

Crafting Norwegian-American Identity and Inclusion in Decorah's Vesterheim Museum

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IN A CASUAL DRIVE through the streets of Decorah, Iowa, one finds omnipresent signs and symbols conveying its Nordic heritage. Businesses take on names such as Viking Bank, Viking Realtors, and Viking Safestore. Some pay homage to the community's Norwegian origins, such as Pulpit Rock Brewery, named after the awe-inspiring geological plateau in western Norway. The Restauration restaurant takes its name from the famed sloop that registered the first instance of Norwegian immigration to the United States in July of 1825. School mascots like the Luther College Norse and the Decorah High School Vikings embrace the community's Nordic Heritage, and Luther College, which has a long-standing Scandinavian studies program with a Nordic emphasis, is located at the end of Leif Erickson Drive. Each year on May 17, or *Syttende Mai*, the anniversary of the 1814 Constitution of Norway is commemorated on Water Street. Every July, tens of thousands of visitors descend upon Decorah to celebrate Nordic Fest.¹ Under this otherwise seamless performance of Norwegian-American heritage lay decades of starts and fits in the decision-

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1. The 2020 Nordic Fest was canceled due to COVID-19.

THE ANNALS OF IOWA 80 (WINTER 2021). © State Historical Society of Iowa, 2021.

making processes that crafted a particular Norwegian-American identity in the institution known today as Vesterheim: The National Norwegian-American Museum and Heritage Center. Throughout this process, Vesterheim remained rooted in Norwegian folk-art traditions, yet it also fostered a culture of diversity and inclusion.

Of all the so-called “Norwegian-ness” to be found in north-eastern Iowa, Vesterheim is undoubtedly the mothership of this ethnic ethos.² Vesterheim contains three full floors of exhibits and thousands of artifacts, many donated directly from Norway and collected from or given by local Norwegian-American settlers. It includes an open-air exhibit recently renamed Heritage Park, comprised of settler homes, a blacksmith shop, a mill, and a 1795 house built in Øystre Slidre, Valdres, Norway, and then removed to Decorah in 1975.³ Vesterheim offers year-round folk art classes taught at its Folk Art School, ranging from knitting to knife making, with instruction delivered by artisans, sometimes recruited from Norway, and it sponsors annual tours to Norway that focus on folk-art traditions. This small ethnic museum has carved out a national name for itself in the quaintly populated town of 8,000 residents, drawing over 5,400 paid memberships from throughout the nation and beyond.

The present expansiveness of Vesterheim had its humble beginnings with a natural history gift—the donation of “600 birds’ [sic] eggs” to Luther in 1877.⁴ For the first thirteen years of its existence, the collection amounted to a storage room at Luther College and functioned as a repository for local people who contributed family heirlooms. In 1890, attempts to bring some order to the otherwise disparate collection began. Professor W. Sihler was appointed the first curator, and a room in a newly renovated

2. Norwegian-ness was the term used by Anders Sandvig in a 1927 letter to the museum. Sandvig was the creator of the Maihaugen open-air museum in Lillehammer, Norway, at the turn of the twentieth century. Tova Brandt, “125 Years of Collecting,” *Vesterheim History Magazine* 1, no. 1 (2003).

3. “Heritage Park Groundbreaking Ceremony,” Vesterheim (website), 6/5/2020, <https://vesterheim.org/program/heritage-park-groundbreaking-ceremony/>.

4. Knut Gjerset, *Luther College Museum* (Decorah, 1923), 1, RG12, Norwegian-American Museum Publications, Luther College Archives (hereafter LCA).

classroom building became the “museum;” however, the space was only accessible by walking through a classroom. Thirty-three years later, Knut Gjerset reflected on this period saying, “It was as well hidden as was the understanding of a real museum or the interest for it.”⁵ At best, he said, it was a “curiosity shop.” In 1895, a Luther College Alumni meeting passed a resolution to bolster the collection’s campus presence. The collection then moved to a building on campus affectionately referred to as “the Chicken Coop,” where, with Haldor Hanson at the helm, it grew in size as public awareness of the museum increased. By 1900, artifacts’ provenance ranged from Alaska to South Africa and from the South Sea Islands to the stalwart Norwegian settlers right there in Winneshiek County.

A long history of deliberate choices made by individuals and organizations in Decorah, Iowa, has led to the present-day folk-art-based Vesterheim that simultaneously fosters pride in Norwegian heritage and celebrates the inclusion of cultural diversity. In Norwegian, *vesterheim* means western home. Fittingly, the institution has come to embody and impart what a sense of home place means for Norwegian-Americans. More recently, it has encouraged visitors of all cultural backgrounds to consider their unique cultural identity and how the United States is home to a vast array of immigrants.

Norwegian Nationalism at Home and Home-Abroad

Nineteenth-century Norwegian immigrants brought more with them from Norway than material artifacts. In their minds, they also carried a notion of what it meant to be Norwegian, and thus, Norwegian-American. The history of Norway as an autonomous political state is complex. It was inherently and directly subordinate to external political structures until the early twentieth century, from the Kalmar Union to Denmark and then later to Sweden, not to mention Vikings from the eighth to eleventh centuries. Although Norway declared independence and forged a constitution on May 17, 1814, it remained forcibly subservient to and in a so-called personal union with Sweden until 1905. Only then did the

5. Gjerset, *Luther College Museum*, 2.

nation of Norway become entirely independent. While under the auspices of the Swedish monarchy in the late nineteenth century, Norwegians strove to articulate their own unique national identity, their Norwegian-ness, as it were.

During this time, Anders Sandvig, an unsuspecting dentist from Lillehammer, Norway, emerged to help constitute Norwegian nationalism.⁶ By 1887, he had collected material artifacts of rural life from the Norwegian countryside, specifically the *Gudbrandsdalen* (Gudbrand Valley) district in which he lived.⁷ This particular valley, running between two major mountain ranges, was felt to have remained isolated enough from modernity to have preserved essential elements of traditional, authentic Norwegian-ness. Sandvig believed his collection embodied what it meant to be Norwegian, which was similar to how Henry Ford felt his museum of Greenfield Village stood for quintessential American-ness. To feature his collection, he created the Maihaugen Museum, a life-sized microcosm of physical artifacts from the rural landscape that he believed both embodied and conveyed Norwegian-ness. Sandvig's efforts paralleled those of other museums in Norway at the time, such as the Norwegian Folk Museum in Oslo. Arne Bugge Amundsen argued that "the ideological and political background for all these museum initiatives obviously was the renewed Norwegian national self-esteem, [when] Norwegian nationalism was at its peak—a development ending in a unilateral revolt against the union with Sweden in 1905."⁸ In other words, Sandvig contributed to the emerging ethos of Norwegian nationalism by showcasing folk structures and folk stories from an idyllic valley in Norway's countryside.

Bucolic pastoral scenes, like those curated by Sandvig, were a deep heritage-well plumbed by many a dipper to douse perceived

6. Arne Bugge Amundsen, "National Museums in Norway," in *Building National Museums in Europe 1750–2010: Conference Proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen*, Bologna 28–30 April 2011, eds., Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius (Linköping, Sweden, 2011), 662.

7. "The History of Maihaugen," Maihaugen (website), accessed 11/15/2020, <https://eng.maihaugen.no/about-maihaugen/the-history-of-maihaugen>.

