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Norwegian-American Historical Museum at Decorah.

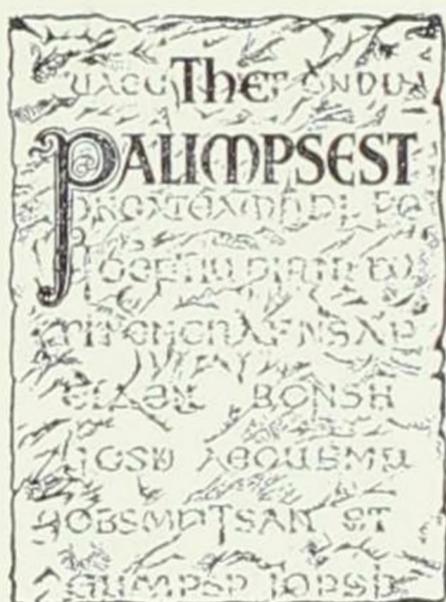
Norwegian-American Museum

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The Meaning of Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN MUSEUM

DAVID T. NELSON

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Illustrations

All illustrations, unless otherwise noted, are from the Norwegian-American Museum.

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THE PALIMPSEST

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Historic Beginnings

The rich soil and scenic beauty of northeastern Iowa lured thousands of Norwegians to this colorful wonderland. Frequently referred to as the "Switzerland of Iowa" it might more appropriately be called the "Norway of Iowa." Clustered in and about Decorah, the Norwegians established Luther College in this picturesque center of Wineshiek County. Opened in 1861, it was the first degree granting Norwegian college in America.

Not content with a college of their own, the Norwegians next established a Museum, which in 1967 will have reached its 90th birthday. The history of this unique Museum containing priceless Norwegian artifacts from the Mother Country and America, is a significant chapter in Iowa history.

What the immigrant brought with him to Iowa were first of all the purely utilitarian objects, such as anvils, millstones, griddles, and great copper kettles. But there were also things of no particular use on the frontier, yet things that kindled life's

dearest memories and warmest feelings. From these precious things the emigrant would not part, and so they had to be laboriously brought along to the new world, useful or not. Yet they had their usefulness just the same. If one could not use them, one could love them — the dolls which children's tear-stained hands had clung to; the bridal crowns and bridal dresses and bridegroom's gloves; the brooches, ornaments, silken articles, and embroideries. Many such articles which soothed the homesick heart of those uprooted from their ancestral homes have been preserved and have found their way to the Museum.

How did the Museum start? And how did it become what it is today? Early beginnings are usually shrouded in obscurity. This is true of the Museum in Decorah. The year assigned for its start is 1877 because President Laur. Larsen of Luther College on February 16, 1877, acknowledged a gift of birds' eggs, including specimens representative of Scandinavian birds, which were to be part of a museum. But in the same communication he apologized for his failure to have acknowledged publicly the receipt of various other artifacts with which a beginning had been made, and he hoped that the museum would be remembered in the future and continue to grow.

No earlier reference to gifts for a museum has been found, but it is evident from Larsen's statement that a beginning had been made earlier and

likewise that among the faculty there was support for a museum as a desirable adjunct to an educational institution.

Little is heard of the collection until 1890. Then the main building of Luther College was rebuilt after the fire of 1889. A small room in the northwest corner on the second floor was set aside for a museum and Professor William Sihler was placed in charge of the modest collection. According to Sihler:

The museum, being a rather insignificant affair, the curatorship was given to the newest member of the faculty, probably because he was a young man. When he was introduced to the room, he found a number of boxes of all sorts filled with objects which had been given by persons to whom a museum was a curiosity shop. Some objects were labeled, but most of them were not. There were also some objects of interest to students of natural history, such as shells, eggs, fossils, etc. All these things were thrown together without order . . . The new curator applied for the small sum of \$50 for cases and cabinets to make it possible to exhibit things. He drew plans for furniture that would fit into the room, and a Danish cabinet-maker, Kulmse, and his son made the necessary articles. The room was the most inaccessible in the building, as it could not be reached except by passing through a classroom.

Professor Sihler, in addition to his museum duties, had a full schedule of classes.

In September 1891, *College Chips*, the student news medium, appealed to the public to aid the

museum. "We have an institution here which bears the proud name of museum," wrote the editor. "It is, however, yet only the nucleus of one, for it is far from being complete enough to be of much practical value." During the next few months several articles were donated, but no continuing interest had yet been awakened. In 1894 the editors of *College Chips* made a new appeal to friends of the college: "Our museum seems to have been forgotten. Prof. W. Sihler, who has charge of it, is doing all he can to improve and enlarge it, but one man can not accomplish much, especially when he is occupied with so many other things, if we do not all help by contributing something."

For some time prior to this there had been a stirring of interest in origins, a desire to know more of those who had pioneered in this relatively new Middle West. This interest and curiosity was present among those of Norwegian ancestry as well as among those of other nationalities. As early as 1886 the Luther College Alumni Association had designated Professor Gisle Bothne the official historian of Luther College. His articles began to appear in *Norden* (a Chicago Norwegian language paper) and attracted attention. Finally, in 1897, they appeared in revised form as a 471-page book, the first full-length history of Luther College.

During approximately this same period Rasmus

B. Anderson was gathering historical materials. In 1895 he published these in book form as *First Chapter of Norwegian Immigration (1821-1840)*, a pioneer work on the history of Norwegian-Americans. His work in turn stimulated others. Apparently, so far as the museum was concerned, the time was ripe for moving ahead.

Certainly the interest of some alumni was stirred, for an announcement was made that at a meeting of the Luther College Alumni Association to be held in Red Wing, Minnesota, on August 16, 1895, the following topics were to be considered for discussion and action: 1. The collection of books, papers, and manuscripts, especially those dealing with the history of Luther College and the history of Norwegians in America. 2. The collection of relics, minerals, plants, etc., for the Luther College Museum. 3. The collection of a library of Scandinavian music for Luther College.

At this meeting Rev. Adolf Bredesen, after leading the discussion, presented a resolution asking the faculty of Luther College to adopt a definite plan for developing the museum and to appoint as curator a member of the faculty who could devote more time to its management. The Association adopted the resolution and also voted sufficient funds to furnish one room for the museum. At the same meeting J. C. M. Hanson, later an internationally known librarian, urged the collection of books, papers, and manuscripts, espe-

cially those relating to the history of Luther College and the Scandinavians in America. C. A. Naeseth, college librarian, was asked to superintend the gathering of such a collection but withdrew later in favor of Haldor Hanson. Ola Solheim urged the collection of a library of Scandinavian music at Luther College and Hanson was elected chairman of a committee to carry out this project.

Torstein Jahr, the editor of *College Chips*, later a cataloger and an expert on Scandinavia in the Library of Congress, commented on the encouraging news that the alumni association of the college had interested itself in the museum. He warned that it was not the purpose of the museum to gather merely curiosities, but things of value for man's enlightenment. Yet things that would be of enduring value for such a collection often are lost because men fail to understand their value and to care for them. Nor do many understand what a difficult and painstaking task it is to hunt up material, to undergo the inconveniences of traveling here and there to assemble it, to persuade owners to part with it, to pack and ship it, and to interest other people in such an undertaking. Moreover, after materials have been assembled, they must be cataloged, classified, and arranged. Eventually, this requires skill and patience of a high order.

In the "Chicken Coop"

On October 12, 1895, in accordance with the resolutions of the alumni, Professor Haldor Hanson was placed in charge. The museum was moved from the college main building to the nearby brick structure known as the "Chicken Coop," a building 60 x 30, of which at first only the two east rooms were set aside for the collections. These were modest enough at this time: 30 stuffed and mounted specimens; 40 butterflies and insects; 300 birds' eggs; 150 rocks and minerals; North Cape and Valdres meerschaum; rocks from the Gausta mountain; relics from the Chicago and Luther College fires; Civil War relics; Luther College scrapbook from 1865; Chinese articles and idols; South African weapons; Indian clubs and arrows; a penholder from a piece of the Gokstad ship; Confederate and other paper money; 90 silver and copper coins; 2 oil paintings by Alex Grinager and 10 by Herbjørn Gausta; cast of Bjørnson by Asbjørnsen, and miscellanea.

Hanson had been engaged as a full-time music teacher for 1895-96 and had also agreed to look after the museum. The alumni association agreed to aid the museum, and President Larsen hoped it would become something more than it had been.

Our people want to hold fast that which is good in the old heritage and let it be of benefit to this new nation. Therefore, we will all guard our old memories . . . The pioneers have represented our nationality at its best, and they have brought to this new land . . . forces that should influence its history, as the Normans of the Middle Ages influenced the countries to which they came. They have already done so, and the mark they have made will never be erased.

Larsen's hope was more than fulfilled. Hanson, who possessed great talent as a collector, was zealous and tireless as the possibilities of the museum grew upon him. In October 1896 he issued an appeal for help in assembling a complete collection of newspapers, books, and other material of Norwegian-American interest. He stated that B. Anundsen, publisher of *Decorah-Posten*, had given the museum copies of everything from his press. He also reported that copies of almost everything from the Synod's press was in the museum and the college library. He suggested that if the project of gathering everything should succeed (more than 200 books and brochures had already been gathered), perhaps a history of Norwegian-American literature could be prepared. He reported that nearly 2,000 different "things" had been given the museum during the preceding twelve months. The total collection very early began to take on the character of a Norwegian-American museum and it was as such that it received its widest support.

In 1897 Hanson began to agitate for a fireproof library and museum building, but it was years before this hope was even partially fulfilled. For the period from October 13, 1895, to May 25, 1898, Hanson reported that the museum received 3,471 items as gifts and 1,183 by purchase. Hanson enlisted the interest of students; their musical organizations gave concerts for the benefit of the museum. The Luther College Alumni Association likewise gave financial support to the museum.

Missionaries who had received their early training at Luther College became interested in the museum. Thus Rev. T. L. Brevig, a pioneer Norwegian Lutheran missionary to Alaska, sent a number of artifacts from that area, including a six-foot long tooth of a mammoth. Over the years many other items came from Norwegian-American missionaries in other parts of the world.

An attempt to build up an art section for the museum was made in 1898, when the classes of 1894, '95, '96, and '97 furnished the funds for the purchase of a full-size plaster cast of the Apollo Belvidere. Subsequently, casts of other classical sculptures were obtained; but interest in these waned as the museum turned more and more to Norwegian-American materials.

