

THE GOLDEN AGE OF LUREN

by J. R. Christianson

Singing societies were a popular kind of social organization in Norwegian cities of the nineteenth century, as they were in Germany and elsewhere in Scandinavia. They were primarily an urban phenomenon, and in Norway, they originated in the capital city of Christiania (now Oslo). Three male choruses—one each of students, craftsmen, and merchants—were organized there around the year 1845. From Christiania, the concept of male chorus as combined musical and social organization spread rapidly to other Norwegian cities and towns. Before 1870, it reached the urban Norwegian settlements in the New World.

Luren Quartet, founded in 1868, was the first Norwegian-American male choral society. A singing society named Idun was organized at Luther College in 1869. Chicago and LaCrosse, Wisconsin both had Norwegian-American male choruses by 1870, and scores of other cities and towns followed in the years to come. Luren was reorganized as a larger chorus on March 17, 1874 and has had a continuous history to the present day.

These early Norwegian-American singing societies were purely Norwegian organizations, and they had direct ties with similar organizations in the Old Country. Pastor Vilhelm Koren, who inspired the organization of Idun, had sung in the students' chorus in Christiania in 1845. Hartvig Engbertson took the name of Luren from that of a singing society he had known as a boy in Christiania. Luren's greatest baritone in later years, O. W. Holm, and its greatest director, Carlo A. Sperati, were both natives of Christiania. Likewise, the repertory of the Norwegian-American male choruses consisted of the same four part Scandinavian songs that were

sung by their compatriots in Norway, composed by Lindeman, Nordraak, Grieg, and others. The very song books were imported from Scandinavia.

By the 1880s, there were so many of these male choruses in America that they began to hold annual conventions or sangerfests, a tradition that has continued to the present day.

When Luren Singing Society celebrated its centennial in 1968, J. R. Christianson was commissioned to write a centennial history. The following is an excerpt from that history, treating the first decade of the twentieth century. It gives a lively picture of urban social life among the second generation of Norwegians in northeastern Iowa.

Early in the forenoon of Thanksgiving day, 1900, three large, horse-drawn wagons rumbled out of Decorah, Iowa on the northward road. They bore the 11 active members of Luren Singing Society—E. M. Sunnes, O. W. Holm, John Jackwitz, Carl Larsen, H. C. Hjerleid, O. P. Rörvig, Louis Helgesen, N. N. Quandahl, Axel Bergh, John S. Alstad, and B. E. Johnson—together with two passive members, B. Anundsen and Professor R. R. Monrad, and the clarinetist, M. J. Soukup. Druggist Quandahl had “provided each wagon with two kinds of medicine,” as Anundsen later reported in *Decorah Posten*, so that the throats of the singers would not suffer in the late autumn cold, the one “to be taken two spoonful every third mile, and with the other, the throat should be rinsed

every half hour. These prescriptions were followed faithfully."

After five "pleasant" hours on the road, the three wagons rolled into Spring Grove, Minnesota. The singers enjoyed a good, warm meal at the hotel, and then they went over to the new opera house and put on a concert for "the largest gathering of people ever witnessed" in Spring Grove, according to the *Herald*, "fully four hundred and fifty people." The program included songs by Luren, two clarinet numbers by Mr. Soukup, and a song, as well as a piano solo, by a daughter of Pastor Reque. A banquet following the concert was attended by over 150 guests, and the speeches, dining, and fellowship lasted far into the evening. "There is something strangely magnetic about Luren," recorded the *Herald*, "and they never fail to captivate, completely, their hearers."

With such an enthusiastic reception, it is not surprising that an annual Thanksgiving concert in Spring Grove became a regular part of Luren's calendar during the early years of this century. Hesper and Harmony, Mable and Cresco, Kendallville and Calmar also became the scenes of Luren concerts. The group usually travelled by horse-drawn wagon but sometimes by train, and they always made a splendid outing of the out-of-town concerts. Their hosts always staged a festive banquet following the concert, with speeches and song, lots of good Norwegian food and fellowship. The hosts either paid the expenses or shared receipts after a certain guaranteed amount to Luren, and these concerts raised much of the money needed to send Luren to *sangerfests* in those years. Thus they rode off in high style to the Sioux Falls Sangerfest of 1902 in a private Pullman car, even going so

far as to bring their wives along. They also travelled to the LaCrosse Sangerfest of 1906 by private railroad car.