8. Amundsen, "National Museums in Norway," 667.

dangers, societal ills, and cultural amnesia attributed to modernity. According to the Maihaugen Museum website, “The Rural section, as a concept, was the idea of Maihaugen’s founder Anders Sandvig. The histories of the farmer, the crofters and the local officials are preserved in the large and small farms, the vicarage and crofts. The founder of the Maihaugen was of the opinion that it was important that the culture of the old villages was preserved for future generations.”⁹ Sandvig began by collecting old farmsteads and putting them on his property. Soon after, the town of Lillehammer invited him to move his collection of “little Norwegian-houses on the prairie” to an existing park. The Maihaugen was an embodiment of the nationalist zeitgeist in Norway’s quest to identify itself as entirely independent of Sweden.

The links between Sandvig’s concept and construction of the Maihaugen and Decorah’s conception and creation of a *vesterheim* were direct, conscious, and intentional. For example, “in 1914, the Rev. M. K. Bleken,” a Luther College professor, “presented a miniature reproduction of the Maihaugen open air [sic] museum at Lillehammer, Norway, made by Ragnvald Enebo for the Christiana exposition of that year.”¹⁰ The museum displayed the diorama on Luther’s campus. This mini-Maihaugen was eventually placed in storage and deteriorated over the years, but not before inspiring folks in Decorah.¹¹ In the same year leaders at Luther began imitating the Maihaugen, identifying immigrant cabins in the region, acquiring them, and then assembling them on campus as a local open-air Norwegian-pioneer complex dedicated to Norwegian-American identity. The Rev. U. V. Koren’s (a founding figure of Luther College) parsonage from 1853–54 was among the first of these relocated structures.¹²

9. “The Rural Section,” Maihaugen (website), accessed 12/30/2018, <https://eng.maihaugen.no/Experience-Maihaugen/The-open-air-museum/The-Rural-section>.

10. Gjerset, *Luther College Museum*, 7.

11. Laurann Gilbertson confirmed that this artifact was made of papier-mâché, deteriorated beyond repair, and is no longer in the collection. Laurann Gilbertson, email message to author, 1/3/2019.

12. Gjerset, *Luther College Museum*, 7.

The 1920s brought many pivotal decisions in the life of this evolving Norwegian-American museum. In 1921, Knut Gjerset became curator, and in 1925, it took on an ethnically descriptive identity when it changed its name from the Luther College Museum to the Norwegian-American Historical Museum.¹³ Until this point, the collection was a mix of natural history and Norwegian immigration artifacts. Taxidermists were busy as “all the birds inhabiting the region about Winneshiek County, Iowa, together with their eggs” were accessioned in 1905. As late as 1922, “over 600 mounted specimens of moths and butterflies” entered the collection.¹⁴ Pivoting away from natural history and toward ethnic identity, Gjerset began to articulate what this Norwegian home-abroad was, what it meant to the descendants of those late nineteenth-century Norwegian immigrants, and how the museum itself would function both as a container for and distributor of Norwegian-American heritage.

Though early curators such as Sandvig, Hanson, and Gjerset lacked the theoretical tools of heritage studies that we have today, they deliberately created social spaces in which visitors could cultivate a Norwegian or Norwegian-American identity by performing folk practices. Laurajane Smith described this process of crafting heritage as “an embodied set of practices or performances in which cultural meaning is continually negotiated and remade, and is, moreover, a process in which people invest emotionally in certain understandings of the past and what they mean for contemporary identity and sense of place.”¹⁵ By walking into a physical space of old cabins filled with old farmstead furniture and imagining what it meant to their Norwegian ancestors to “breathe life” into those objects, visitors to the museum were at the same time constituting a sense of Norwegian identity for themselves.¹⁶

13. Brandt, “125 Years of Collecting,” 10.

14. Gjerset, *Luther College Museum*, 6–22.

15. Laurajane Smith, “Theorizing Museums and Heritage Visiting,” in *Museum Theory*, eds. Andrea Witcombe and Kylie Message (Hoboken, NJ, 2020), 459–60.

16. Anna Rue, “‘It Breathes Norwegian Life’: Heritage Making at Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum,” *Scandinavian Studies* 90, no. 3 (Fall 2018), 350–75.

Expressions of "Norwegian-ness" in 20th Century Home Furnishings

When Norwegian immigrants arrived in the United States, they were faced with the inevitable necessity to adjust to American ways of life and put aside some of the culture they brought with them; however, settlement in America did not oblige Norwegians to completely give up their cultural identity. "The emigration experience actually fortified the wish to retain specific aspects of the old life...but weakened a separate ethnic life-style." (*The Promise of America* by Odd Lovoll)

Like other ethnic groups in the United States, the home is one place Norwegian immigrants and their descendants could cultivate and share culture and traditions. "Norwegian-ness" may be expressed through the foods served, the language spoken, the handcrafts practiced, and the furnishings used in the home. This is not to say that "American-ness" did not intrude upon or co-exist with "Norwegian-ness". Integration was natural and inescapable; and, overall, Norwegian immigrants were willing to adjust and Americans were willing to accommodate.

Exhibit label featured in Vesterheim in 2020. Image courtesy of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, Decorah, Iowa.

The 1925 centennial celebration of Norwegian immigration to the United States, along with several tons of donations of Norwegian artifacts collected in Norway and then shipped to Decorah, propelled Gjerset's vision of Norwegian-American identity in the museum.¹⁷ These artifact contributions can be traced directly to the Maihaugen where "The World League of Norsemen, called *Nordmannsforbundet*, requested Anders Sandvig, director of the museum to issue an appeal for museum articles to be sent to America."¹⁸ Sandvig personally called upon the museums of Norway to contribute artifacts interpreting the Norwegian diaspora to send to Decorah.¹⁹ Upon their arrival, a letter composed by Sandvig accompanied the items. In it, he wrote: "May these objects work so that the *Norwegian-ness* in you will not die out too soon and the connection with the *homeland* will, because of this,

17. For a discussion of how this centennial galvanized Norwegian-American ethnic identity across the United States, see April Schultz, "'The Pride of the Race Had Been Touched': The 1925 Norse-American Immigration Centennial and Ethnic Identity," *Journal of American History* 77, no. 4 (March 1991), 1265–95.

18. David T. Nelson, "The Museum under Gjerset," *Palimpsest* 46, no. 12 (1965), 628.

19. Newsletter 2, no. 3, (November 1967), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, Vesterheim Archives (hereafter VA).

be tighter. Receive this gift as proof that we follow you all in our hearts even though the big Atlantic Ocean parts us."²⁰ Sandvig crafted a Norwegian-ness for Norwegians to feel at home in Lillehammer, Norway, and then showed the way for Norwegian-Americans to craft a sense of a Norwegian-American homeland, a *vesterheim*, in Decorah, Iowa. From the actual Maihaugen in Norway to the diorama of the Maihaugen in Decorah and from the relocation of pioneer cabins to Luther's campus to the tons of artifacts from Norwegian museums sent to the Norwegian-American Historical Museum of Decorah, a spirit of folk Norwegian-ness, or in today's terms, a claim to Norwegian heritage, was intentionally crafted.