Hanson had an eye for publicity. He persuaded authorities to include a cut of the building housing the museum in the catalog of the college for 1899-1900. This building was the old "Chicken Coop,"

60 x 30, two stories, which by that time was almost wholly occupied by the museum. This building, to the northwest of the old Main Building, continued in use (though not as a museum) until it was torn down in 1952.

In 1899-1900 Haldor Hanson was named Curator of the Museum, the first time this title was used. On May 15, 1900, he reported:

Since the Luther College Museum, so far as is known, is the only Norwegian museum in this country, one of its chief objectives has been to gather and preserve Norwegian-American newspaper material so far as possible. It now has 518 complete annual issues of various newspapers and a few more, more or less complete. There are more than 2,000 items in the museum library, nearly all published by Norwegian-American authors. In addition, there is a collection of old and rare books, especially Norwegian-Danish and religious books.

The Museum has a coin collection of 600 items including paper money and medals; a stamp collection of more than 4,300 different items (not displayed because of lack of room). In a photograph collection there are 124 photographs of Norwegian-American pastors, teachers, journalists, and several others; 180 photographs of churches, schools, and parsonages, 30 photographs of groups from Luther College, etc.

In the natural history section there are 150 mounted birds, 38 fish, 35 animals; a small collection of insects; 975 birds' eggs; about 1,000 shells; 33 specimens of coral; about 200 specimens of minerals and ores; many fossils; 30 varieties of seed; a herbarium of about 500 specimens (not displayed for lack of room); a cross-section of a large spruce from Oregon.

In the ethnological section there are somewhat more than 400 Indian artifacts, like arrowheads, stone axes, trinkets of beads, etc.; about 100 articles from Alaska; a collection of weapons and poison arrows from the South Seas Islands; a number of articles from South Africa, China, and Japan.

The Museum has made a special effort to gather a collection of Norwegian materials, older and newer, examples of Norwegian fine and domestic arts. Much of this was brought to America by immigrants, and it is important to rescue as much of this as possible before it is too late.

A beginning has been made of an art collection, notably with Mr. Gausta's large and splendid painting, "Closing the Bargain." A plaster cast of the Apollo Belvidere and 21 plaster masks are also found here.

Dr. L. Cadwell of Decorah has kindly turned over to the Museum his collection of minerals and a cabinet. . . . The Museum's collections are displayed in 200 frames under glass — in 10 glass wallcases and 17 "show" cases.

Much good will has been shown toward the Museum in these years, and it has received many handsome gifts. But it has been necessary for its growth and development not to rely only on gifts which may fortuitously come to the collection, but also to purchase some things — and even to buy more than, strictly speaking, its means permitted, in order to promote, enlarge, or complete a given area.

On June 19, 1901, a faculty building committee reported that more room was needed for the library, museum, and music. On March 24, 1902, Hanson announced a subscription of \$280 toward a new building, presumably to serve the museum.

On May 15, 1902, the faculty resolved that a library-museum building of fireproof construction was the first need of the college. On June 17, 1902, Hanson's resignation as curator was announced to the faculty.

Apparently a considerable difference of opinion had arisen concerning the priority to be given to certain college projects. There was also a change of administration, President C. K. Preus succeeding President Laur. Larsen, who resigned. In any event, the gymnasium was enlarged in 1902-1903, and the library-museum building was not constructed. Hanson's duties as curator came to an end. On September 16, 1902, U. V. Koren, the President of the Synod, sent a letter to Hanson, thanking him for his great services to the museum and enclosing a check of \$200 as a gift.

Haldor Hanson's departure was a great loss. Almost single-handedly, he had aroused interest and enthusiasm in the project. Making influential persons aware of the significance of the museum, he had obtained hundreds of artifacts and considerable financial support. He had set before the museum the task of gathering all that would throw light on the contributions of those of Norwegian descent to this country. In doing this he gave the museum a direction which it thereafter never lost and set it on the course which has made it the foremost Norwegian-American institution of its kind in this country.

From Markhus to Preus

On September 16, 1902, Professor George Markhus was appointed curator. In 1906 he was succeeded by Professors H. W. Sheel and M. K. Bleken jointly. President C. K. Preus was curator from 1911 until his death in 1921.

In 1903, a 32-page illustrated brochure of the college, which was prepared by Oscar L. Olson (later third president of the college), included views of displays: one showing mounted birds, animals, and fish, and a second showing hand-made, hand-decorated artifacts, mostly of wood, such as Norwegian immigrants had brought with them.

In 1905 the classes of 1898 and 1899 gave the museum a replica of the famous Laokoon group in plaster. The class of 1899 is also credited with the gift of a plaster reproduction of the Greek statue of Athena Giustiniani. A reproduction of the "Borghese Warrior" was donated by the class of 1900. A copy of the statue of "Apollo Belvedere" had earlier been presented by the classes of 1894 through 1897. These and other similar replicas represented the interest of groups interested in classical studies, but over the years this area has become one of minor interest to the museum.

Dr. Carsten Smith of Decorah gave the museum a collection of stuffed specimens of all the birds inhabiting the region about Winneshiek County, together with their eggs. In 1907 an embroidered seal, that had been sewn by Miss Sara Bödker of Chicago as a "design for the seal of the board of Lady Managers" at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, was received through Mrs. George A. Torrison as a gift from the Norumbega Society and other friends in Chicago. In 1908 a bust of Henrik Wergeland by Stephan Abel Sindring (1846-1922) was presented by Dr. T. Stabo and unveiled by K. Gjerset.

President Preus, although much preoccupied with other duties, succeeded in securing many valuable additions to the collection. In October 1913, through the initiative of Dr. T. Stabo of Decorah, the Egge log cabin, 14 x 16 feet, was moved to Decorah and set up on the college campus. It had served as the first parsonage of U. V. Koren, when he took up his pastoral duties at Washington Prairie, six miles southeast of Decorah, in 1853. It was furnished with interesting articles from pioneer days. The cabin had been built in 1851, and in 1853 was inhabited by Erik P. Egge, his wife and two children. They were kind enough to share this very modest house with the Korens. It was constructed of logs, beautifully fitted together by a master axman. One authority said it is an outstanding example of the art of dovetailing.

After more than 110 years, despite moving and weathering, it is hard to get a knife-blade between the logs at the corners where they are matched.

In 1914 a miniature replica of the Maihaugen open air museum at Lillehammer, Norway, which was made by Ragnald Enebo for the Christiania (Oslo) Exposition of that year, was presented to the museum by Professor M. K. Bleken. The museum also procured, among other Norwegian articles, a grandfather's clock from Hallingdal, Norway, a *lur* and a *langeleik* (old musical instruments).

A far more important acquisition was the carved wooden altarpiece by Lars Christenson (Kjørnes). Born in 1839, Christenson emigrated from Stedje Parish in Sogndal, Sogn, Norway, in 1864 and in 1866 settled as a farmer in Six Mile Grove, about three miles from Benson, Minnesota. In 1907 he moved to Benson, where he remained until his death in 1910.

His altar has a three-part and tiered composition and a central placement of the Crucifixion, the Last Supper, and the Ascension. The artist left unfinished the three base panels of the predella when he quit work on the altar in 1904. He used oak veneer, maple, and walnut and obtained color and contrast from the woods, using no paint on his creation.

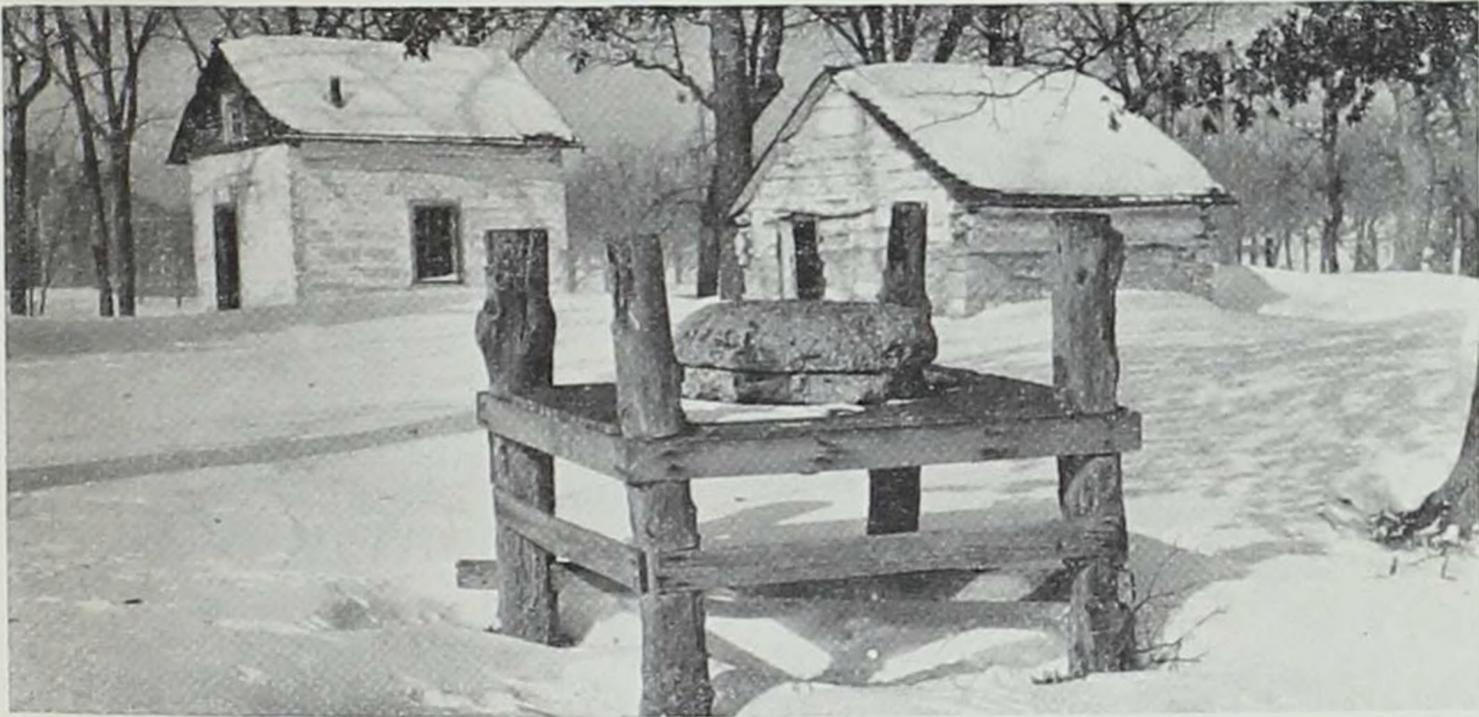
Presumably, Christenson became a member of Our Saviours congregation in Benson, which in

1901 built a new church edifice to replace the earlier one lost by fire. Fortunately, the altar was not placed in the new edifice, for the latter in turn was lost by fire in 1911. In 1904 he exhibited the altar at the Minnesota State Fair. After the fair, it was stored in St. Paul until it was transferred to Luther College in Decorah in 1910 through the efforts of C. K. Preus. At the college it escaped fire a second time when it was transferred to the present museum building before Old Main burned.