Luren had a vaudevillian side that was given full rein in those years around the turn of the century. "Ole Olsen and Ching Foo" performed on the slack wire (Ching Foo was Louis Larsen), and sometimes the entire Luren chorus dressed up in costume for a Chinese march and song. On other occasions, the Roman Gladiators, Marius and Sulla, appeared on the program, or Luren would be spelled by the Mandolin Club, the Tobiason Harp Orchestra, or Professor Haldor Hanson and his violin. A group of rough looking hoboes might burst into the room and commence to perform on instruments made of soap cases and cigar boxes—they were the "Hard-up Kvartet," E. M. Sunness, N. N. Quandahl, John Alstad, and Ole P. Rörvig. There was also a Nisse Quartet of youngsters, a group called the trolls of Dovre Mountain, and an elaborate performance of a wedding festival from Hardanger, billed as five scenes with "music, games and spring dances. A chorus of thirty voices in national costumes. New scenery."

All in all, there was an aura of good fun and *joie de vivre* over those fleeting years from 1900 to 1905 that make them a kind of golden age of Luren. There were parties, outings, and picnics accompanied by shooting and fishing as well as song and food. Sometimes Luren got together with Frohsinn, a German society in Decorah, or with Det Norske Selskab and Symra for such events. They were also in frequent contact with the other, newly-formed Norwegian singing societies of the area. Laerken in Calmar and Gauken in Naseth were both active by 1902, and from 1909 onwards, there was an active organization



The Luren Singers as they appeared in an early twentieth-century photo. All of those pictured, save one, made the trip to Spring Grove in 1900 (courtesy of the Winneshiek County Historical Society Collection, Luther College Library, and Luren Singing Society).

known as the Winneshiek County Sangerforbund, consisting of Luren, Laerken, Gauken, and Grieg from Nordness, which put on concerts and held outings together. There were parties during these years to honor B. Anundsen and Professor Haldor Hanson, and there was even some involvement in politics, naturally enough on the side of the Republican Party.

The political involvement started with Congressman Gilbert Haugen's presence at the Luren anniversary festival in 1899 in Decorah. Two years later, Haugen arranged Luren's successful tour to his hometown of Northwood. In 1901, Senator Knute Nelson of Minnesota visited Decorah and was serenaded by Luren. In