As feelings of fondness for Norwegian-American identity were forged, an unintentional fissure began to form between the museum and Luther College. It began when the museum rebranded itself distinct from Luther and continued when the museum physically moved off of Luther's campus. Gjerset's 1923 *Luther College Museum* was in essence a fundraising plea for a new facility disguised as a historical account of the museum. Eight years later, in 1931, the old hotel turned publishing house on Water Street became available, and the museum moved from Luther College's campus to downtown Decorah.²¹ Once moved to 520 West Water Street, its present-day location, with the recently acquired tonnage of artifacts in tow, the museum kept a steady tack toward fostering Norwegian-ness under Gjerset's watch. Mere inertia kept it from failing for several decades. While the stock market crash of 1929 stalled many museum efforts, Gjerset managed to add both artifacts to the collection and pioneer cabins to the open-air collection, which remained located on Luther's campus.²²

World War II shifted national attention and brought marks of entropy to the neglected museum on Water Street. On November 22, 1948, acting curator Inga Norstag gave her report to the Luther College Board of Regents. She began, "I became curator on

20. "Vesterheim-Preserving a heritage. Connecting us all," Vesterheim (website), 7/24/2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1swuKt7v8o>. Italics added for emphasis.

21. "Vesterheim-Preserving a heritage."

22. Nelson, "The Museum under Gjerset," 633.

Sept. 1, 1947," and then summarized the state of affairs: "As you perhaps know the Museum had been closed for several years after having been run for some time on insufficient help. The result was that there was an appalling accumulation of dust, grime and cobwebs all around" and that "the third floor had for quite some time been inhabited by pigeons, sparrows, and bats." Eighty-one years into the museum effort, and this was its condition. Norstag concluded, "All in all it was a sight that would have been most discouraging, if it had not been so challenging. I determined that there must be not only a come-back but a go-forward." She faced the challenge for ten years, and then fell ill and was forced to retire in 1960.²³ From its origins in gifts of natural history to a Norwegian immigration centennial that vivified a Norwegian-American focus and from a boost from Norwegian Anders Sandvig's initiatives to a dusty decline, the museum needed a strategic plan if there was going to be, as the emboldened Norstag said, a go-forward.

A Venture of National Import?

Four years later, a new esprit décor arrived at the museum. Bold new initiatives were about to be implemented that would ultimately turn the slow fissure between the museum and Luther College into a rift that would take decades to close. Out of this chasm also sprang the focus and resulting success that Vesterheim represents today. A formidable obstacle faced by many community museums is how to acquire, maintain, and operate proper facilities. In Decorah, there had been a running theme of "we need a better building for the museum" for decades. This refrain led to two of the most significant strains in the history of the museum. The old hotel turned print shop on Water Street was not "fire-resistant" and could not be open in the winter months out of fear that the old boiler might set the dried wood of the structure ablaze. In the early 1960s, there emerged a belief that this small institution in Decorah, Iowa, with a paltry annual budget barely over \$17,000 could create and tap into nation-wide

23. Inga B. Norstag to President of Luther College, RG12, Series 1, Sub Series 2, Box 1, Correspondence, LCA.

enthusiasm for constructing and endowing a facility to be built on Luther's campus. An audacious 3 million dollars became the fundraising goal. This ill-fated plan quickly left the rebranded Norwegian-American Museum (NAM) with a hefty debt to the Decorah Bank and a significantly strained relationship with Luther College.

Momentum for a new building initiative culminated in a 1964 letter to Luther College President Elwin Farwell from professor and museum chairperson David T. Nelson recommending that a "national fund-raising firm" be hired to tap into the "affection for Norway and the achievements of men and women of Norwegian descent in this country."²⁴ Enthusiasm for this idea was high, and plans moved quickly. The John Price Jones Company (JPJC), an advertising firm headquartered in New York City, was hired to lead the new museum fundraising campaign. On March 11, 1965, just two weeks into the JPJC marketing firm efforts, a letter from museum board president Gunnar Gundersen to Dr. Farwell optimistically declared "Full Speed Ahead!"²⁵

Gundersen presided over the board of the NAM from the board's inception in 1964 until his emphatic resignation on September 1, 1967.²⁶ He left in protest over contentious and, from his point of view, unproductive negotiations with Luther College over control of the museum. Nevertheless, in 1965, he was all in on the desire to raise 3 million dollars for a new facility built on Luther's campus. The fundraising campaign was framed as a 90th-anniversary celebration with the intent to raise 1.5 million dollars for a new building and 1.5 million dollars for an endowment.

In August 1965, JPJC presented a report to the board entitled "Preserving Our Pioneering Heritage." This document serves as a window into not only what went wrong with this new campaign but, more importantly, how those individuals at the time conceived of and felt a sense of Norwegian-American identity.

24. David T. Nelson to President Farwell, RG12, Series 1, Sub Series 2, Box 1, Correspondence, LCA.

25. Gunnar Gundersen to President Farwell, RG12, Series 1, Sub Series 2, Box 1, Correspondence, LCA.

26. During this reorganization, the museum dropped "historical" from its official name.

This 25-page report enumerated in glowing terms why this campaign would succeed and appealed to sentiment for as well as fear of losing Norwegian heritage. Infused in the foreword of the report was Gunnar Gundersen's sense of what Norwegian-American identity meant. In it, he wrote, "A prominent Norwegian-American living on the West Coast" believes "the finest things about America are the results of the composite contribution of all its diverse ethnic groups. Each has the duty to preserve and transmit the best that is in its own culture, not only for its own edification, but for the benefit of all." Money, it was presumed, would flow from the coasts to Decorah, commensurate to this emotional plea. To that end, JPJC played every marketing card at its disposal.²⁷

Community museums often utilize galvanizing declarations of the singular importance they represent to draw donations and cultural heritage tourists to that site. Accolades such as "the best," "the first," "the last," "the biggest," "the smallest," "the only," or "the most" dot the landscape to convince tourists that the offered experience cannot be found elsewhere.²⁸ This trope was deployed by JPJC in the fundraising scheme when they emphatically pronounced the singularity of the Norwegian-American experience: "No immigrants to America came with greater hopes or more shining visions than the Norwegians in the 1830's and 1840's [sic]. These were hardy pioneers who moved into Illinois and Wisconsin and then made the first crossings of the Mississippi into Iowa and Minnesota." The JPJC report further declared, "The [Norwegian] men worked at breaking and tilling land for farms and constructing log cabins, using handmade implements and tools. The women set up housekeeping as best they could, cooking meals on crude stoves and improvising in hundreds of ways." This Norwegian immigrant narrative eclipsed all other peoples as if no other immigrants had come before them and as if no other people had lived in this region and cooked meals for themselves before them. The mythic pioneer tale continued, "With them they

27. John Price Jones Company, Inc., "Preserving Our Pioneering Heritage," August 1965, Gunnar Gundersen Collection, 1998, Gundersen, 9, VA.

28. See also David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge, UK, 2011), 173.

brought whatever possessions they could carry. The 5,000-mile journey to the new land was arduous and frequently dangerous and the destination, when finally reached, was either wilderness or a sparse settlement in an area only recently cleared." This virgin-land narrative created a clean palette for painting a vintage pioneer portrait of Norwegian immigrants.²⁹

Norwegian-American immigrants were thusly placed within the pantheon of Manifest Destiny narratives in which pioneers struck out onto untamed lands, pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, and succeeded. Potential donors were told, "In 1877 Luther College began the collection. . . . Thousands of immigrants have made it the repository for treasured family objects either brought from Norway or produced here in those heroic days when the wilderness was being conquered."³⁰ Not to be confused with history, JPJC built an advertising campaign loaded with mythic frontier and pioneer narratives to transform popular sentiment into monetary donations. Consequently, the campaign told a simplified historical story: "The first Norwegian immigrants to arrive in Iowa and Minnesota were pioneers in every sense; they were 'there' long before these states were admitted to the Union."³¹ In actuality, Iowa became a state in 1846 and Minnesota joined the Union in 1858. Most Norwegian immigrants arrived in Iowa and Minnesota beginning in the 1870s, after the conclusion of the Dakota Wars.