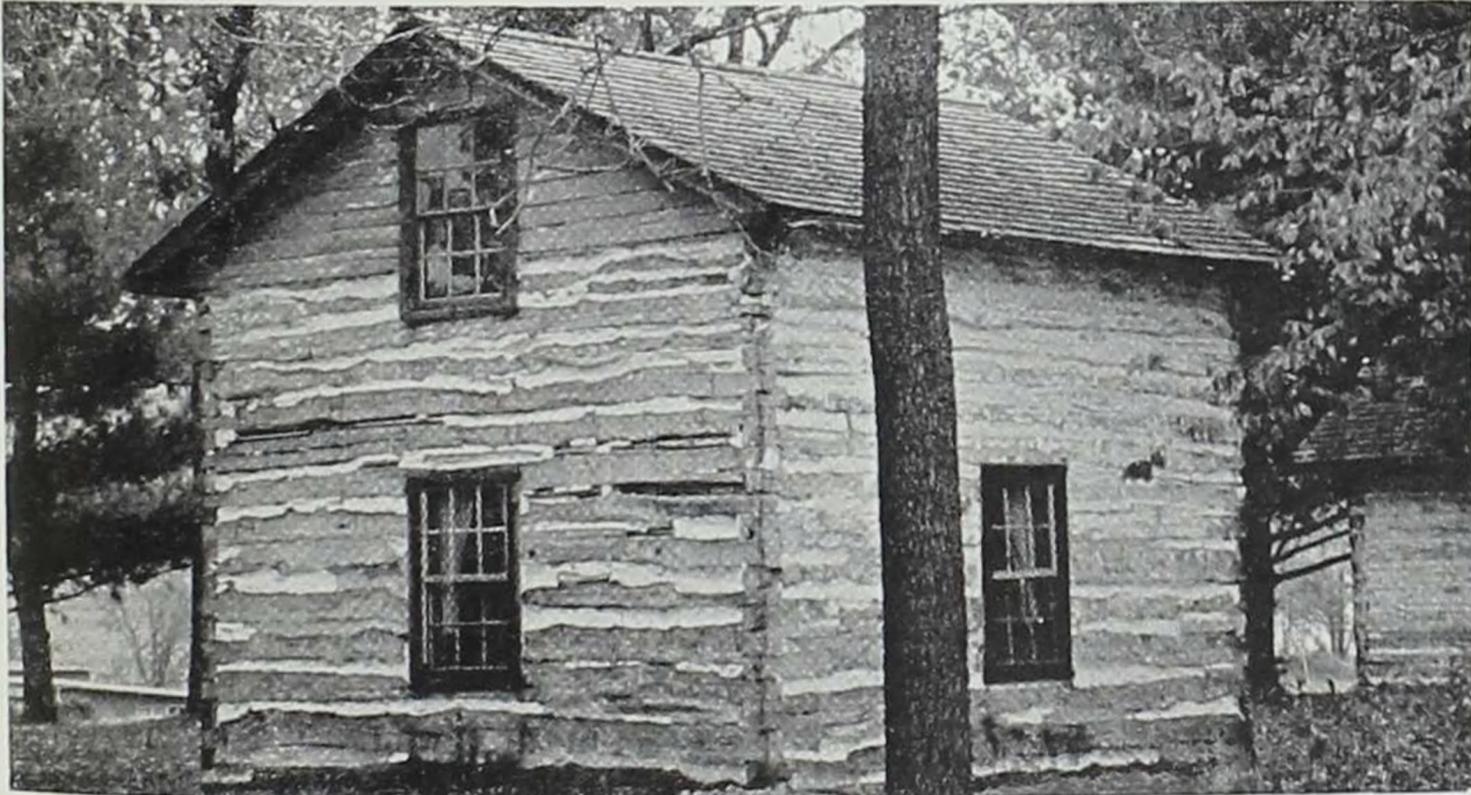
Christenson's altar has been recognized as an important work of folk art. In it, says one writer, "he produced a monument that in originality, expressive power, and grandeur has little to rival it in the folk art of America." The Nativity Scene from the altar has been used on a Christmas card by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

During the later years of his administration, President C. K. Preus became greatly involved in many diverse matters unrelated to the Museum, and the latter suffered. Gradually he turned again, however, to the library-museum building project, which had been dormant for several years, and succeeded in raising the funds needed for it. In this building, named the Koren Library, rooms on the first floor and the third floor were set aside for the museum.

THE OUTDOOR MUSEUM — LUTHER CAMPUS

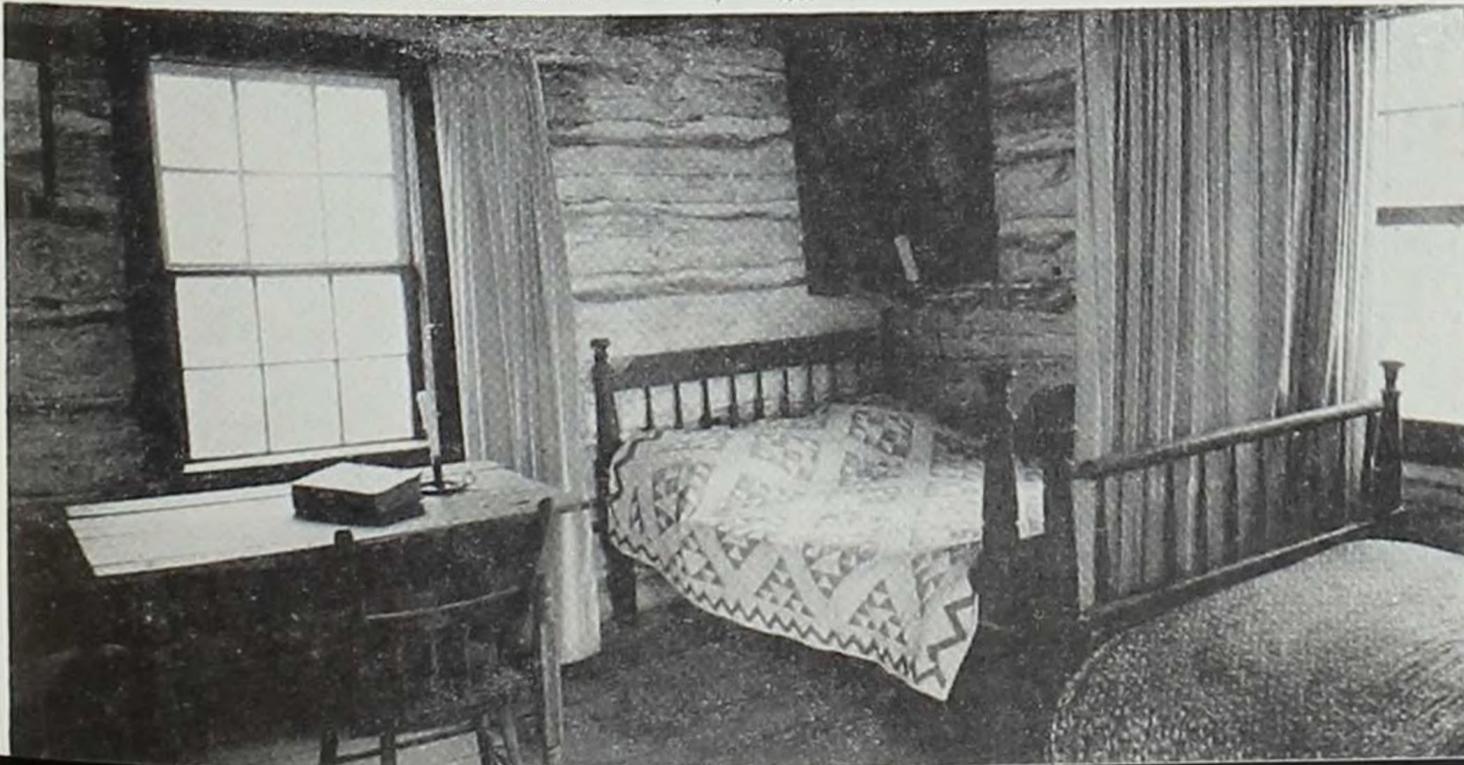


Norswing millstones, Tasa drying house, Haugen cabin.



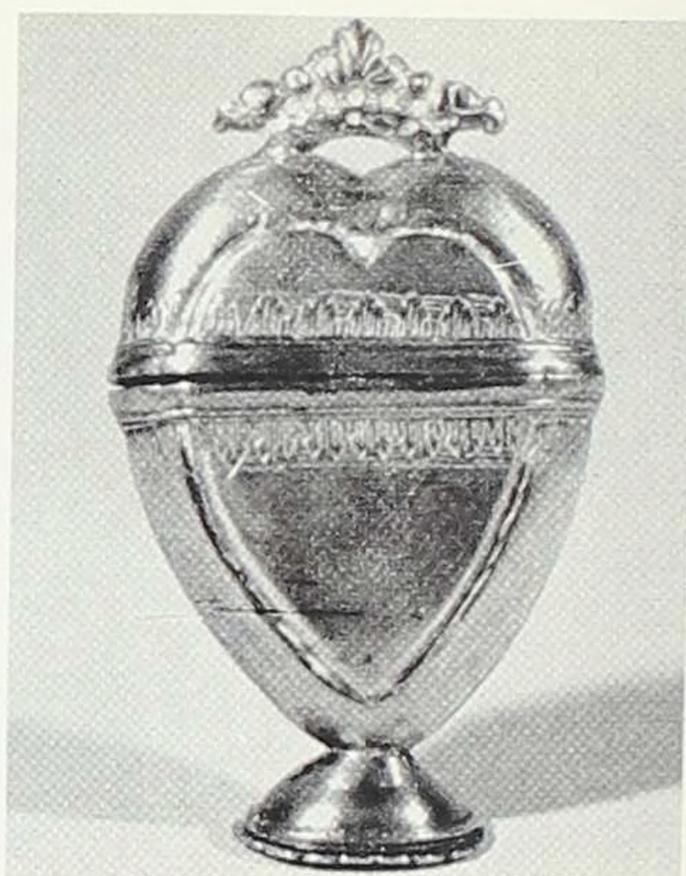
The Egge-Koren cabin with schoolhouse in background.