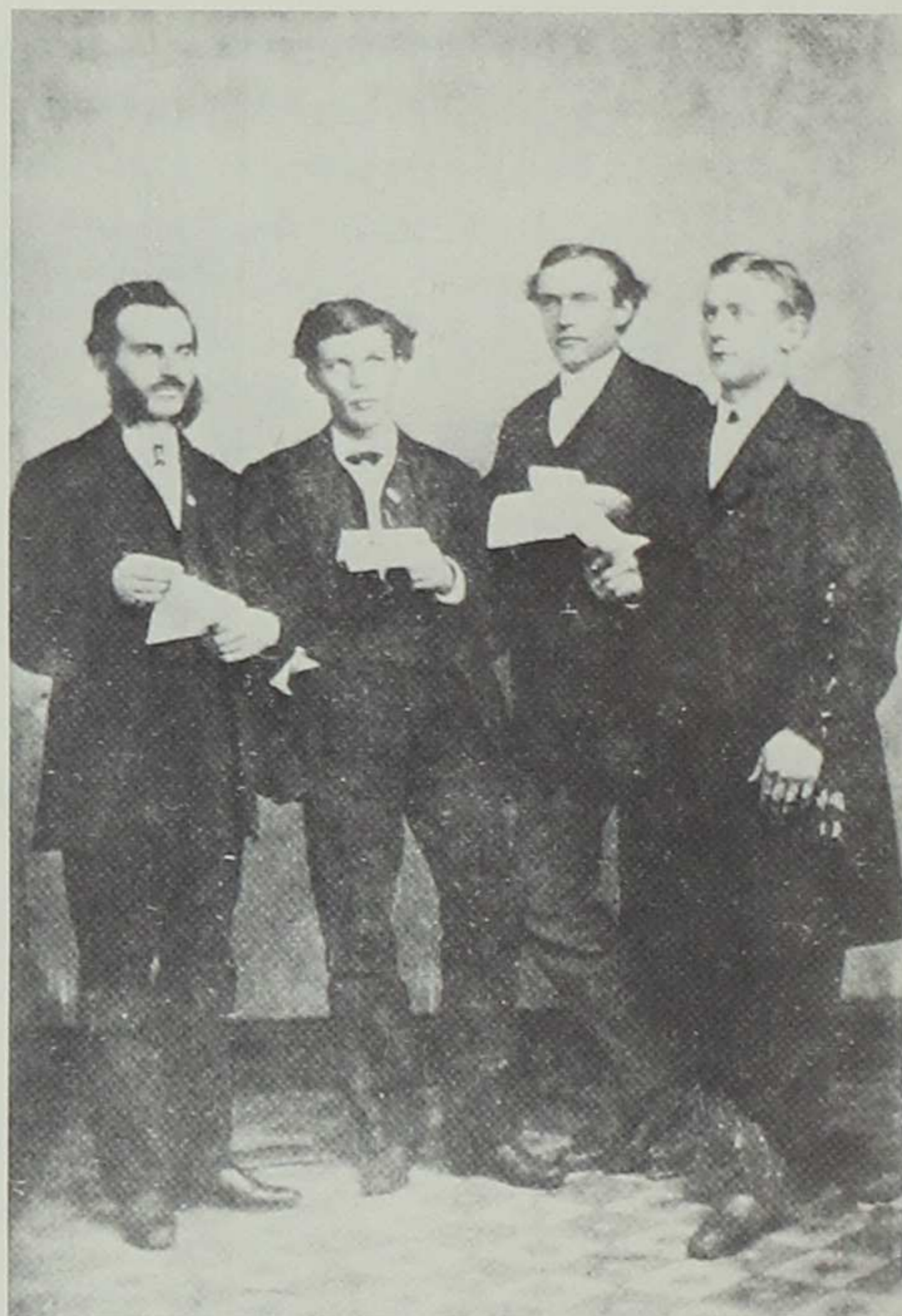
1902, Luren accepted money from the Republican Central Committee to sing at political gatherings in Calmar and Decorah, and in both cases, the speakers were Congressman Haugen and other prominent Norwegian-American politicians. Most of the members seem to have shared a bias towards the Republican Party, though at least one, Rörvig, refused to go to the gathering in Calmar, saying that "he had something better to do."

A benefit concert for the Luther College Museum was held by Luren in the Grand Opera House on April 17, 1901. Professor Haldor Hanson arranged the program and contributed to it with his violin; he was director of the college band

as well as curator of the museum. Luren sang in English and in Norwegian. Sunnes and Holm sang a duet. Mr. Soukup played a clarinet solo, and Mrs. Jessie Ervin-Marsh contributed a piano solo. The program ended with four numbers by the Luther College Band, including opera overtures by Verdi and Rossini. *Decorah Posten* called it "One of the best concerts we've heard in a long time," but the attendance was disappointingly meager. As Luren well knew, it took Chinamen and spring dances, and refreshments after the show, to turn out a big crowd in Decorah during those years. As for Professor Hanson, he and his two colleagues, Reque and Bothne, were all made honorary members of Luren in 1904, although Hanson left Decorah in that same year.

John Jackwitz had been president of Luren almost continually for more than a quarter of a century by 1901, and when the spring election of officers was held on March 6, the old warrior "informed Luren in a little speech that he felt obliged to resign as an active member," pleading that he "felt old and tired, and no longer had the old glad humor." He was unanimously elected an honorary member of the society, and Holm succeeded him as president, with Quandahl as vice president, Carl Larsen staying on as secretary, and Hjerleid as treasurer. Jackwitz continued to attend Luren affairs as long as he lived in Decorah. He spent his last years in Lyngblomsten Home in St. Paul, where he died in 1926.

Other veterans of Luren were honored by their comrades during these years. Thus Carl Larsen, the little bookbinder with the big walrus moustache, was presented with a gold-headed ebony walking stick in January of 1901. He was the secretary



The original Luren Quartet, forerunner of the larger Luren Society (courtesy of the Winneshiek County Historical Society Collection, Luther College Library, and Luren Society).

of the society, and his volumes of minutes, written in a clear hand and flawless Norwegian, always with a dry sense of humor, are basic to the history of Luren Singing Society in its greatest years. Sunnes, with his immense beard and basso profundo voice, was serenaded by Luren and presented with a splendid meerschaum pipe on the occasion of his forty-ninth birthday in September of 1901. A man of lively wit and a vivid imagination, he was the life of Luren's programs during that era. He had been director of Luren 1879-1885, relinquished the job to Carlo A. Sperati in 1885-1886 and to Julius J. Hopperstad in 1886-1892, then took over again in the years 1892-1905. Sunnes also directed the

construction of sets and backdrops for plays, skits and farces, organized the Nisse Quartet, and made the instruments for the Hard-up Kvartet.