Arguments made for the Norwegian-American museum had a decidedly ethnic and racialized cast. The "Preserving Our Pioneering Heritage" document declared, "The Museum can demonstrate for the interested viewer 'the story of the coming of the people from the land of Thor to the American forests and plains.'"³² An article written by David T. Nelson of Luther College published in *The Viking* in December 1965 deployed deep-seated notions of race and ethnic identity: "There is a well-known

29. JPJC, "Preserving Our Pioneering Heritage."

30. "Pattern for the Future," A Vesterheim Publication, Gunnar Gundersen Collection, 1998, Gundersen 20, VA.

31. JPJC, "Preserving Our Pioneering Heritage."

32. JPJC, "Preserving Our Pioneering Heritage."

saying: *‘Stor arv det er for mannen av godtfolk være fødd [sic]’* It is a great heritage for a man to come of good stock.” Nelson went on to point out that “we know that Leif Erikson was here 800 years earlier; that Snorri Thorfinnson, the first white child born on the American continent of which we have record, was born in 1008, an ancestor of Thorvaldsen, the great Danish sculptor; that John Vinje, born 1614, was the first white child born in New York.”³³ So-called “first white child” markers exist from coast to coast. Erected decades, if not centuries after the purported birthdates, these markers project not only contemporary notions of racial and ethnic identity backward, but moreover, nativity into the past.³⁴

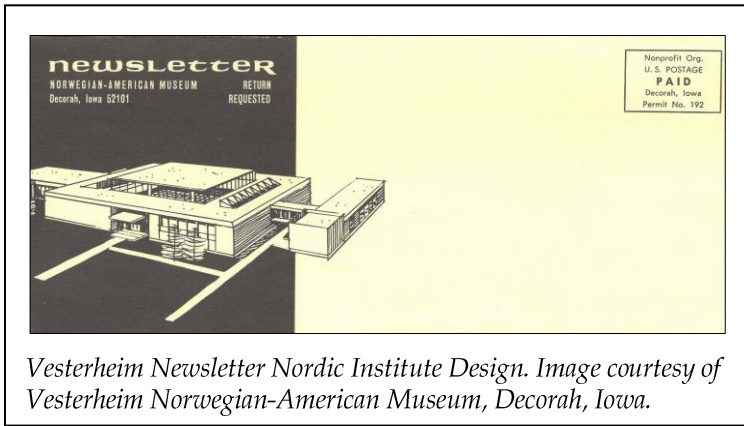
The marketing material for the proposed museum project in the 1960s expressed an extraordinary air of confidence concerning Norwegian-American ethnicity. It declared, “Of all the challenges facing the Norwegian-American Museum, as it moves toward its 90th year of service, the greatest is the challenge to serve as a ‘pilot’ for other ethnic museums. The Museum will encourage and stimulate the development of such museums and will furnish guidance and ‘know-how’ insofar as possible.”³⁵ This proposal contained high-hopes, indeed. Ultimately, the report was not a productive marketing tool for the fundraising campaign. However, it was influential in convincing the boards of the Norwegian-American Museum and Luther College that Decorah acted as a national seat of Norwegian-American ethnic identity. The assurance from an ill-trusted marketing agency and a questionable faith in the enterprise propelled the project forward. Part of the initial report by JPJC recommended selecting an architect that could deliver an “imaginative museum building.”³⁶ In the parlance of our times, a “destination building” was the initial target.

33. David T. Nelson, “Article on the Norwegian-American Museum,” *The Viking* (December 1965).

34. For a thorough discussion of such monuments, see Cynthia Culver Prescott, *Pioneer Mother Monuments: Constructing Cultural Memory* (Norman, OK, 2019). See Pioneer Monuments in the American West Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/PioneerMonument/> for examples of how the Black Lives Matter movement has engaged with these monuments.

35. JPJC, “Preserving Our Pioneering Heritage.”

36. Charles A. Brecht to President Farwell, RG12, Series 1, Sub Series 2, Box 1 Correspondence, LCA.



JPJC recommended shooting for the stars with this project, and the Decorah folks were struck.

Shortly after peak-optimism for the new building campaign, news began to arrive from the New York City marketing firm that things were not going so well. Fewer than four months into the project, on April 22, 1966, JPJC corresponded with the Treasurer of the NAM, John K. Anundsen, to express concern “that about \$20,000 in billings for services and expenses remain unpaid as I write.”³⁷ Given how quickly it hemorrhaged money, one must question the sincerity of JPJC’s optimistic projections for the campaign. Anundsen promptly replied to JPJC on April 27, 1966, addressing the financial fundraising woes of the campaign, saying, “I appreciate your concern and, believe me, I share it.” JPJC was not the only party propping up this house of cards. Revealing that critical players in Decorah also lacked faith in the campaign, Anundsen continued, “The college shares it too and we’ve been hoping for a few larger donations so that the ‘heat will be off’ so to speak.” The suddenness of these admissions of misgiving coming out of Decorah makes one wonder how many reservations about the project were held privately during its planning stages.

Frank Miller, the NAM attorney, held back no such reservations. In a September 9, 1966 letter addressed to JPJC, he exclaimed,

37. Charles A. Brecht to John K. Anundsen, RG12, Series 1, Sub Series 2, Box 1 Correspondence, LCA.

"Misleading conclusions were drawn from the [Preserving our Pioneering Heritage report]. The information program has been inadequate and irregular. The choice of personnel in some instances has been unfortunate."³⁸ While the failure of JPJC's plan might be chalked up to poor advertising and promotion, it may more squarely be attributed to the lack of enthusiasm on the part of distant urbanites for a rural, ethnic-folk museum. Decorah was then and is still to this day down the road less traveled, sitting 45 miles from I-90, and 75 miles from I-35. Though the JPJC-led campaign was doomed from the start and ended in turmoil, the three-year endeavor generated a focused conception of what Norwegian-American identity meant to the NAM and the principal figures who participated in that process.

The Marion and Lila Nelson Era

It took nearly three decades to sort out proprietorship of the collection, its location, fiduciary responsibility, and to put to rest contention from the ill-conceived JPJC marketing scheme.³⁹ Amidst the tumult, Marion Nelson was calmly laying the groundwork to elevate the Norwegian-American Museum to the heights it has reached today as Vesterheim. While Nelson held a Scandinavian Studies position at the University of Minnesota in the early 1960s, he and his wife Lila began making trips to Decorah in piecemeal consulting capacities. He was hired as museum director in 1965.⁴⁰ It is difficult to overstate the role Marion and Lila Nelson played in the ultimate fate of Decorah as a destination city for Norwegian-American heritage. Without their persistent dedication to professionalizing the collection, cataloging, refining exhibits, and pursuing the prophetic vision Marion Nelson offered in the first few months of 1967 on the heels of the JPJC fiasco, the museum

38. Frank R. Miller to John Price Jones Company, 9/9/1966, Gunnar Gundersen Collection, 1998, Gundersen 9, VA.

39. Newsletter 26, no. 1 (Spring 1991), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

40. Dr. Farwell to Marion Nelson, 1/7/1965, RG12, Series 1, Sub Series 2, Box 1 Correspondence, LCA.

may very well have languished as Luther College and the Norwegian-American Museum bickered.