Interior of cabin shared by Egges-Korens in 1853-54.

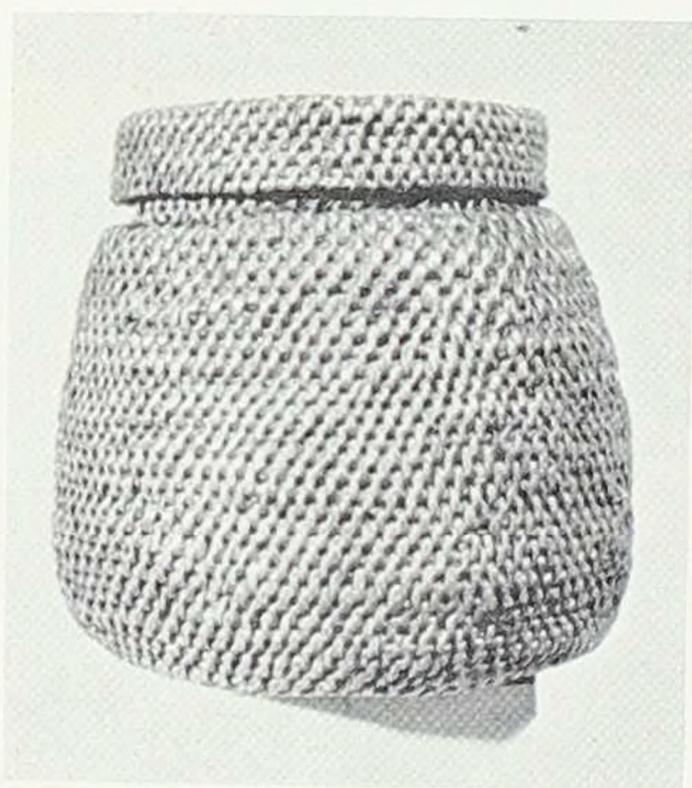




Wooden Porridge Container
Gudbrandsdalen (1810)



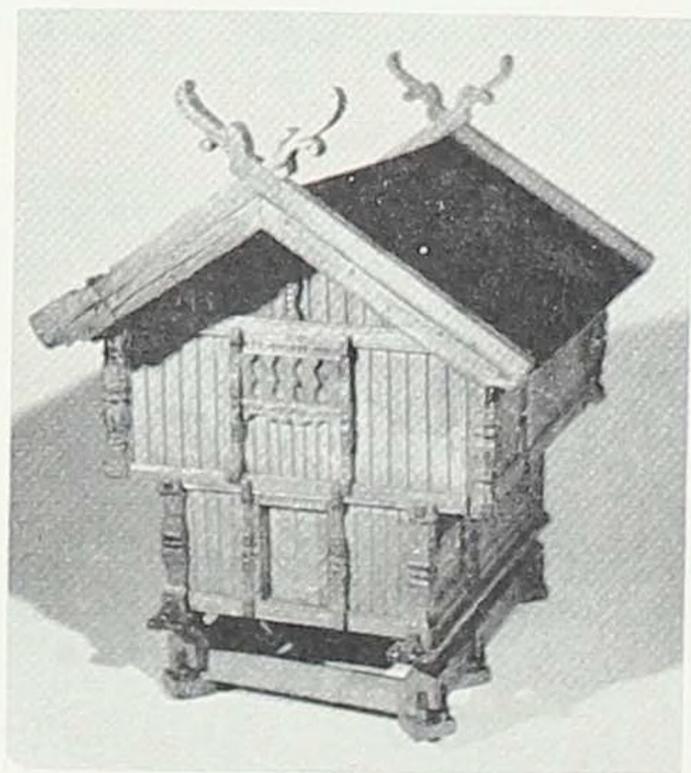
Silver Perfume Bottle
(About 1800)



Birchroot Basket
Typical Norwegian Basket



Voss Headdress (19th Century)
Black Embroidery



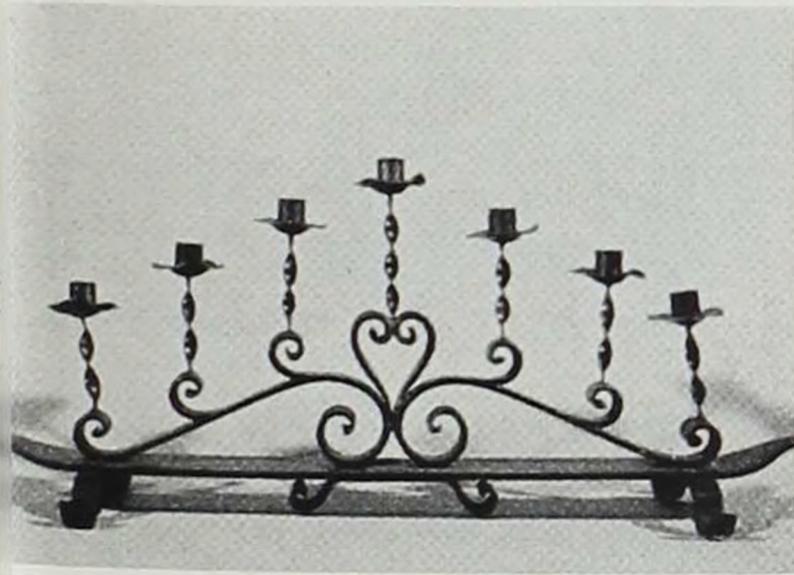
Model of a Norse Storehouse made
in the U.S. in the 1880's.



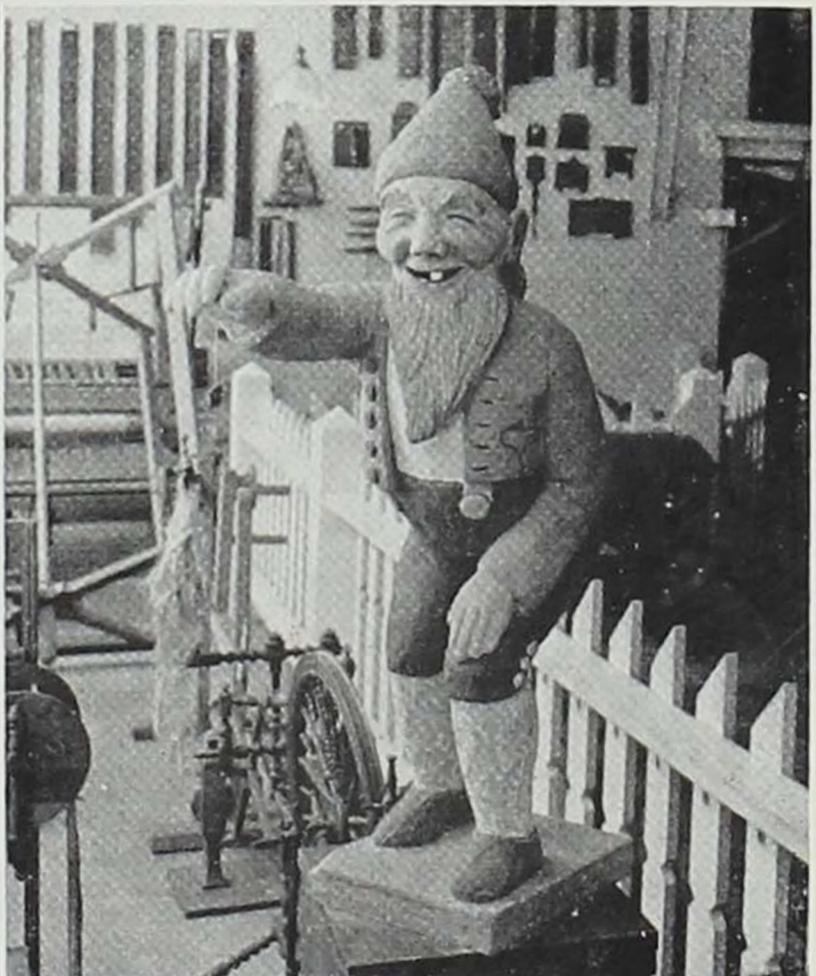
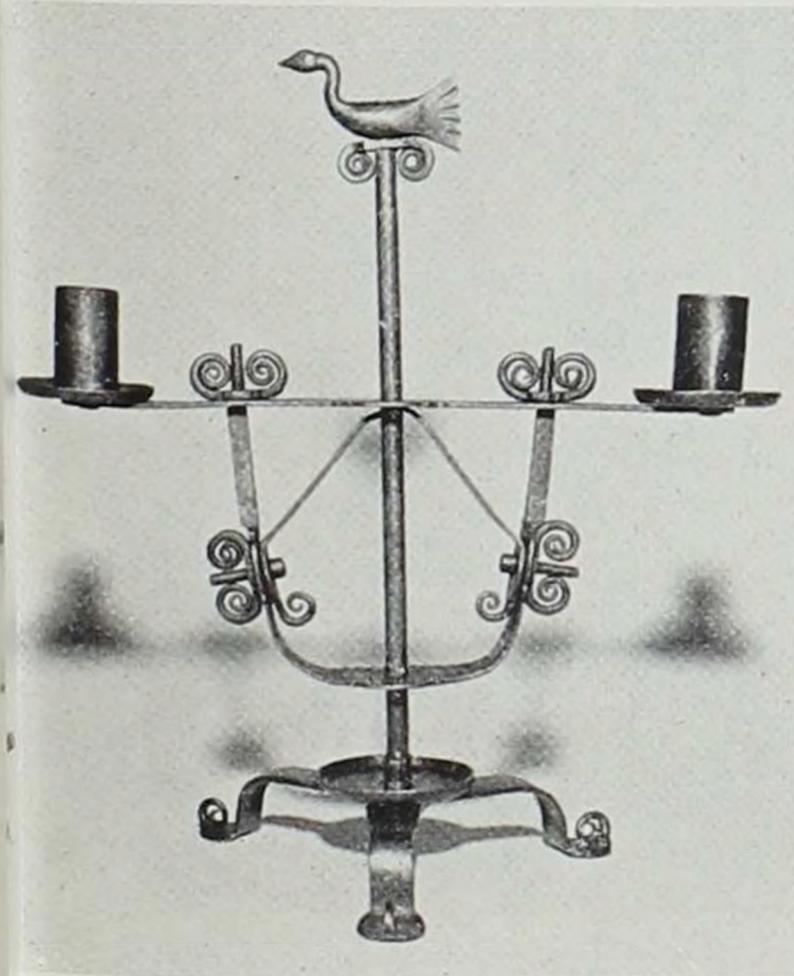
Silver Wedding Crown
(Late 18th Century)



Left) Detail from the Christenson Altar (Circa 1900). Compare its angel motif with that of the 16th Century oaken travelers chest (right).



