

Syttende mai Vignettes from Minneapolis-St. Paul: The Changing Meaning of Norway's Constitution Day in the Capital of Norwegian America, 1869-1914

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Studying the *syttende mai* (17th of May) celebrations in the Twin Cities is an experience akin to interpreting the meaning of an album of illustrated historical vignettes. Vividly highlighted events that quickly fade off into the everyday life of the Norwegian-American community and historical development of Minneapolis-St. Paul, these annual festivities were at first local, frequently private affairs. But as the Upper Midwest came to hold four of five of the nation's Norwegian Americans in a largely agricultural area whose many-faceted hub and population magnet was the Twin Cities, the local commemorations became accepted as the primary focal point of regional, and then national and international public exhibitions and assessments of the state of "Norwegian America." In the process the local community grew accustomed to viewing itself and to being viewed as the preeminent population and organizational center or "capital" of the group. In the course of forty-five years, furthermore, the shifting character of 17th of May commemorations reflected several stages of community development in the history of the Twin Cities' Norwegian-American centers. Accounts of 17th of May plans and activities also provide a series of portraits that reveal the evolving status quo in the

community and its relationship to American society and Norway. Of all Norwegian-American customs, showing public reverence for the homeland's assertion of the right to full national independence through the Constitution of May 17, 1814, has been the most likely to attract attention regularly and thus produce a cumulative written record.

One may argue with Kathleen Neils Conzen that, as with the German-American festive culture she studied, these celebrations have served to preserve the common cultural heritage that creates a sense of community within the group and that simultaneously marks it off from other groups and the host society.¹

Such preservationist rhetoric was especially noticeable in the 1880s, but even then *syttende mai* rhetoric included a second element – assertions of the contributions of the group to the United States or of the compatibility of Norwegian and American traditions. This aspect shows the concern to demonstrate that Norwegian Americans have found their proper place as a part of American society. The changing style and content of the celebrations give evidence of the on-going “triangulation” performed by individual immigrants and their leaders; over time they located a version of Norwegian-American identity at *increasing* distances from their sense of what was Norwegian and at a *decreasing* separation from what seemed American. The commemorations have thus been the site of some of the most concerted attempts by Norwegian-American leaders to formulate a public reputation for the group that in their view would best serve its members and themselves.

In Werner Sollors' terminology, the evolving character of *syttende mai* in Minneapolis-St. Paul thus exhibits the growing prominence of “assent” to integration in American society and the lessening adherence to “descent” from Norwegian cultural tradition.² Through 17th of May observances, Norwegian immigrants and their descendants have repeatedly formulated and publicized an ethnic identity suited to their needs as

1. Kathleen Neils Conzen, “Ethnicity as Festive Culture: Nineteenth-Century German America on Parade,” in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 44-76. The May 17th ceremonies in the Twin Cities have received detailed description in American and Norwegian-American papers, ethnic organizational records, individual memoirs and interviews, and the old country's consular records.

2. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6-10.

a community coping with the changing pressures of life in the United States. With reference to a number of especially notable *syttende mai* celebrations, the following discussion explores the relevance of Conzen's and Sollors' ideas for a deeper understanding of the evolving significance of Norwegian Constitution Day celebrations in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

The Pan-Scandinavian Beginning: Ole Bull Visits a Post Civil-War Boomtown

Since the 1850s Scandinavian immigrants, among others, had streamed into Minneapolis-St. Paul. The Nordic peoples first contributed to the river towns' rapidly expanding population in sufficient numbers to attract general attention, however, in the ten years after the Civil War, when their settlement in both urban centers accelerated quickly. The growth of Minneapolis, which did not incorporate as a city until 1866, was especially remarkable. It grew from a village of "not more than a dozen houses" in the early 1850s to a boomtown rapidly approaching a population of 15,000 twenty years later. In the same years Norwegian immigrants made their preference for Minneapolis over St. Paul evident, and comprised about one twelfth of its residents in 1870. By that time the Scandinavian newcomers in Minneapolis had organized themselves into two Lutheran congregations and supported a Dano-Norwegian newspaper aimed at a Nordic audience. When the internationally famous and energetically patriotic Norwegian violinist, Ole Bull, gave a concert at the fledgling city's opera house in early May of 1869, he apparently sparked efforts to celebrate Norway's Constitution Day in Minneapolis. The thought of giving Bull a reception appropriate to his fame and national origin, according to local ethnic community historian Carl G. O. Hansen, inspired a group of mostly single, young entrepreneurs and journalists among the immigrants to found the Scandinavian Society in late February of that year.³

3. Marion D. Shutter, *History of Minneapolis, Gateway to the Northwest* (Minneapolis: Clark Publishing Co., 1923). U.S. Census of Population, 1870. Carl G. O. Hansen, *My Minneapolis, A Chronicle of What Has Been Learned and Observed about the Norwegians in Minneapolis through One Hundred Years* (Minneapolis: published by the author, 1956), 16, 22-23, 26-28.