Fortunately, Marion Nelson had been quietly developing contingency plans in the background in the event that the JPJC campaign failed. When it did so, he made a fast pivot in January of 1967 when he informed Luther College that he was considering renovating the Water Street location and dropping the idea of a new building built in conjunction with Luther.⁴¹ While securing a stable, fire-resistant physical space was important, far more critical to the long-term success of the museum was the plan Marion Nelson held for creating a social space in which a Norwegian-American folk-ethos would flourish.⁴²

Nelson shared his plan with members of the Executive Committee on January 10 and gave a report on it to them during the March meeting.⁴³ In his presentation entitled "Phases of procedure in the Museum Project," he articulated five distinct stages for developing the Norwegian-American Museum. The first phase was to finally "restore the old building." Regarding fundraising conflicts, "a separate donation or several separate donations should be sought" to minimize competition over the same money between the NAM and Luther College. Phase two focused on the open-air exhibit and was to "restore the cabins in their present location," which at that time was on Luther's campus. The third phase entailed expanding the open-air exhibit at the Water Street location in order to "obtain the old mill and put it in condition for industrial and architectural exhibits." The depth and breadth of Marion Nelson's plan, which he revealed in one fell swoop, relied on months, if not years, of premeditation.

41. Marion Nelson to Dr. Farwell, 1/7/1965, RG12, Series 1, Sub Series 2, Box 1 Correspondence, LCA.

42. For discussion of how similar towns across the United States did the same thing, see Eric Dregni, *Vikings in the Attic: In Search of Nordic America* (Minneapolis, 2014), and Peter Arronsson and Lizette Graden, *Performing Nordic Heritage: Everyday Practices and Institutional Culture* (Abingdon, UK, 2013).

43. Norwegian-American Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 3/23/1967, 82–85, Vesterheim Collection, Board Minutes, VA. These minutes include the Marion Nelson Plan from 1/10/1967.

The fourth phase of Nelson's plan was ambitious, to say the least, considering the indebtedness of the museum at the time: "purchase the remainder of the block in which the Museum and the mill are located. Possibly restore the frame structure next to the Museum (the house which legend says was occupied by John Brown's family) and use it as either a gallery for pioneer weapons and Indian material or as a crafts shop." Additionally, Nelson wanted to "construct a simple modern building along Water Street which would complement rather than compete with the surrounding early architecture."⁴⁴ The sky was the limit in this optimistic yet prescient vision for unlocking the museum's potential.

The fifth phase would redouble efforts to mirror the Maihaugen museum in Lillehammer, Norway, by making the open-air exhibits a full-blown "Division" of the museum: "The log cabins on the campus (and hopefully an early rural church) would be brought down and grouped near the mill. This would form an immigrant rural settlement approximately as it would have been in the early fifties. The street would make up a comparable urban area as it would have in the 1860's [sic]." That hoped-for church turned out to be the Bethania Lutheran Church, originally built in 1901 in rural Northwood, North Dakota and then moved to Vesterheim's open-air division in 1992.⁴⁵ Part and parcel to this physical plant vision was finishing it with a solid veneer of Norwegian folkways.

After lining out these initial five phases, Nelson, in the same March 23 meeting, proceeded to delineate yet another five-point plan called "Aims in the future program." He wanted to progress slowly, in manageable, locally supported steps, and to redress the contentious issue of collection-ownership. In his fourth and fifth points, he turned to the task of creating a Norwegian-American ethos at the NAM. Nelson emphasized, "The program should be designed to have as great social, cultural, and economic significance as possible," and "it should be designed to appeal as much as possible to the general public without compromising in taste

44. NAM Board Minutes, 3/23/1967.

45. "Bethania Lutheran Church," Vesterheim (website), accessed 1/4/2019, <https://vesterheim.org/exhibit/bethania-lutheran-church/>.



or historic accuracy.”⁴⁶ It is truly remarkable that on the one hand, Nelson articulated all of these ambitious plans at once, none of which were found in the record before this moment, and on the other hand, that they have virtually all come to pass. Marion and Lila Nelson’s conception of and dedication to crafting Norwegian-ness in Decorah was clear, concise, and immediately deployed.

Folk-art-Nationality

Under the leadership of Marion Nelson, which began in 1965, several active measures infused a Norwegian-American ethos into the museum. It started with subtle changes. For example, the museum planned that “a coffee shop will serve authentic Norwegian pastries.”⁴⁷ Such efforts evoked a more visceral experience of Norwegian-ness that got results. The museum reported that “never in the eighty-eight years of its history has the Norwegian-American Museum had a more active season than that which closed on October 31, 1965.”⁴⁸ Similar elements continued

46. NAM Board Minutes, 3/23/1967.

47. JPJC, “Preserving Our Pioneering Heritage.”

48. Newsletter 1, no. 1.

to be added to the museum the following year. "A new feature at the Museum is a sales counter of locally produced crafts in the Norwegian tradition. Mrs. Eleanor Torvik is in charge and only quality products are being accepted. Knitting, rose painting, and weaving were all selling well on opening day."⁴⁹ By "quality," Torvik meant a feeling of authenticity, creating a deliberately fashioned experience of the Norwegian folk-art ethos.

Given the response to these new offerings, it became evident that people were hungry to immerse themselves in Norwegian-American folk-art. When the museum opened for the 1966 season, for example, "more than two hundred persons visited the Museum during the first six hours. . . on May 1. The Museum Volunteers, which now number nearly a hundred, furnished hostesses to serve coffee and give information." Moreover, the visitors experience was enhanced by what is today called "living history": "Many [of the volunteers] were in the new costumes which they have ordered at their own expense from Norway. They will be on hand every Sunday of the season." This success was the beginning of Norwegian-ness taking full root in folk-art expressions at the museum and in community involvement.

The museum newsletter promoted these popular programs ensuring that "the volunteers also are continuing their Sunday programs of craft demonstrations and entertainment."⁵⁰ In addition to engaging visitors in an authentic Norwegian folk-art experience, the results of the 1966 season were monetarily impressive with sales of over \$700,000. It was not bad for selling "knitted scarves, mittens, caps, doll clothes, woven aprons, place mats, trunks, recipe boxes, bowls, hooked rugs, pottery, glassware, ornaments, etc." Moreover, these measures of return were realized with a predominately regional visitorship.

These initiatives intended to craft Norwegian-ness at the Norwegian-American Museum in the same style as Anders Sandvig had done at the Maihaugen in Lillehammer: "The venture was the initial step in a Museum effort to preserve the early

49. Newsletter 1, no. 3 (June 1966), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

50. Newsletter 1, no. 3.

craft traditions in the Norwegian-American communities."⁵¹ Two observations at this point are notable. First, this level of engagement and success came immediately after the 1964–66 failed JPJC campaign. Just because New York City “elites” were unwilling to give money to a “hayseed” museum in Decorah, Iowa, did not mean that no one was willing to invest their time and money there. Secondly, the title of an entry in the 90th Anniversary edition of the newsletter emphasized, “Museum’s Aim Constant: To Preserve Norse Heritage.”⁵² The focal points of these events and activities were Norwegian folk-art and folk-ways, and though still present, less so on the immigrant pioneer experience.

At this time, three annual events were established that continue to impart a feeling of Norwegian-ness in Decorah to this day, *Syttende Mai*, Nordic Fest, and trips to Norway. In 1966, over 600 people visited the museum during *Syttende Mai*, and after the parade, there was a “Norwegian smørgaasboard at Luther College,” complete with “Norwegian costume. . . flags. . . [and] folk-dancing.”⁵³ The July 1969 Nordic Fest featured many elements of Norwegian-ness: “A parade of costumed children carrying flags opened the festivities. The parade ended beside the Museum building, where Nordic Dancers then performed in the street. Demonstrations of early crafts shown in the Museum were candle-dipping, weaving, klosterson stitchery, lefse, [and] rommegrot, a Norwegian cream porridge.”⁵⁴ These events transported historical folk-ways from Norway to Decorah, Iowa, and allowed those participating in them to have a séance with the past, to reach across the ocean of space and time, and to embrace their own Norwegian ethnic identity.