Wrought iron candelabra in Norse design made in Denver. (Right) Beer bowl with rose painting (1828). Since coffee was imported, beer was a common drink.



Candlestick with bird finial — 18th Century Norse wrought iron. Norwegian Nisse (elf) carved in concrete by Halvor Landsverk.



Early Norwegian bridal costumes from Hardanger.



Panel of altar carved by Christenson.



Detail from hand-embroidered breastpiece for provincial Norwegian costume.



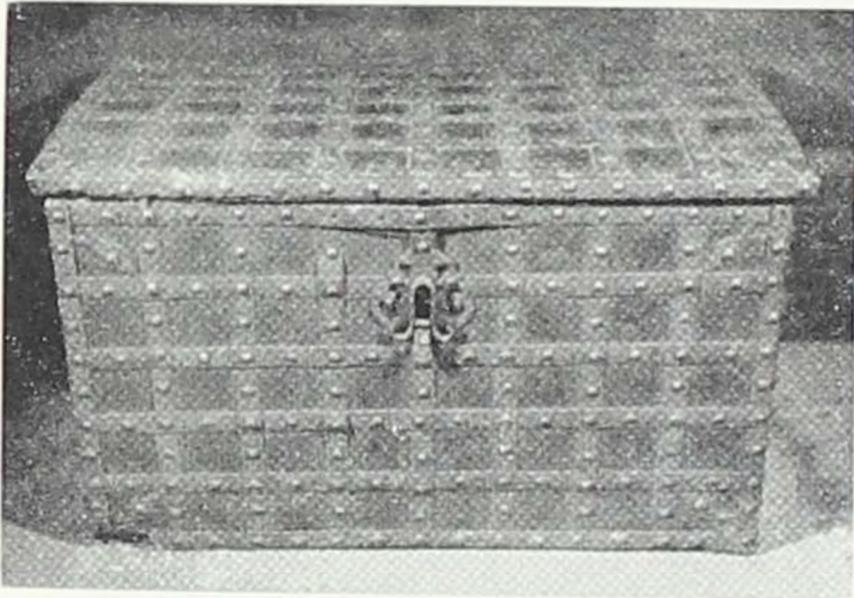
All handmade furniture carved by Reverend Erik Johnson.



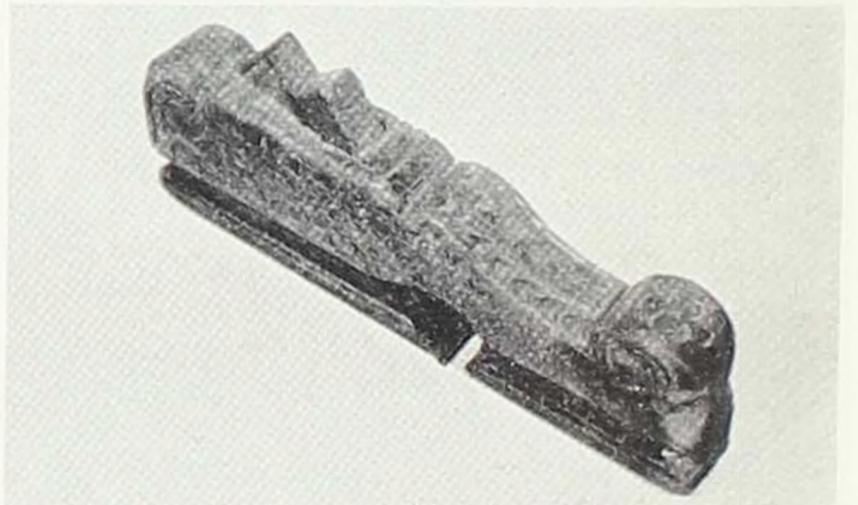
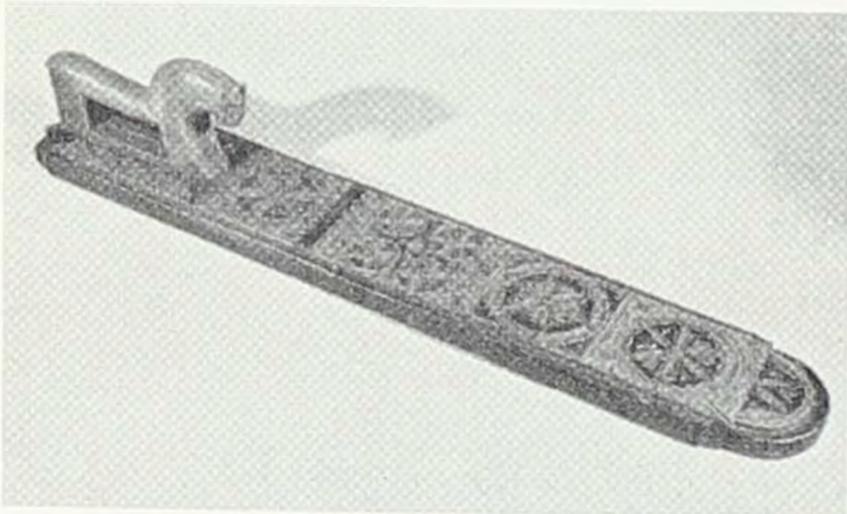
Interior, Norwegian home, circa 1830.



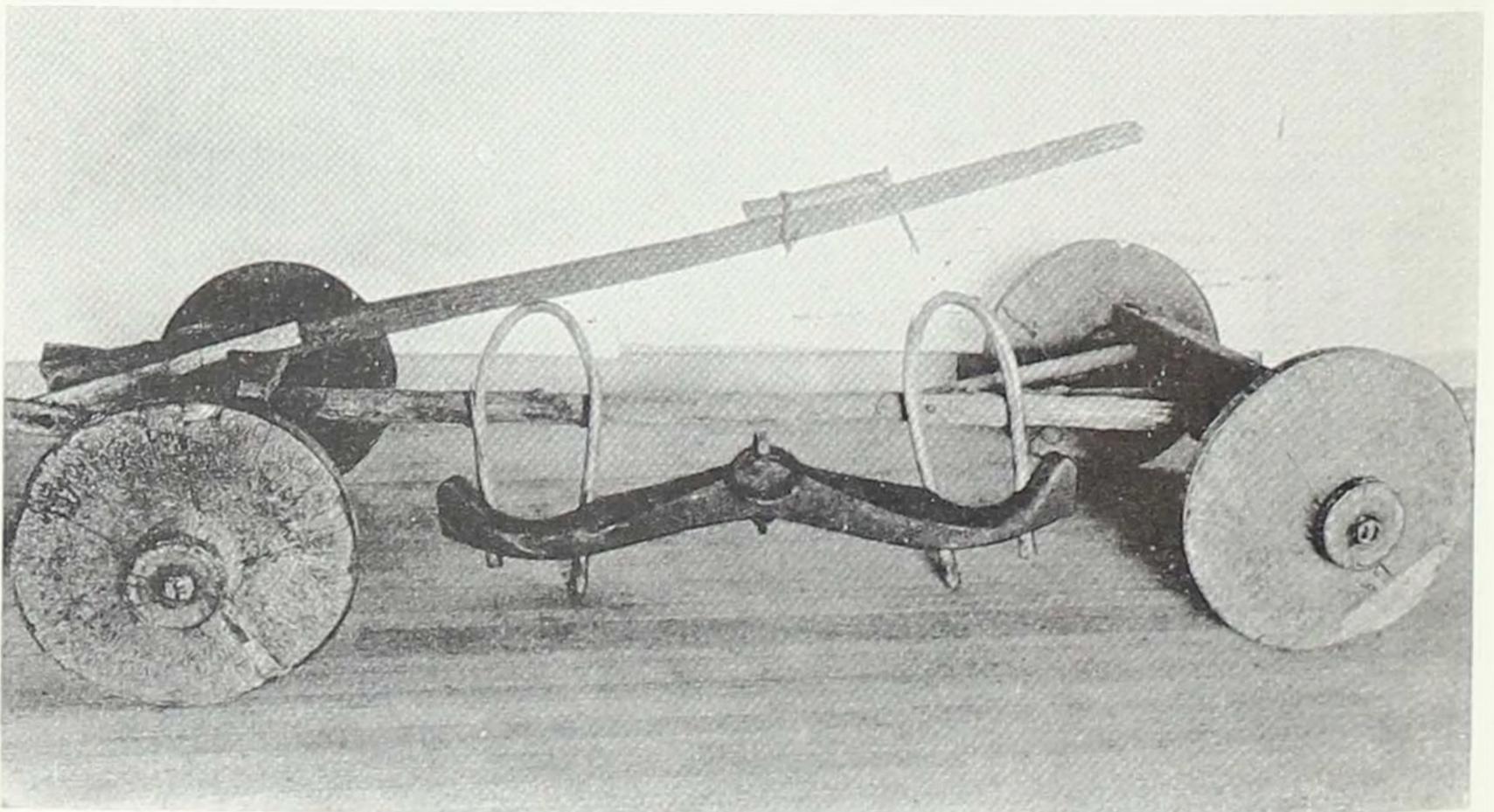
Log chair and sofa from Decorah; cupboard from St. Ansgar, trunk from Telemark, Norway 1860.



Oak money chest (left) and lady's sidesaddle (about 1700) brought from Gudbrandsdalen by Jacob Syverson of Sioux City.



Mangle board with typical Gothic chip carving. Norwegian plane in shape of dragon's head, a popular design for 1,000 years.