Holm was another veteran. Both he and Sperati were married to daughters of Ole G. Hoffoss, who played a lively Norwegian fiddle till close to his nintieth year and had been a stalwart tenor in the very early days of Luren. Holm was a baritone and often sang solo. He was also the one who wrote the skits and plays, and he was president of Luren from 1901 almost continually until his retirement in 1909. He rejoined in 1913 and remained an active singer until his death in 1929. Mrs. Holm was also a tireless supporter of Luren, and not merely with the many delicious Norwegian dishes which she and other women brought to Luren picnics, parties, and programs. She was a member of the Luren Ladies' Quartet organized in 1904 with Mesdames Holm, Quandahl, and Arneson, and Miss Haugen. She served as secretary of the Luren Ladies, participated in the Hardanger wedding tableaux, the skit about the trolls of Dovre Mountain, the children's party held in the Luren clubrooms in 1904, and many other Luren events.

Other members of Luren during those years included Ben. Johnson Klingenberg, first tenor, 1900-1902; Adolf Hansen, first tenor, who joined in 1901; Ivar Hove, first tenor in 1902 and again from 1904; Blakstvedt, Linnevold, and Dotseth, first tenors from 1903; Agrim A. Lee, second tenor beginning 1903; Duffie Hansen, A. Berger, Ole Winger, and Jos. Hopperstad, all first tenors who became active in 1904; G. A. Bolstad, baritone, 1905-1906; Jens Lee, baritone, beginning 1906; Mr. Baldani, tenor, who on the day of his election

in 1907 "was invited by the president to sing a solo, which he was willing to do"; S. Nilsen and J. B. Linde, baritones from 1907; O. L. Hamre and J. L. Hamre, second tenors from 1907; O. L. Anderson and Lars L. Moe (died 1908), first tenors from 1907; as well as Emil Johansen, Dr. O. Boe, and Thorson. Quandahl, Holm, Sunnes, and Carl Larsen were all named honorary members in 1908, and Hjerleid was in 1910.

As men grew old in the service of song, so did material things, and the Luren banner from 1874 was among them. By the beginning of the twentieth century, it was worn with age, and in 1901, Luren began to discuss the acquisition of a new one. President Holm and Banker Hjerleid raised pledges of \$159 in the Decorah area, and Luren voted on January 2, 1902, to order a banner priced at \$156 from the Fjelde sisters of Minneapolis from whom the society had received a number of sketches. These renowned sisters sewed for six or seven weeks, and on March 24 the new banner arrived in Decorah via American Express. It was displayed to the society at the meeting of March 26 and publicly unveiled before an enthusiastic full house in the Grand Opera House on Friday evening, April 18, 1902.

A Note on Sources

This article was taken from a manuscript history of Luren Singing Society 1868-1968, commissioned for the centennial of the society in 1968. Sources came mainly from the unusually rich and comprehensive archives of the society. Besides scrapbooks of clippings, cards, reviews and programs going back to 1874, and the original secretaries' protocols since 1884 (kept in the Norwegian language till 1943), these archives contain many photographs of Luren, its clubrooms, sangerfests, and the like, from 1868 to the present. These materials are currently deposited in the Winneshiek County Historical Society Archives. Other artifacts associated with the society, are deposited in Vesterheim the Norwegian-American Museum.

The program that evening included songs in English and Scandinavian by Luren, two eight-handed piano pieces (Mendelssohn, C. M. von Weber) by four young Decorah ladies, and two selections by the Luther College Band. Mayor F. W. Daubney then took the stage and delivered a presentation address before unveiling the new banner. Luren replied with a song written in English for the occasion by J. J. Hopperstad, the first verse of which ran:

Glorious banner, now unfold thee,
To the breeze thy beauties fling.
All enraptured we behold thee
While we gather here to sing.
Strengthen our determination,
Give us courage for the fray,
Grant that hope's sweet inspiration
In our souls may never die.