Marion Nelson delivered a prepared speech for the occasion of the first Nordic Fest on July 27, 1967. If he was stinging from the recent fundraising debacle, it was hard to tell as he assuredly

51. Newsletter 1, no. 4, (November 1966), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

52. Newsletter 2, no. 3 (June 1967), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

53. Newsletter 1, no. 3.

54. Newsletter 4, no. 3 (July 1969), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

declared, "We confidently expect that [the museum's] value for us and for all in this country will prove stronger than all obstacles, and will make it a source of strength and inspiration to many, many generations."⁵⁵ Reflecting on her participation in the first Nordic Fest in the same newsletter, "Honored Guest Peggy Wood, the actress famous for her role as the Norwegian mother in 'I Remember Mama,' commented on the children's parade which opened the Fest: 'It's too delightful to forget. Such things as that give you a chance to rest from the despair around us. This is indigenous to Decorah.'" This "indigeneity" is a powerful claim of the presence of a viscerally felt ethos of Norwegian-ness. Annual festivals were just the beginning of many offerings planned by the museum that fostered such close affiliation with Norwegian identity. Undoubtedly, Marion Nelson's plan was on track and was essential to the Norwegian-American Museum's survival.

It took other people to come together and mutually craft a folk-art based Norwegian-ness in Decorah, Iowa. In practice, the Nelsons landed at a cresting confluence of numerous Nordic tributaries at this fateful bend in the Upper Iowa River. From Luther College to the long-established Luren Singers male chorus and from the *Decorah Posten* Norwegian-language newspaper to the vibrant civic groups such as the Jaycees and churches as well as community volunteers such as Durwin Algyer, Helga Lund Algyer, and Phyllis Leseth, who spearheaded events such as Nordic Fest, it took a village of engaged participants to realize Marion Nelson's multi-pointed plans.⁵⁶ Ethnic folk-art museums need the folk to embody an ethnic ethos, take it beyond a museum, and turn it into a living heritage center.

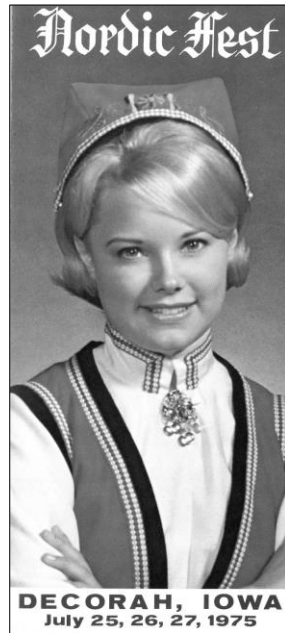
In addition to annual festivals, folk art classes became very popular experiences at the museum. Rosemaling, for example, came to Decorah in earnest after Marion Nelson traveled to St. Louis in 1966 to see a rose painting demonstration given by Sigmund Aarseth, who was promptly invited to Decorah to give

55. Newsletter 2, no. 3.

56 Dawn Swenson Holland, *Nordic Fest: 50 Years Strong* (Decorah, 2016), 17–28.

rosemailing classes. The June 1967 newsletter announced Aarseth “will teach two six-day courses in rose painting at the Museum,” adding, “the courses are designed for students with some experience in painting. . . limited to ten students.”⁵⁷ Aarseth would become a regular feature in Decorah, returning many times and befriending the community.

Norma Wangsness was among the first students in Aarseth’s rosemailing classes in Decorah. Living a few doors down from the museum, she steadfastly connected with her Norwegian-American ancestry at the museum to become a decorated rosemailer, to become an icon of Norwegian-American heritage in Decorah, and to be the invited Grand Marshal of the 50th Anniversary Nordic Fest parade. Wangsness attributed the growth of her personal identification as a Norwegian-American to the museum. When Sigmund Aarseth arrived in Decorah to give rosemailing classes in 1967, she remembered, “I was challenged to learn more and to then master, the decorative painting style of my heritage. When Vesterheim determined to create a Gold Medalist level of achievement in Rosemauling [sic], my challenge and goal, was to become the 1st Gold Medalist in Rosemauling from Decorah, Iowa.” Her determination for mastery and the origins of it are revealing: “I was evolving fast. My Norwegian heritage brought the need and desire to be authentic in my painting education and style.” Together, the museum and the people who engaged with it crafted and performed into



Nordic Fest 1975 Brochure. Courtesy of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, Decorah, Iowa

57. Newsletter 2, no. 3.

existence a Norwegian-ness in Decorah that satisfied that need and desire to be authentic.

During a recent interview, the avid painter conceded that the Norwegian folk-art practice of rosemaling was not her favorite style of painting. Many of her paintings, including several free-hand oil portraits and landscapes, graced the walls of her home. When asked why Wangsness did rosemaling at all rather than focus on her greater painting interests, she confided, "I do it because I am Norwegian."⁵⁸ She said, "It really wasn't until I married my husband and we moved into a house just steps from the Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, that the realization and uniqueness of our Norwegian heritage sparkled. In those early years, the existence of the museum actually gave me (us) a new pride in our heritage." This pride is the feeling of "indigenous Decorah" that Peggy Woods noted above. Wangsness observed, participated in, crafted, and embraced a personal ethos of Norwegian-American-ness in synchrony with the museum, with Sigmund Aarseth, and with others.

From 1965 to 1970, there was a fluorescence of Norwegian-folk-ways in Decorah. The number of Norwegian-born residents had fallen sharply, and the second and third generations of initial immigrants were rediscovering their roots. With annual Nordic Fests, folk-art classes, and Norwegian artists in residence, Decorah was embodying Norwegian-ness year-round. A final element that crafted a Norwegian ethos in Vesterheim was the museum-sponsored trips to Norway. These transnational tourism ventures began when "the Board authorized Museum sponsorship of a charter flight to Norway for Museum members during the summer of 1970." It was noted that "special tours in Norway may also be planned in conjunction with the flight."⁵⁹ Dean Madden created this initiative, "connecting it to the folk art classes offered at the museum."⁶⁰ In 1970, the same year the museum officially changed its name to Vesterheim, it had 135 participants on its trip

58. Norma Wangsness to Daniel Maher, "RE: I Do It Because I'm Norwegian," 9/19/2017.

59. Wangsness to Maher.

60. Newsletter 5, no. 1 (January 1970), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

to Norway. In 1973 the tour “was filled immediately after its announcement” with Sigmund Aarseth acting as the tour director.⁶¹ From rosemaking classes to Nordic Fest and Nordic Tours, Vesterheim had created year-round immersion experiences for those wishing to engage in and embody Norwegian-ness.

Anna Rue, a Ph. D. in Scandinavian studies who grew up immersed in Decorah’s *vesterheim-ethos*, came to write about her own experiences from an academic perspective. Reflecting on her personal practices of engaging in Vesterheim museum-sponsored events, she concluded, “Heritage making in these ways allows the community to play a central, active, and therefore meaningful role in the maintenance of their own traditions in partnership with the institutions that care for their historical and physical cultural expressions.”⁶² Haldor Hanson, Knut Gjerset, and Marion and Lila Nelson fostered this sense of ethnic-placemaking, acting as conductors bringing members of the community, including Norma Wangsness and Anna Rue, to the fore, to create a sustained, symphonic production of Norwegian heritage in Decorah, Iowa.

