

Earl Reitan, *Crossing the Bridge: Growing Up Norwegian-American in Depression and War; 1925-1946* (Normal, Ill.: Lone Oak Press, 1999) ISBN: 1-883477-28-X, 143 pp., index, ill; \$12.95 paper.

This is a family history covering three generations, written by the professional historian in the Reitan clan of the Upper Midwest and dedicated to his siblings. The author's academic training, albeit in the field of eighteenth-century British history, leads the reader to expect qualities not usually found in the genre of family histories that became a commonplace of American middle-class culture in the wake of the ethnic revival of the 1970s. Reitan himself must have believed this to be the case, given the title he chose and his decision to send the book to be reviewed by an academic journal. A careful perusal of this highly readable narrative does not disappoint the reader hoping for something different than the usual family history.

On the one hand, *Crossing the Bridge* lacks features typical of the form, such as a multitude of family photographs and the increasingly professional genealogical charts that trace multiple generations – which hold more than familial and antiquarian interest perhaps only to social historians who can identify the representative amidst the minutiae. On the other hand, although it is not a scholarly monograph exploring the experience of the generation of Norwegian-Americans who reached maturity by 1946 as the title suggests, this slim volume provides some of the satisfactions one hopes for from the professional historian. Reitan enhances the book's value by emphasizing the more generally relevant elements in his family's experience. For example, he understands his story as a narrative of assimilation – of 'crossing the bridge' to mainstream American culture – and with a light touch analyzes the factors promoting or impeding individuals' and generations' movement away from their immigrant or ethnic past. As he deftly characterizes the defining traits of

individual relatives who affected his growing up, he identifies his sense of their ethnic qualities and places them against the background of a 'large Norwegian-American community in a strongly Scandinavian state [Minnesota], where their moral and religious values were widely shared' (10).

For Reitan, assimilation represents the family's progress over three generations from a 'parochial and conservative' Norwegian immigrant society – and later, a similarly narrow ethnic community – to complete access to the 'opportunities of post-war America' (3, 32). The first generation, his Norwegian-born paternal grandparents, were pillars of small-town life in Grove City, Minnesota – founders of its Norwegian Lutheran church, the proprietors of the general store, and part owners of the grain elevator. Yet they chose to speak and write English in public and at home when their native tongue was still used in church and on street corners in the town. Pioneers and benefactors of the great American expansion, they also suffered the reverses common to the country's 'boom-bust capitalism' but nonetheless made a complete commitment to the United States that was 'more than legal status' by taking out citizenship (9–11). Reitan's maternal grandparents were Danish immigrant farmers, but he always knew he was a Reitan, not a Jensen, and although his mother was the culture-bearer in the family, only when writing this book did he consider that the heritage transmitted to him was anything but entirely Norwegian in origin. The second generation took further steps along the way chosen by their elders. His father and uncles chose careers in business, all but one in small towns. Both of his two aunts married and kept house in small towns, but one first took teacher training at the Lutheran Normal School, one of the 'network of institutions the immigrants established to provide a comfortable transition for the next generation.' The other followed a potentially more Americanizing path, when she divorced and lived an 'emancipated' life in Minneapolis-St. Paul (15, 18). The entire second generation reserved 'ethnic trappings' for special occasions, and stock phrases or a 'comical jumble' of Norwegian and English was all that remained of their linguistic heritage. Nonetheless, Reitan claims that theirs was a Norwegian-American environment, whose greatest strength and staying power came from the conservative social and moral precepts disseminated by the Lutheran church and enforced by the community. These limits provided an 'unthreatening context within which ... Americanization could take place' (21–22).

Still, a lack of higher education and the dearth of economic opportunities during the Depression meant that his father 'did not make much progress' into mainstream America (101). Economic set-backs twice forced the family to move outside the haven of Norwegian America, but Grove City, Minnesota, the point of ethnic origin, remained the one place his parents felt at home. Everywhere they lived, exposure to American mass media from newspapers and magazines to radio and film made their children's third-generation tastes and heroes distinctly American. The strength of Norwegian Lutheranism and its 'scholarly tradition' nonetheless inspired Earl and his siblings to choose Concordia College, the closest school supported by their synod, when they left home (84, 103, 131). Their generation was the first to cross completely into American society, but mixing with men of many backgrounds during the Second World War and going further away from home for graduate school after the war comprised the first decisive steps outside the ethnic sub-culture.

The author's understanding of his ethnic past conforms to the conventional wisdom

among historians nearly fifty years ago: The inevitable end of immigration is Americanization, and the ethnic community is a kind of decompression chamber which partially relieves the pain of the generational transition from one culture to another. But Reitan also fulfills the title's promise of dealing with the impact of 'depression and war' by tracing how the Great Depression and World War II affected the processes of assimilation for individuals and, to a degree, the ethnic community as a whole. Perhaps most valuably for the social historian, he remembers clearly and tellingly catalogues the typical elements in the lower-middle-class small towns and bungalows of his childhood, concisely contrasting with the insider's first-hand knowledge what in them was Norwegian-American and what was mainstream American. We are treated to descriptions of the physical layout of streets, neighborhoods, and houses in several Midwestern small towns, along with a remarkable quick study of how these arrangements affected the quality of life for inhabitants. As Odd Lovoll, the dean of Norwegian-American historians, has recently noted, the study of the ethnic group's small-town centers has been neglected. Reitan's book provides valuable material for studies in this area. The general and specialized reader will also enjoy the author's unpretentious, lively writing style, which serves well as a vehicle for family humor and irony as well as for conveying strong but restrained family feeling.