When the ovations finally died down, Luren ended the program with a lavish, new production of the Wedding Festival in Hardanger. From that day until Luren's centennial year of 1968, the Fjelde sisters' banner waved above the Luren Singing Society, and it now hangs in the Norwegian-American Museum beside its predecessor.

A new clubroom was next. In November of 1902, a committee was appointed to look for a better locale, and in December, they reported that the third floor above the National Bank was available for \$75 a year. On December 17, all of the active members except two went up to look. They sang a trial song in the empty room and soon thereafter signed a contract to rent the locale for three years. By January of 1903, they had agreed to share the clubroom and costs with Det Norske Selskab,

Cresco

Grand Concert

At Lyric Hall, Tuesday Ev'g, Feb. 11, 1902

By the Luren Singing Society of Decorah, Ia.,
assisted by Miss Coyle, Pianist, and the
Celebrated Slack Wire Performers,
Ching Foo and Ole Olson.

PART I.

1. Moonlight on the Lake A. White
LUREN.
2. Piano Solo Selection
MISS COYLE.
3. Min lilla Vraa (My little Cabin) J. Sandstrom
Barytone Solo—O. W. HOLM and CHOIR.
4. Chinese Song
CHING FOO.
5. Gluntarne (Duet) G. Wennerberg
O. W. HOLM and E. M. SUNNES.
6. Hor oss Svea G. Wennerberg
LUREN.
7. Piano Solo Selection
MISS COYLE.
8. The Owl and the Pussy Cat R. de Koven
LUREN.
9. Sleight of hand performance
CHING FOO.
10. Up Broder up (Gallop) F. Mohring
LUREN.
11. Stars of the Summer Night A. M. Thatcher
LUREN.

oooooooooooo

PART II.

12. Slack wire performance
CHING FOO and OLE OLSON.
13. The Mountain King and his Dwarfs
DWARF CHORUS.

The program presented by Luren in Cresco. Note the vaudevillian influences supplied by Ching Foo and the Dwarf Chorus (courtesy of the Winneshiek County Historical Society Collection, Luther College Library, and Luren Society).

and in March of 1903, the two societies moved in: There were the usual rounds of house warmings, and some new decorations as well, including portraits of Sunnes, Holm, and Carl Larsen in gold frames, by the local artist, Arne K. Berger. The total property of the society was listed in the secretary's protocol for 1908 and appraised at \$742.75. It included a piano and piano chair, music stands and song books and a book case, innumerable

framed pictures of Luren, of various 'sang-erfests' and of other Norwegian-American singing societies, portraits of the Norwegian royal family, one leather upholstered chair, two marble topped tables, a sofa, 16 common chairs and two long tables, one banner, one old banner, one golden harp, a stove, and many other things, acquired through the years since 1868. They still did not have everything, though, for when Luren entertained in the clubroom, they had to borrow the dishes belonging to Det Norske Selskab.

By 1905, times were changing and growing more nationalistic. In the Luren clubrooms, as among Norwegians everywhere in the world, there came to be more and more talk of politics. This gay singing society, with its carefree skits and its picnics and outings, and its motto of *Egen Fornöielse* ("Self satisfaction"), began to grow serious. Solemn discussions, solemn patriotic songs, large Norwegian flags and heavy bunting in the Norwegian national colors, long-winded speeches and lectures made their way into the meetings of Luren in those years. Ties with Norway, which had long consisted of fond memories, letters from the family, and an occasional summer vacation trip, now began to take on a more official character.

So it was with Norwegians everywhere in the world. Great things were happening at home: independence from Sweden was in the air. Every Norwegian knew that independence would come in one way or another, but the question was whether it would come through warfare and bloodshed, or by peaceful means. The tense anxiety of those years around 1905 helped to build up a great wave of national feeling, and that feeling swept the Norwegian-American colonies, Luren and Decorah in-

cluded, with as much power as it swept the Old Country.

The sixtieth birthday of Edward Grieg in 1903 gave a focus to this national resurgence among lovers of Norwegian music. Luren staged a Grieg festival on June 15, 1903, and they also sent the composer a birthday gift of 20 Norwegian crowns, together with a letter in Norwegian, hailing Grieg as "the world's greatest living composer." Two months later, President Holm received a postcard of thanks, written in Grieg's own hand, which is preserved in the scrapbook of the society.