Royal Treasures

Crucial to the constitution of Norwegian-ness in Decorah has been the numerous connections to and visits from the Royal Family of Norway. In 1939, Crown Prince Olav and Princess Märtha visited Decorah on their first visit to the United States.⁶³ When Crown Prince Harald of Norway visited in October 1965, he declared, “I feel, as you say, ‘a part of it all,’ having spent 5 years of my early childhood in America.”⁶⁴ Luther College President Farwell escorted the royal entourage through the museum along with Marion Nelson. The museum newsletter recounted, “The

61. Newsletter 8, no. 1 (January 1973), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

62. Rue, “‘It Breathes Norwegian Life,’” 373–74.

63. “Royal Visits to Vesterheim and Decorah,” Vesterheim (website), accessed 1/2/ 2019, <https://vesterheim.org/about/>.

64. Vesterheim Publications, “Pattern for the Future,” Gunnar Gundersen Collection, VA.

Museum prepared a special Norwegian buffet and a demonstration of arts and crafts which included rosemaling, carding and spinning." In this way, the people of Decorah, Iowa, demonstrated to the Crown Prince of Norway what it meant to be Norwegian. They did so to his satisfaction as the Crown Prince declared, "I was very much impressed by what I saw today at the Norwegian-American Museum. The collection is unusual, certainly delightful to see, especially those personal possessions and heirlooms which Norwegian pioneers in America carried with them wherever they decided to settle in this great country."⁶⁵ The maintenance of transnational ties to Norwegian royalty has legitimated and authenticated Decorah-Norwegian-ness for decades.

While featuring royalty is a departure from an emphasis on the folk, it nonetheless validated the museum as a container of Norwegian-American identity. For example, in 1966, the museum newsletter reported that "King Olav Accepts Bid To Be Museum Honorary Chairman." It said: "We now bear the stamp of approval from the man who heads the nation for which we all have a great measure of reverence. His Majesty's endorsement of what we are striving for here should be a great spurring of interest and activity by every American citizen whose background stems from the country that produced our forebears who have done so much to build the greatness of America." In 1975 King Olav V visited Decorah to dedicate the Main Building and returned in 1987.⁶⁶ Olav V's successor, King Harald V, and Queen Sonja visited in 1995 and 2011. In 1999 Crown Prince Haakon visited to dedicate an addition to the museum, the Amdal-Odland Heritage Center.⁶⁷ To this day, a member of Norwegian royalty is designated as the honorary board chair of the museum.⁶⁸ The maintenance of this transnational link to Norway is impressive.

65. Newsletter 1, no. 1.

66. Newsletter 10, no. 4 (October 1975), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

67. "Royal Visits to Vesterheim and Decorah," Vesterheim (website), accessed 1/3/ 2019, <https://vesterheim.org/about/>.

68. "Vesterheim's Connection to Norway," Vesterheim (website), accessed 1/4/2019, <https://vesterheim.org/about/>.

Despite the royal character, it is of great value for conferring authentic Norwegian-ness upon Vesterheim's folk-art emphasis.

A Norwegian-American Complex

While the physical plant of Vesterheim would be different from the planned "destination museum" of 1964, the underlying conceptual plan changed little until after 2000. The architects of Norwegian-ness in Decorah aspired after the likes of what John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and others had done to preserve and bring back to life colonial times in Virginia at Colonial Williamsburg.⁶⁹ To that end, the museum board approved the purchase of adjoining property for "preserving an entire immigrant environment" in 1972. At that very board meeting Edward Alexander, retired Director of Interpretation of Colonial Williamsburg, was on hand to give a presentation entitled "What is a Museum?"⁷⁰ Indeed, what does this artifact assemblage of little-Norwegian-houses-on-the-prairie ultimately mean?

Though leadership has changed over the years, the emphasis on pioneer homes and folk-art traditions and the feeling of being "home" have continued to resonate as central messages of the museum. Janet Blohm Pultz became director of Vesterheim museum in 1998.⁷¹ In the spring of 2000, she opined:

The importance of home in Norwegian culture makes Vesterheim—*western home*—an appropriate name for a Norwegian-American museum. Having a Norwegian home was central to the immigrants' identity, so much so that they gave the name *vesterheim* to their home in the New World. In an age where so many people are homeless, or come from a home that they would just as soon not remember, this emphasis on home is a value worth treasuring.

69. "About Colonial Williamsburg," Colonial Williamsburg (website), accessed 9/16/2020, <https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/learn/about-colonial-williamsburg/>.

70. Newsletter 7, no. 4 (October 1972), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

71. Newsletter 34, no. 4 (Winter 1999), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

Pultz then connected the names of the exhibits at the museum to this train of thought: “the home in Norway” and “the home in America.” Pointedly she said: “We have taken care to recreate the whole home environment of the Norwegian immigrant. . . . It is not just the objects that are important, but the sense of place and identity that they impart when we see them in context.”⁷² The feeling of “home” is indeed a powerful drawing card. The summer 2020 group tours to Norway, while canceled due to COVID-19, were initially promoted in Vesterheim’s newsletter with the heading “NORWAY You *Can* Go Home Again.”⁷³ The issue included an article on kayaking in the “Ancestral Fjords of Norway” entitled “Coming Home,” and another article about hiking in Norway that invited one “Through Home, to Home.” Indeed, it was the visceral act of coming into contact with the folk-art traditions that emanated from the folk, from the homes, and from the families that was fostered by Knut Gjerset’s and Marion Nelson’s vision of the museum to embody this Norwegian Western Home. The group tours back to Norway are a logical extension of that vision.

This emphasis on home begs the question, what constitutes a place as home? Before Norwegian emigration to the United States, it was flatly not their western home. It was somebody else’s home. Only occasionally can alternate accounts of experiencing life in the Decorah, Iowa region be directly observed in the museum. Walter Benjamin is famous for once saying that to speak of heritage is to speak of a catastrophe.⁷⁴ In other words, beneath the smooth, inspiring heritage stories of Norwegian-American pioneers is the fact that their presence in Decorah would never have been possible without first removing Dakota-Sioux, Ho-Chunk/Winnebago, and other Indian Nations from the region. After all, Decorah is 150 miles from Mankato, Minnesota, where 38 Indians were hanged in 1863 (reduced from the over 300 planned to be executed before President Lincoln

72. Newsletter 35, no. 1 (Spring 2000), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

73. *Vesterheim* 17, no. 2 (2019). Italics original.

74. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley, CA, 1998).

pardoned the majority). Various Indian Nations had made the region their home for centuries before the United States violently took it from them. The immigrating white pioneer families, such as all the Norwegian-Americans, could then establish their homes on the central tallgrass prairie. Consider that Decorah, and the county in which it is located, Winneshiek, are Indian names.

One must look hard in Vesterheim exhibits for any signs of Indian presence before Norwegians and other European immigrants (immigration to the region was not ethnically monolithic) moved to the area. In the basement of Vesterheim, if one looks closely, one can see attacking Indians carved into the occasional kubbestol (wooden seats crafted in one piece from the trunk of a tree), but with no interpretation to be found. One exhibit, "Special Exhibit Pictures Indian Lore," was described in the 1969 newsletter:

It gave a comprehensive picture of the arts and crafts, as well as the life, of the Indian. Such implements as arrowheads, hammers, axes, and grinding equipment indicated the Indian's ability to chip and polish stones. His sense of decoration was illustrated by quill work, bead work, and engravings on pipe stone. Pottery included a collection of small vessels in the shape of fantastic animals, and probably originated in Colombia. A bow and arrow supposedly used by Chief Sitting Bull was on display.⁷⁵

This small attempt at inclusion from the 1960s projected Indians into the prehistoric era or to an Indian Nation not from the local area, effectively erasing the violent displacement of Indian Nations from northeastern Iowa immediately before Norwegian immigration to the area.