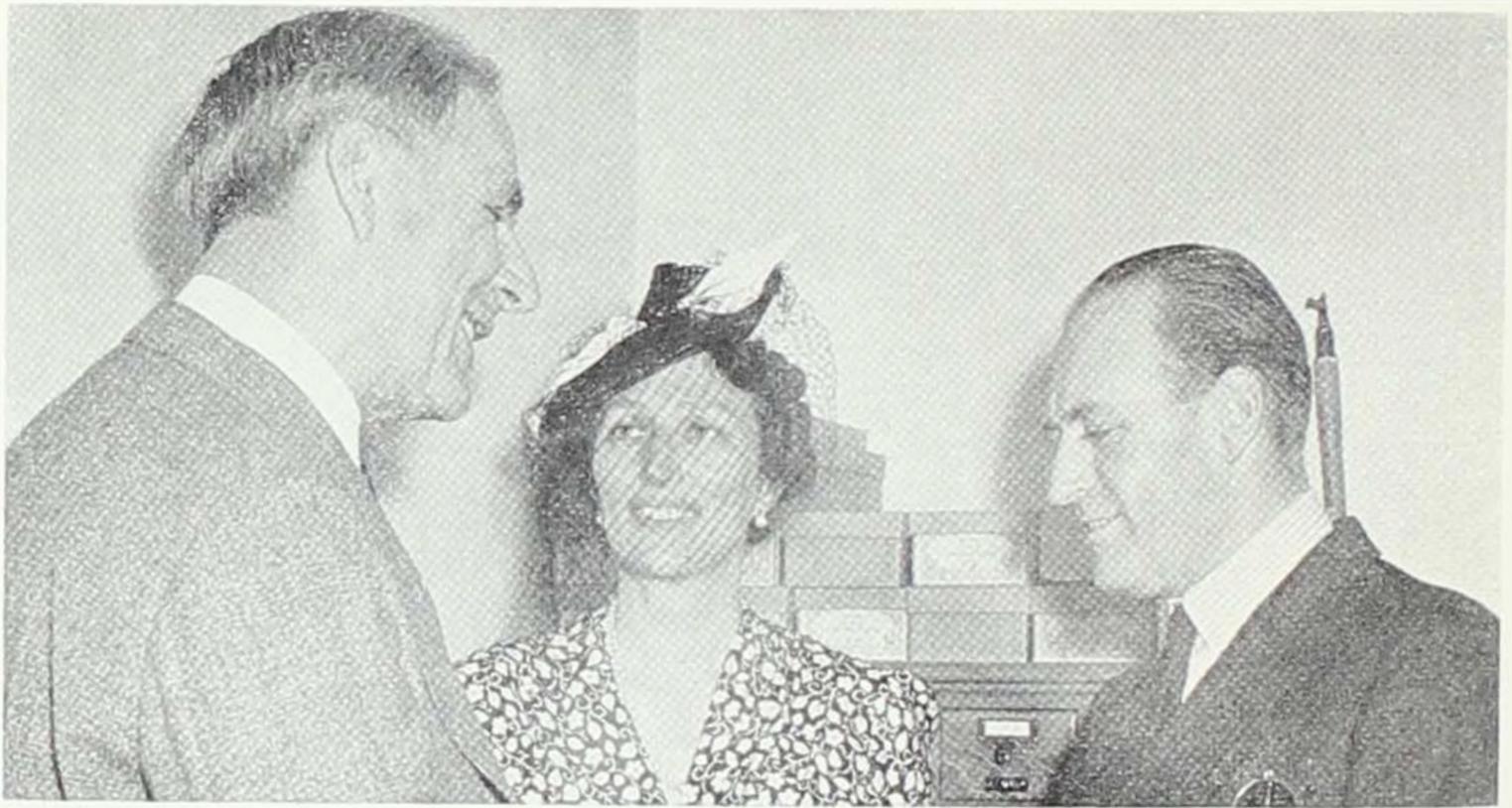
Lars Davidson Reque's Kubberulle, or farm wagon, with wheels made from a slice of a log. Note primitive ox yoke.



Displayed in a corner of the Museum are models of the *Restaurationen*, the Eidsvoll Building (Norwegian Independence Hall), Sloop spinning wheel, and other objects, (Left) A. O. Davidson, president, Wagner College, New York City. (Right) J. W. Ylvisaker, fifth president of Luther College.



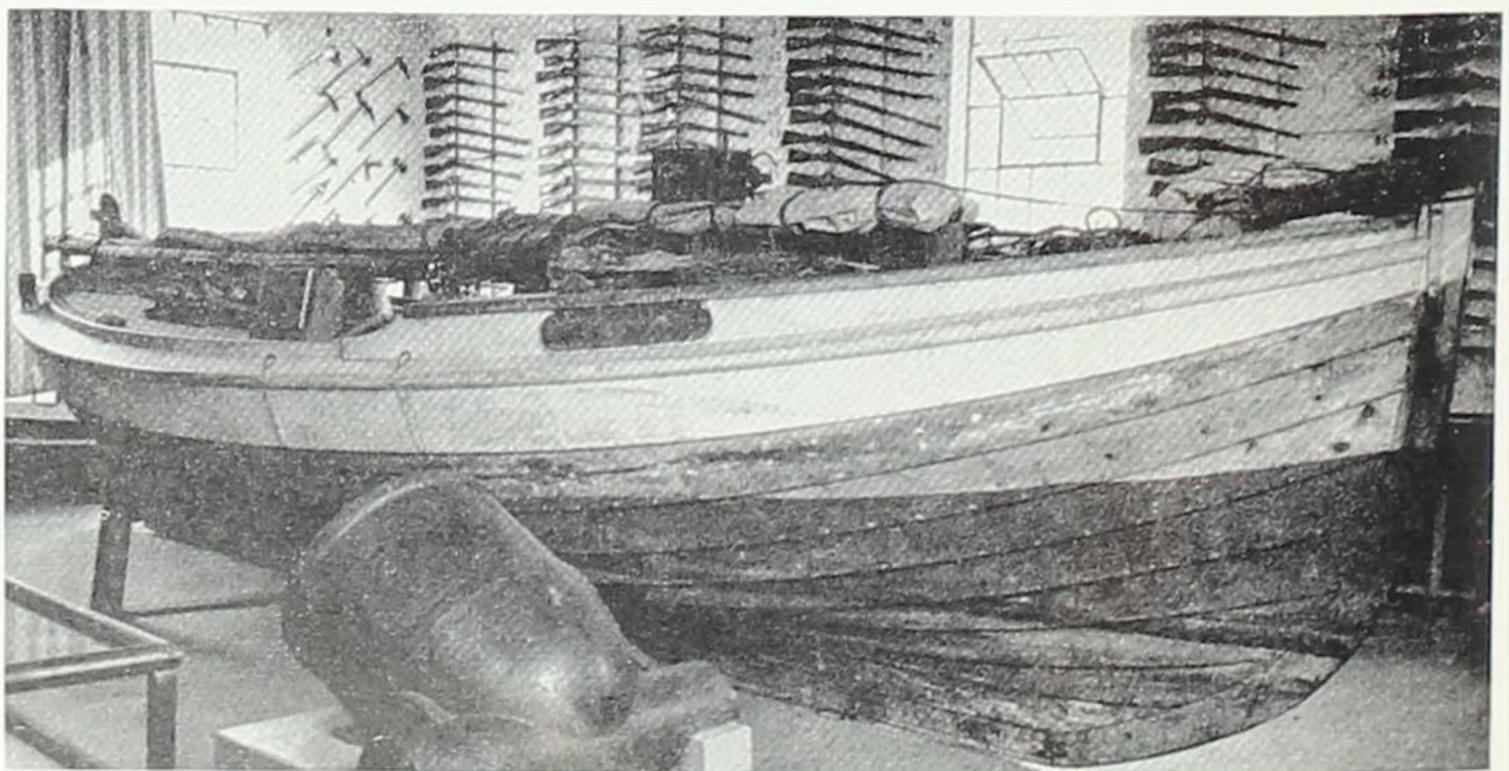
Oskar Torp, Prime Minister of Norway, with Inga Bredesen Norstog, Director of the Museum, inspects a model of Trondheim Cathedral made by Olaus Wang of Maddock, N. D., and presented by Trønderlaget. Church dates from the 12th and 13th Centuries.



Crown Prince (now King Olav V) with his wife, Martha, toured the Museum in 1939. Their guide was the Rev. N. S. Magelssen of Highland Prairie, Minn.



His son, Crown Prince Harald, toured the Museum in 1965.



The *Trade Wind* crossed the Atlantic from Norway to the Chicago Fair in 1933.

The Museum Under Gjerset

After President Preus's death in April 1921 before Koren Library had been completed, a faculty committee recommended that Professor Knut Gjerset be made curator of the Museum. Gjerset was well-known as an historian and scholar for his two-volume *History of the Norwegian People* and his *History of Iceland* — both pioneer works in English in these two areas. The committee also recommended that all books, papers, and periodicals in the Museum be transferred to the new fireproof library, that the management of the Museum be placed in the hands of a committee of three, and that contingent funds for the Museum be made available immediately.

Under Gjerset, who took charge in 1922, changes were made almost immediately so that by 1923 the following description could be given:

The Luther College Museum occupies the building to the northwest of the Main Building together with the third floor and part of the first floor of the new Koren Library. In the latter building three exhibits have been created: one of paintings on the third floor; one of reproductions of masterpieces of plastic art and another of objects illustrating Norwegian cultural life on the first floor. The Old Museum Building, thoroughly renovated, contains the museum collections proper. The pioneer collection con-

tains articles illustrating the life of the Norwegian pioneers in this country, as well as many objects preserving tender memories of the early immigrants associated with their old homes in Norway. Prominent in this collection is a replica of a typical Norwegian dwelling house of about a hundred years ago, furnished with articles brought from Norway by early immigrants. In contrast to this Norwegian house of the immigrants stands the Egge log cabin of the pioneers.

The Norse-American Centennial of modern emigration from Norway, marking the sailing of the sloop *Restaurationen* (The Restoration) from Stavanger to New York City in 1825, was held June 7-9, 1925, at the Minnesota State Fair Grounds in the Twin Cities. President Calvin Coolidge gave the principal address and greetings were read from King Haakon VII of Norway. A silver medal, designed by James Earl Frazer, was minted, 40,000 being struck off. Two commemorative postage stamps were issued — a two-cent stamp in red and black showing the sloop *Restaurationen* and a five-cent stamp in blue and black on a white background, showing a Viking ship. Of the five-cent variety 1,900,983 were printed and of the two-cent variety 9,104,983. These stamps marked the first instance in which Iowa was included specifically in a First Day of Issue on May 18, 1925, both stamps being placed on sale at Decorah and Algona. All these commemoratives have become collectors items.