When Norwegian independence finally came by peaceful means in 1905, the joy in Decorah was as boundless as in Christiania. Prince Carl of Denmark was elected to become king of the new realm under the name of Haakon VII. His coronation took place near the grave of St. Olaf, in the cathedral of Trondheim, in June of 1906, and two passive members of Luren, K. I. Haugen and B. Anundsen, were present as representatives of the society. They presented His Majesty with a splendid document of congratulations from Luren, rendered in polychrome and golden letters upon parchment. In return, the delegates were awarded the Royal Coronation Medal in silver.

Back in Decorah, the Norwegian national fervor reached a kind of peak at a "Syttende Mai" celebration sponsored jointly by Luren and Det Norske Selskab in one of those early years of the century. *Decorah Posten* wrote that "we cannot remember having celebrated a similar festival in this country with a more national stamp than this one. The locale was tastefully decorated with Norwegian and American colors, which looked unusually

fair and inviting in the glow of the newly installed gas lighting." Professor Thron Bothne lectured on the meaning of May 17 to Norwegian history. Next came Luren with "Ja vi elsker dette Landet" and other national songs, followed by Professor Haldor Hanson, who played a selection of Norwegian national songs on his violin. The main address of the evening was by Professor Gisle Bothne, and it "treated national song and was really more in the form of a popular lecture than an after dinner address. . . . It was from first to last a penetrating appeal to a Norwegian's best national feelings and thoughts. With powerful, immediate examples, the speaker illustrated how the idea of nationality—which is the great undertone bursting forth with such power in national song—has been one of the fundamental elements in the history of our people." Still another speaker came after that, Mr. K. Thompson, who talked about some of the obscure local poets of Hardanger and Voss, and recited their verse in witty dialect. Finally, Luren sang again, and then everybody joined in the splendid repast which the ladies of Luren and Det Norske Selskab had prepared. There was song and music and conversation far into the night, until old John Jackwitz, whose birthday was May 17, humorously told the assemblage how the day should be properly celebrated. Professor Siewers ended the evening with a few warm words for Ole Bull, "one of the most *norske* Norwegians who ever lived."

Along with the heavy, self-conscious spirit of Norwegian nationalism, a new



The banner of Luren made by the Fjelde sisters and first unfurled in 1902. The relic is now preserved among the collections of Vesterheim (courtesy of Vesterheim).

generation shouldered its way into Luren. One by one, the fun loving Old Guard passed out of the picture. Jackwitz was the first to go in 1901. Holm resigned in the heat of a squabble in 1909, and Sunnes succeeded him as president but stalked out of the very next meeting when more controversy arose, and apparently never came back. He and Carl Larsen resigned in January of 1910, and Hjerleid resigned in 1909. Luren did not lose its vigor, however, with the passing of the Old Guard. New members flocked to the society: O. N. Quandahl, Fagerli (bass), Carl O. Hagen (bass), and G. O. Lermo (second tenor) in 1910; Einar Josephsen, E. E. Berg, and Professor Bjarne Svanoe the year following. In July of 1910, Luren Singing Society was incorporated as a legal entity in the state of Iowa, and a new set of bylaws replaced those from 1885.

Only the problem of a director seemed to stand in the way of the society's progress. Sunnes had held the job more or less continuously since 1892, but his health was poor and he asked to be relieved in March of 1909. Since "Professor Sperati would not assume the directorship of Luren under any circumstances" (Luren minutes, March 2, 1909), old J. J. Hopperstad, who had served temporarily as director of Luren as early as 1886, took up the baton again and held it until 1911, but then he could do no more.

Between January and March of that year, President Boe of Luren negotiated with Professor Carlo A. Sperati, and to a special meeting of the society on March 10, 1911, he was finally able to report

that "he had now gotten a reply from Prof. Sperati and he asked for 5 dollars for every time Luren meets to rehearse, and a similar sum for each time he meets for rehearsal with the Winneshiek County Sangerforbund, that is, an average of 3 meetings each month with Luren and one with the Sangerforbund."

Luren accepted the offer. On March 14, 1911, Carlo A. Sperati directed a rehearsal of Luren Singing Society for the first time in 25 years, but not for the last. This time he stayed at the podium for a third of a century, and Luren entered a new era in its history: the Sperati Era. □