While exhibits lack developed discussion of displaced Indian Nations of the region, and importantly, this is not the stated purpose of Vesterheim, the museum has demonstrably learned hard lessons with which many prominent institutions have yet to

75. Newsletter 4, no. 1 (January 1969), Vesterheim Publications Collection, Vesterheim Newsletters, VA.

grapple⁷⁶ Wayfinding signage installed in 2020 around the open air exhibits explicitly address the displacement of Indian Nations.⁷⁷ One sign to be erected in front of the Painter-Bernatz Mill begins, “After Native Americans were forced off the land in Northeast Iowa by the U.S. government, European settlers like William Painter moved into the area.” Text accompanying an 1835 image of Chief Waukon Haga declares, “The United States government was actively removing Native Americans from this region when European settlers first arrived here.” The narrative goes on to discuss other institutional efforts to disrupt Indian Nations, including boarding schools and the 1887 Dawes Act. More than typically found at frontier and pioneer museums, Vesterheim has taken on the issue of immigration and race relations in such challenging, provocative ways.

These alterations are not accidental. Through intentional conversations, individuals engaged with the museum have “come to understand that through collections, stories, and programs, Vesterheim can offer opportunities for people to connect with their own identity, whatever their heritage. As an institution, we have become more conscious of the need to actively welcome visitors representing different backgrounds and ages.”⁷⁸ In the face of the Alt-Norge in Norway, the Alt-Right in the United States, the ethnically charged mass murders committed in Norway by Anders Breivik in 2011, and President Donald Trump’s 2018 tweet that Norwegians are the “right kind” of immigrants, Vesterheim has persisted in telling a more complex, nuanced, and inclusive story of immigration and who has a claim to “home” in the United States.

76. For examples see Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg*, (Durham, NC, 1997); Daniel R. Maher, *Mythic Frontiers: Remembering, Forgetting, and Profiting with Cultural Heritage Tourism* (Gainesville, FA, 2016); Doug J. Swanson, *Cult of Glory: The Bold and Brutal History of the Texas Rangers* (New York, 2020).

77. Laurann Gilbertson, email message to author, 9/29/2020.

78. Becky Idstrom, Communications and Marketing Manager, Vesterheim, email message to author, 9/14/2020.

In a current "Visitor Guide" to the museum, there is a section on "Cultural Identity in American Society."⁷⁹ Visitors are guided through the museum by the publication and are told, "Identity is created, assigned, shaped, and influenced by many different things." The guide encourages the visitor to consider: "Who are you? What makes you who you are? The place you were born? The language you speak? What you do for a living? The religion you profess? Your race or cultural heritage? Your gender? Is it only one or two of these, or maybe several in a combination?" After this relatively sophisticated introduction to identity questions, the guide turns to the topic of immigration: "Each immigrant culture enriches us through food, art, music, and many other ways. Immigrant cultures are truly part of our American fabric." And then, pointing the issue very personally and directly, the visitor is asked to consider, "How has your life been influenced by your own immigrant background or the culture of other immigrant groups?" In this manner, Vesterheim squarely addresses contemporary issues of immigration within a national and international context.⁸⁰ The point is reinforced in current issues of newsletters and exhibits. They state that "we are all immigrants" and that all immigrants should be proud of their heritage. They go further saying that immigrants can feel pride while also acknowledging the frequently messy and complex "shared past," for example, between Norwegian immigrants and the Ho-Chunk people.⁸¹

Vesterheim demonstrated this commitment to inclusiveness when it responded directly to the May 25, 2020 death of George Floyd that sparked increased energy within the Black Lives Matter movement. In a June 3, 2020 Facebook post, it stated, "Vesterheim stands with all who are mourning and seeking justice for George Floyd and with those who suffer the effects of racism in

79. "Cultural Identity in American Society," *Vesterheim Visitor Guide* (Decorah, 2018), 7.

80. See also, for example, Robert Zeidel, "Pursuit of Ethnic Loyalty: Immigrant Americanization During World War I," *Vesterheim Magazine* 15, no. 2 (2017), 6–11.

81. A Vesterheim wayfinding sign reflects this as "Thanks to the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska for contributing content to this panel to help more fully interpret our shared past." Laurann Gilbertson, email message to author, 9/29/2020.

countless ways in their daily lives. We're listening, we're learning, and we acknowledge that we have a lot of work to do. Vesterheim has a responsibility to do no less in our efforts to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion." In the same post, it explained that the previously scheduled groundbreaking and rechristening of the open-air exhibits as Heritage Park were canceled "to avoid distracting our audience from this historic moment and the needs of their communities." A June 24, 2020 Facebook post followed up with specific measures Vesterheim was undertaking to be more inclusive going forward.⁸²

In so many ways, Decorah is not unlike virtually any American small town. Pioneer Days, Founder Days, Fall Festivals, and similar events elide the facts of conquest and how a group of people who previously called that place their home had to be removed before a new claim to "home" could be made by a new group of people. On the other hand, Decorah, Iowa, and Vesterheim are exceptional models for tapping into and flourishing economically with ethnic heritage tourism and for incorporating inclusiveness into the museum experience. A 2003 article by Tova Brandt, then curator of the museum, reflected on its 125-year history and perhaps pointed to one of the seeds of Vesterheim's value of inclusiveness:

Because immigrant materials were solicited from everyone, the collection didn't just represent Norwegian Americans who had achieved a particular degree of success. In fact, its main focus became the lives of everyday people, and thus it represented more accurately the Norwegian-American experience and better reflected the lives of its patrons. Though the collection still included artifacts from prominent religious, political, and cultural leaders, these stories were not considered more important than the stories of Norwegian Americans from all social and economic backgrounds.⁸³

82. Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum Facebook page. See also "Vesterheim's Commitment to Address Racism," blog, Vesterheim (website), 6/24/20, <https://vesterheim.org/a-message-from-vesterheim-president-to-address-racism/>.

83. Brandt, "125 Years of Collecting," 5.

Vesterheim is fundamentally a folk museum, about the folk, and for the folk.⁸⁴ It has never been about representing the elite, dominant economic class perspective. In other words, the museum has been inclusive, from a socioeconomic perspective, from its inception. Expanding to include a diversity of race and gender perspectives is a continuation of that value. As Chris Johnson, President/CEO of the museum, articulated, "This is a difficult challenge, but with changes, Vesterheim can contribute to creating a world that recognizes disparities, respects differences, and realizes our common humanity."⁸⁵ Vesterheim's conception of Norwegian-American identity and value of inclusivity was constituted by and continues to adapt and be transformed by individuals. These and countless others not named here did just that for crafting Norwegian-American identity and inclusivity in Vesterheim museum of Decorah, Iowa.

84. Vesterheim is currently rebranding itself to reflect this by changing its name to Vesterheim: the National Norwegian-American Museum & Folk Art School. Becky Idstrom, Vesterheim Communications and Marketing Manager, email message to author, 9/25/2020.

85. "Vesterheim's Commitment to Address Racism," blog, Vesterheim (website), 6/24/2020, <https://vesterheim.org/a-message-from-vesterheim-president-to-address-racism/>.