A remarkable series of exhibits was prepared

by Professors Knut Gjerset, O. M. Norlie and Theodore C. Blegen. The series consisted of 22 divisions — pioneer life; the church; schools; farming; the press; Norwegian-American literature; public officials; art; charitable institutions; a women's division; domestic arts; clubs and societies; music and song; trade and commerce; the sport of skiing; manufacturing; Norwegian-Americans in World War I; engineers; architects.

The tremendous interest aroused by the Norse-American Centennial celebration led to the formation of the Norwegian-American Historical Association. It was incorporated by Knut Gjerset, Birger Osland, and O. E. Rølvaag in Minnesota on February 4, 1926. Its objectives, substantially those outlined by Theodore C. Blegen earlier, included helping to maintain and develop the museum at Decorah which, on October 15, 1925, had been re-named the Norwegian-American Historical Museum.

The descendants of the Sloopers who sailed on the *Restaurationen* in 1825 organized a Slooper Society in September 1925. One of its aims was to collect articles that came over on the sloop *Restaurationen* and other articles representing the life of this important group. Among items presented by the Sloopers to the Norwegian-American Historical Museum was the shawl of Margaret Allen Larsen Atwater, who was born aboard the *Restaurationen* during its crossing of the Atlantic.

She was the daughter of Lars Larsen (Jeilane), the leader of the group. Her middle name came from William Allen, the English Quaker who had befriended captured Norwegian seamen during the Napoleonic wars. She grew up in Rochester, New York, and married Dr. John Atwater, city superintendent of schools there. The shawl was presented by her daughter Jane Sara Atwater.

Meanwhile, *Nordmannsforbundet* (The World League of Norsemen) through Anders Sandvig, the noted director of the Sandvig collection at Maihaugen in Lillehammer, had issued an appeal for museum articles to be sent to America. On May 26, 1926, the Executive Board of the Norwegian-American Historical Association passed unanimously the following resolution:

The Norwegian-American Historical Association gratefully accepts the gift of the museum articles which is now being collected in Norway, the gift to be deposited in The Norwegian-American Historical Museum at Decorah, Iowa, this institution agreeing to act as custodian in perpetuity of this gift on behalf of the Norwegian-American people.

In response to the above resolution the Luther College Board of Trustees, on June 5, 1926, accepted the responsibility of acting as custodian in perpetuity of this gift. Anders Sandvig did his work well. The Norwegian state railways and the Norwegian-America Line furnished free transportation. In April 1927 five truckloads of materials

weighing 8,800 pounds packed in 27 cases reached Decorah. More came later.

It is hard to overestimate the great and enthusiastic role played by Anders Sandvig. This dentist, who as a graduate student had been sent home from Berlin with tuberculosis and given less than a year to live, had found his way to Lillehammer. There, close to the countryside with simple and natural ways of living, he recovered his health and devoted his talents unselfishly to creating the great museum collection which bears his name. He did it because of love for all that was best in his people. And he wanted to share with his countrymen abroad. "Most of the emigrants can not return to Norway to see the homes they left," he said; "so we will send a home (*stogo*) to them." Of this action D. G. Ristad stated, "To incorporate an actual Norwegian home in the museum shows not only discernment, it is a stroke of genius, an endearing thought. It is placing the child at the mother's breast. It is setting the son on the father's knee."

The shipments sent to Decorah contained hundreds of extremely valuable items from museums at Bergen, Stavanger, Drammen, Skien, Hadeland, Hamar, Kristiansund, Aalesund, Valdres, Setesdal, and Osterdal. Anders Sandvig coordinated the collections, added many items from his famous museum at Lillehammer, and supplemented the whole with items from the Norwegian Folk

Museum. Goldsmith Frisenberg of Lillehammer presented a silver tureen, copy of an old original from Kraberg in Vaagaa. This museum gift was truly a magnificent one and a worthy tribute from the mother country to Norway's sons and daughters who had sought homes in America.

Gjerset continued to press for action on a new museum building. Many individuals worked faithfully with him, but the 1929 stock market crash soon raised insurmountable obstacles.

In 1930 Gjerset purchased for \$6,125 the museum collection of P. D. Peterson of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He acquired, among more than 1,000 items, musical instruments, old porcelain and glassware, Indian relics, many firearms, and pioneer items, including an elaborately carved chest from 1629.

During the period 1929-1931 the Little Iowa Log cabin, which was built in 1853, a typical farm home of the period, and equipped with pioneer furniture, was added to the outdoor museum on the Luther College campus; likewise, a log schoolhouse from Springfield Township near Decorah with its original equipment. To these were added the Tasa drying house, dating from 1860, from Goodhue County, Minnesota, and the Ingeborg Kongslien waterpower grain mill, logs, grindstones and all, shipped from Vang in Valdres, Norway, as a gift from Knut B. Norswing. Here also are found the millstones brought from Nor-

way by Knut Norswing's grandfather, Knut Gudmundson Norswing. These stones had been brought from Trondheim to Laerdal in Sogn, where Knut bought them and packed them over the mountains to Vang in Valdres, the packhorse it is said, becoming sway-backed because of their weight. Having heard that land in America was singularly free of stones, Knut decided to take them with him when he emigrated. He managed them down to the sea, over the ocean, and by canal boat and sailing vessels to Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, thence over sand hills, marshes, rivers, and high ridges to Washington Prairie, southeast of Decorah, where they ground grain for hungry settlers for many a year without demanding payment.

A temporary frame building was erected in 1931 for the display of a large collection of pioneer farm implements. The shed, now dismantled, was just to the east of Diderikke Brandt dormitory.

When the Lutheran Publishing House discontinued operations in 1931, its three-story building in Decorah with more than 16,000 square feet of floor space was placed at the disposal of the museum. In the summer of 1932 the building was remodeled and most of the museum exhibits were moved into it. A formal opening of this new home for the museum was held at commencement time, 1933. The collections then filled the large three-

story building on West Water Street and, on the campus, the two-story Sunnyside, two floors in the Koren Library, a tool shed, and five log cabins, altogether 25,297 square feet of floor space.

The Norway room on the first floor showed how people had lived in Norway, and the Pioneer room on the second floor, how the early pioneers lived in this country. Interesting articles illustrating Norwegian pioneer life in the country include glassware, chinaware, copperware, pewter, costumes, clocks, chests, musical instruments, candlesticks, lamps, lanterns, pipes, snuff boxes, calendar sticks, and others.

The natural history and ethnological departments embrace respectable though not outstanding collections on the third floor. A special section houses photographs of uniform size of Norwegian-Americans who have distinguished themselves in this country, and of institutions built and maintained by Norwegian-Americans.

In 1935-1936 the sailboat *Trade Wind*, built by Harald and Hans Hamran and sailed by them from Christiansand, Norway, to the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago in 1933, was given to the museum by Arthur Andersen of Chicago. About 1932 the museum was given recognition by the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. and was listed in its directory of American Museums.

Gjerset sought to preserve for posterity a pic-

ture of the life and development of the Norwegian pioneers. To this end he gathered objects, both utilitarian and artistic, used by them. There is the "kubberulle", a primitive type of farm wagon with wheels made from a slice of a log. (This conveyance carried the maternal grandparents of President Lars W. Boe when they went to Deerfield, Wisconsin, to be married in 1844.) American-style grain cradles made by them show that they were quick to adopt new things when these were found to be superior to their own. Norwegian inventiveness is shown by the Mandt oscillating sleigh, an invention that revolutionized sleigh manufacture. Norwegian artistic ability may be seen in the carved Christenson altarpiece, the paintings of Herbjørn Gausta and Lars Haukanes, and in the tapestries of Pauline Fjelde and Anna Bothne. By throwing light on the history of one of the American nation's important ethnic groups the museum has made a great contribution to the history of the American people. The appeal of the museum is thus not to people of Norse extraction alone.

The moving of the museum articles and the setting up of the extensive exhibits in the present museum building was a great drain on Gjerset's strength. A heart attack forced him to sharply curtail his activities, and in January 1936 he submitted his resignation as Director of the Museum.

His death that same year brought to a close a golden age of growth and expansion.

Knut Gjerset was tireless in his efforts to create a museum which should not only be a monument to the many men and women who with integrity and honest toil had carried on the great tasks of the pioneer in the Middle West but should also be a source of enlightenment and inspiration to all their descendants. This vision of the Museum's purpose he never lost. Moreover, he was able to communicate his deep convictions to others and to stir them to action. Although many men and women have contributed to the growth of the institution, Knut Gjerset's stamp rests prominently upon it to this day. All who cherish the immigrant heritage, of whatever nationality, will gladly recognize his outstanding contribution.

Steering for Brighter Days

The great depression and World War II created many difficulties for those in charge of the institution. Professor Knute O. Eittreim was director 1936-1937; Professor Sigurd S. Reque, 1939-1947; Mrs. Inga Bredeesen Norstog, 1947-1960; and Professor Oivind B. Hovde, Acting Director, with Mrs. Ralph M. Olson as Assistant, 1960-1964.

In 1939 Crown Prince Olav (now King Olav V of Norway) and Crown Princess Martha on a visit to Decorah presented a gift from 47 museums in Norway to supplement the collections sent earlier. Replicas of statues of Saint John and Saint Denis from Trondheim Cathedral and of Saint Olav, seated, from the Eidsberg church are excellent examples of medieval sculpture. Fifty-seven other items were included: domestic utensils, pieces of furniture, pieces of jewelry, tapestries, models of boats, articles of clothing, and others. These gifts are another splendid manifestation of the solidarity which obtains between Norwegians at home and their kinsmen abroad.

Mrs. Norstog as director procured beautiful artifacts from Georg Unger Vetlesen, founder of the Scandinavian Airlines System, including 25

modern tapestries; a Sloop spinning wheel and other articles from Captain Joseph A. Johnson of Chicago; water colors from Captain Bernt Balchen; a tapestry from Pauline Fjelde of the gifted Fjelde family; sketches from Mons Breivik, artist; the Wittenberg (Wisconsin) Indian collection; several valuable chests; a shawl and items of furniture from Miss Mary Benson; articles of clothing, china, and silver from Mr. and Mrs. Lewis W. Olson of Mansfield, Ohio; and a painting of Mrs. Samuel Mather (Ellen Knudsen) by Georges Plasse, and other articles from Mrs. Frederic P. Lord. Some gifts of securities were also made toward the endowment of the Museum, of which the market value today is more than \$31,000.

Accessions following Mrs. Norstog's death include three pieces of sculpture by Sigvald Asbjørnson and a portrait of the artist from his daughter, Mrs. Borghild Heitman, and the highly carved and decorated set of furniture which had been made by E. Kr. Johnsen, author and editor, who was professor of theology, first in Hauge's Synod and later in the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America.

