

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 Bredesen 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-Americana.

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.