

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.