On February 7, 1964, the Regents of Luther College authorized an invitation to more than 85 persons to serve as members of a Norwegian-American Museum Board. They likewise resolved that the official title of the "Norwegian-American Historical Museum" should be changed

to the "Norwegian-American Museum." There was a remarkable response to this invitation, more than ninety percent of those invited accepting immediately. From time to time the names of others have been proposed, so that today membership on the Board is almost an even one hundred.

Marion J. Nelson was engaged by the College to spend the summer of 1964 in surveying and cataloging the museum collection. In this work his wife joined him. In a report evaluating the museum, he pointed out that the collection is the most extensive of its kind in this country and that much of it is irreplaceable in case of loss. To gather such a collection today would be an almost insuperable task.

On October 10, 1964, the formation of a separate Museum corporation was authorized. Gunnar Gundersen, M.D., La Crosse, Wisconsin, was elected president, Marion J. Nelson, Associate Professor of Art and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Minnesota, was elected Director of the Museum. The latter has a background of more than four years in Norway, two of them at the University of Oslo, has had experience with a number of Norwegian-American groups, and has an extensive knowledge of Norwegian-American.

At a meeting in Chicago on May 22, 1965, the Board authorized a national campaign for funds to meet the needs for a new museum building and

its proper endowment. Marthinius A. Strand of Salt Lake City was unanimously elected chairman of the Campaign Committee and accepted. All other resolutions necessary for a national campaign were passed.

The movement, which was launched with such promise, suffered a temporary setback with the death on October 26, 1965, of Marthinius A. Strand. He had founded and successfully conducted his own electrical firm in Salt Lake City, was an ardent supporter of skiing and outdoor sports, was an active friend of Norwegian men's singing societies, served his church of the Latter-day Saints faithfully in many capacities, had an unfailing love and warmth for his Norse kinsmen and their achievements, and had whole-heartedly endorsed the Norwegian-American Museum.

On October 6, 1965, Crown Prince Harald of Norway paid an official visit to the Museum, as his parents had done before him, and expressed his great interest in the institution.

If we accept 1877 as its starting date, this oldest and most comprehensive museum of Norwegian-Americana will celebrate its ninetieth anniversary in 1967. Tucked away in a charming valley in the northeastern corner of Iowa, its ideal location has long been recognized.

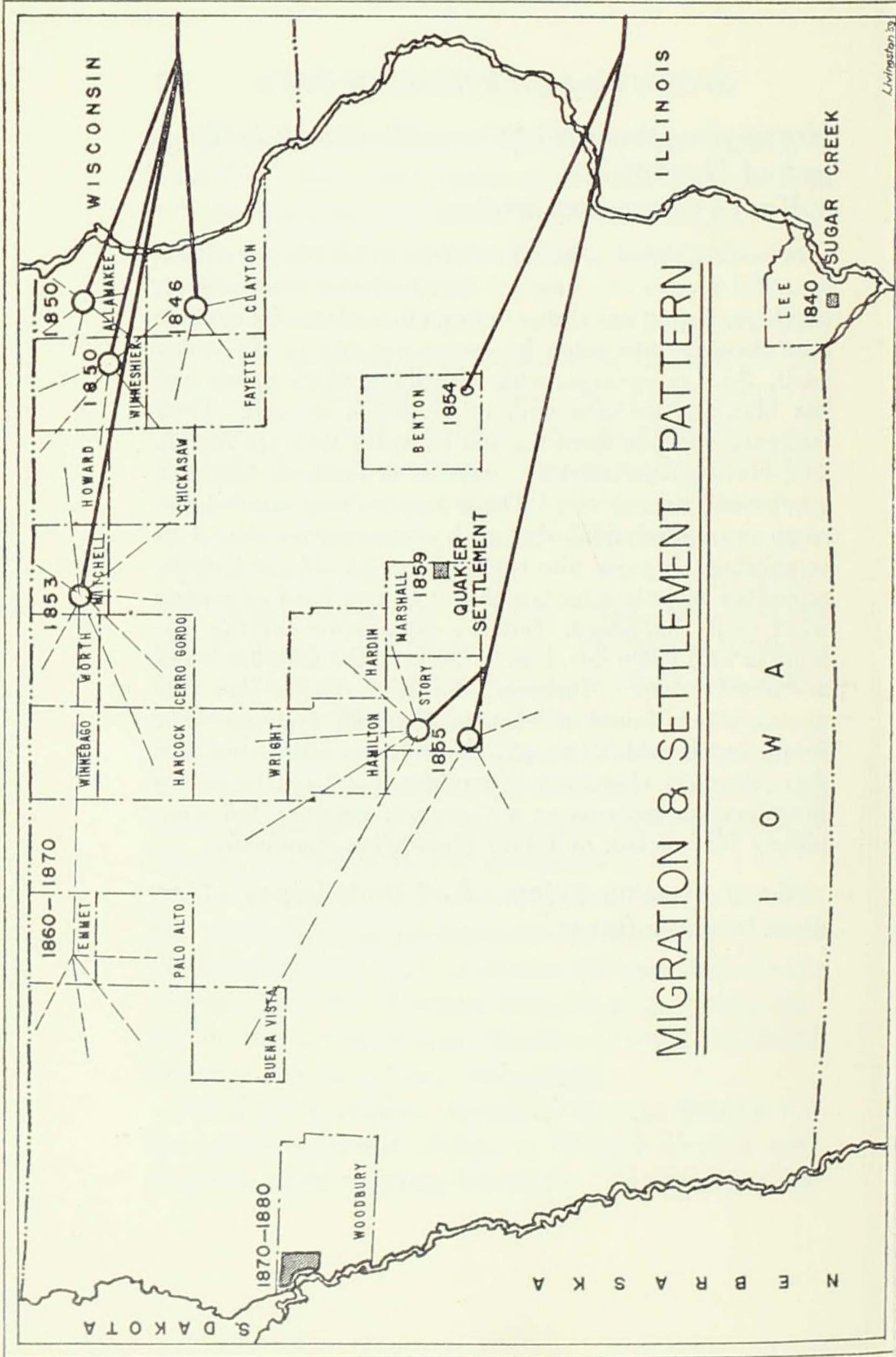
Sir Karl Knudsen, knighted by the British for his services to the Allies in World War I, exclaimed when visiting Decorah: "No wonder the

Norwegians thronged in to settle here; it is like a part of Norway."

Knut Gjerset once wrote:

In some isolated mountain valleys of California certain beautiful species of palms are found which not only flourish there, but do not thrive in any other place. They have been brought into being by forces peculiar to the valley itself. So it is, perhaps, with everything which grows and has life; yes, perhaps with other things as well. Their existence depends upon the soil in which they are rooted. The Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah began in a quiet and natural way. There were no long-winded discussions or resolutions that such an institution should be established. It came into being almost as did old ballads, attracting so little attention that it is now hard to explain what really happened. But the explanation for the museum is very likely this, that in Decorah the museum found a favorable soil. Moreover, the same Norwegian folk genius which found nurture in Decorah and the same subtle forces which brought the museum into being also determined its character. Therefore it did not become a Scandinavian museum or a Germanic museum, but completely Norwegian, or rather Norwegian-American.

So it remains today. And with hopes of an even brighter future.



MIGRATION & SETTLEMENT PATTERN

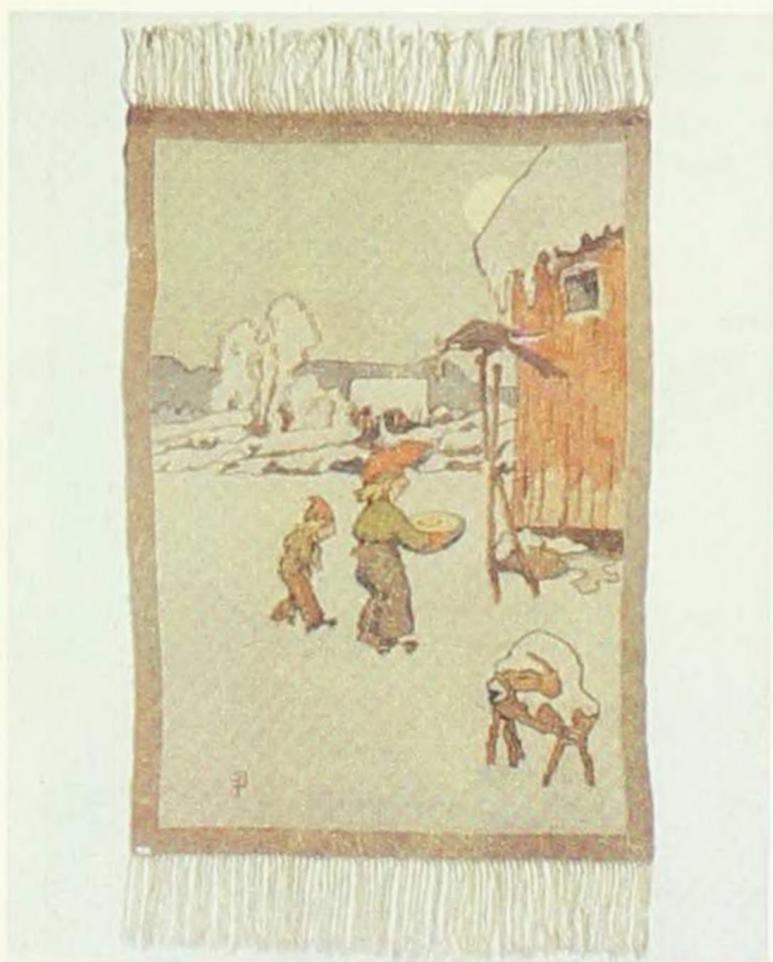
I O W A



Knut Gjerset (left) and Anders Sandvig (right) played dynamic roles in the development of the Museum. Below: Dr. Marion Nelson discusses exhibit placements with Dr. Petersen and Dr. David Nelson, author of the present article.



In 1957 Dr. William J. Petersen, Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa, conducted a tour of 66 Johnson County Farm Bureau women to Decorah to visit the Norwegian-American Museum.



Tapestry showing elves carrying off porridge set out for them on Christmas eve.



Ale tankard from Hallingdal, a standard item in the Norwegian home.



Trunk from Telemark, Norway, painted by Knut or Thomas Luraas (1863). The Luraas family was famous for its rose paintings.