

# When The Ice is Already Broken

## Some impressions from a visiting Norwegian after the Fellesraad Centennial Celebration, 5-8 May 2016.

*By Fredrik Larsen Lund, National Archives of Norway*

I have travelled to 90 different countries and done research into Norwegian migrant communities in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Brazil and other places around the world. However, when I landed in Minneapolis on 5 May to participate in the Fellesraad Centennial Celebration it was my first ever visit to the Norwegian-American heartland in the Upper Midwest.

Thanks to generous support from the organisers, the National Archives of Norway – where I work – was able to accept an invitation to attend the centennial conference, and to give two presentations about how to use archives in Norway.

### **A love affair**

From the time when Rodney and Audrey Pletan picked me up from Minneapolis St. Paul Airport until I returned home three days later, I felt I was among friends. I was overwhelmed by the hospitality and enthusiasm I met among all the bygdslag members. And everyone appeared to be so curious about me. 'Where do you come from in Norway?' – I think I answered that question at least 25 times; and it was always a great way to get the conversation started about shared Norwegian-American topics. Above all, it was amazing to experience the dedication – or I should perhaps say: love – every one of you seem to have for Norway and all things Norwegian.

Being one of a handful of 'native' Norwegians (a slightly outdated term but you know what I am referring to) who gave talks during the conference, I almost felt like a celebrity. However, I think that status had less to do with me as a person and a lot more to do with the fact that so many of you were eager to absorb the information I shared during my two sessions. It was really a privilege to have such a receptive audience listening to my presentations on historical research in Norwegian archives and libraries

### **Norwegian-American identity**

There was certainly a lot of ethnicity on parade during the centennial conference. Quite literally speaking; particularly with the bunad show after dinner on Saturday. Traditions like bunad, folkedans, rosemaling, lefse, lutefisk, etc. live on even though they appear to celebrate an interpretation of a Norway that no longer exists. Norwegian America has developed its own culture over the years. Your own traditions have evolved from the immigrants who came to the USA 100-180 years ago and into what they are today.

The modern-day Norway I live in is something quite different from that (perhaps with the exception of 17 May – the Constitution Day). Sometimes we might laugh a little about how our relatives in America express their Norwegianness. But as a historian who has studied Norwegians around the world, I have deep respect and understanding for the way traditions express a symbolic ethnicity that serve to maintain some kind of group identity linked to your ancestors' homeland. To be honest, I was rather impressed by the level of activity and creativity that was displayed during the bygdslag celebration.

Moreover, when I scratched beneath the surface of the rosemaling I discovered numerous links between contemporary Norway and contemporary America based on our shared history. These links were expressed through cultural exchange, research

projects, education, business, travel, etc. Norway House in Minneapolis is a good example. While I was familiar with some of the Norwegian-American institutions, like Sons of America and NAHA, I was not fully aware how strong the institutional framework really is (still). Not only in terms of bygdelag and historical societies but also other kinds of voluntary organisations and businesses.

### **A new relationship**

As the actual exodus from Norway becomes a more and more distant memory, I hope these institutions can serve to sustain and develop the connections between America and Norway into the future. When our current Prime Minister, Ms. Erna Solberg, visited Washington, DC, just a few days after the bygdelag centennial, she made a comment on Norwegian television about the potential of the Norwegian-American community as a stepping-stone for Norwegian individuals and businesses who wish to gain a foothold in the USA. I think that could well be true: When we approach our cousins in America, we Norwegians meet an open door. And I hope it works vice versa too. The shared identity and understanding between many of us – the fact that the ice has already been broken – is in my opinion a value, a sort of social capital that can be used to invest in many different projects that might be of benefit for people on both sides of the Atlantic.

From the many rewarding conversations I had with lag members during my visit, I learned that there is indeed a high level of knowledge about modern Norway and a keen interest in what is going on over here today. I travelled to Minneapolis half expecting to meet a lot of people who had hardly ever been to Norway. How wrong could I be?! I soon discovered that many of you have been across the pond half a dozen times or more and have a broad network of contacts among Norwegian friends and relatives. And thanks to new friendships I made during the conference I might meet up with some of you in Oslo this summer.

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