphasize exclusivity, that you were part of something special. This would be an especially powerful incentive for immigrants who often felt like outsiders in society. The formality and ritual of fraternal organizations were common at the time.

SP: I notice that by 1995, a high point was reached with 90,000 members in the Sons of Norway, and now membership is somewhere near 50,000. Can you speak to that?

Eivind: In the eighties and early nineties, through the airlines, Sons of Norway offered great deals on charter airline flights for members only, and many people became members for that reason alone. When there was turbulence in the airline industry, and those deals came to an end, all those who were members for that reason left.

SP: Eivind, thank you again for joining us today!