This ambitious little elite was extraordinarily active in making the Scandinavian presence known and acknowledged during its first year of existence. After Bull's visit, the society's next undertaking was the city's first 17th of May observances just two weeks later. These consisted of a private banquet and ball for members and their guests at the new Society's rooms in a downtown hotel. At other points during the year the Society lobbied the mayor and succeeded in prompting him to appoint the city's first Scandinavian policeman and hosted the State Scandinavian Republican Convention, whose delegates toured the town in a convoy of carriages and resolved to ask the main state party to nominate the Swedish American Hans Mattson, the first Scandinavian proposed for such an office, as its candidate for Minnesota Secretary of State. The *Minneapolis Daily Tribune* and *Nordisk Folkeblad*, the above-mentioned immigrant paper, reported all these activities, including the Republicans' choice of Mattson and his election.⁴

Ole Bull was one of Norwegian nationalism's early torchbearers. He carried his fervor undimmed to the Upper American Midwest and lit many a flame of national pride there. Among the men he inspired in Minneapolis were the Swedish-Norwegian vice consul, a newspaper editor, small businessmen, and a future lieutenant governor of the state.⁵ Their eagerness to entertain Bull in style and initiate patriotic celebrations was not simply local boosterism; they greatly admired his musical artistry and flair, his charismatic and forceful personality and advocacy of Norway's cause. And they were exactly the segment of the immigrant population whose aspirations, occupations, and striving for views of the larger Scandinavian and American worlds made Bull's championing of a Norwegian national identity magnetic, made it a great historic movement in their part of the world that could be a deep source of pride for all Scandinavians.

The Norwegian immigrants, like Bull, were drawn to a future reality which at the time meant little to most of their fellow immigrants – or to

4. *Minneapolis Daily Tribune*, February 24, May 4 and 18, August 13, December 20, 1869; *Nordisk Folkeblad*, May 19, June 30, July 14 and 21, 1869; *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 27, 1935. David L. Rosheim, *The Other Minneapolis or A History of the Old Minneapolis Skid Row* (Maquoketa, IA: The Andromeda Press, 1978), 20.

5. *Nordisk Folkeblad*, May 19, 1869. For insightful comments on Ole Bull's role in inspiring support for Norwegian nationalism among Norwegian Americans, see Lloyd Hustvedt, *Rasmus B. Andersen, Pioneer Scholar* (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association [NAHA], 1966), 82-83, 352.

the large majority of people in their homeland. The constitution writers in Norway – and Ole Bull at the end of the 1860s – had advanced beyond the national consciousness of many of their contemporaries. Most people in the country felt their strongest loyalties for regional or district cultures well beyond the century's midpoint. Like many who came to the United States from parts of what later became Germany and Italy, immigrants from Norway arrived as identifiers with these local cultures. May 17th celebrations became one of the customs that – in both America and Norway during roughly the same time period – assisted in the formation of a Norwegian *national* identity on a broad popular basis. Begun as rural church outings and separate secular and religious observances in a few urban settlements in the 1860s, the 17th of May in the United States was not an “integral part of Norwegian-American folk life” until the 1880s and 1890s.⁶ Perhaps the relatively weak sense of *national* identity among the early Norwegian immigrants in Minneapolis made it easier for them to frame the first 17th of May event there as a Scandinavian affair. Not only was the organizing group an elite that kept the celebration an exclusive private event, but they were explicitly pan-Scandinavian. At a time when class meant more in Scandinavia for people's choice of associates, this was the kind of group that could most easily move across national boundaries with a sense of which social circles were appropriately theirs. In Scandinavia then, these people would likely either be sophisticated urbanites or members of privileged classes in the countryside.

The first toast raised to Norwegian liberty on the 17th of May in the city was proposed by a Dane, and the evening's program included speeches to the glory of each of the Nordic nations. A Swedish immigrant (invited from St. Paul) spoke for Sweden, another speaker praised Nordic unity, and a bravo honored the Scandinavian and American flags. Ole Bull would not have been pleased. One of the pronouncements for which he is remembered occurred at a 17th of May banquet in Wisconsin, where he declared how glad he was to see that only two Danes and one “invisible Swede” were present.⁷

6. Odd Sverre Lovoll, “The Changing Role of May 17 as a Norwegian-American ‘Key Symbol,’” the revised version of his address at Eidsvoll, Norway, on May 9, 2000, in Brit Marie Hovland and Olaf Aagedal, eds., *Nasjonaldagsfeiring i fleirkulturelle demokrati* (Copenhagen: Nordisk Ministerråd, 2001), 67-69, and *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People*, revised edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 75, 278. Page 278 contains the quoted phrase.

The Rise of Norwegian Nationalism and Demise of Pan-Scandinavianism

Solidarity behind a broad Scandinavian front is typical of the earliest stage of these groups' settlements across North America, when small local elites organized the first institutions and the larger body of immigrants followed their lead. In the pioneer stage, the behavior of Nordic-American leaders, one may argue with Kathleen Conzen, illustrates the urge to band together to strengthen a sense of community based on common origins and to mark publically the distinctiveness of that cultural heritage. On the other hand, there is little evidence that the Nordic immigrants in the Twin Cities of the 1870s faced the nativistic pressures that Conzen views as a chief motivating force of community mobilization among the German immigrants she studied. Scandinavian immigrants, moreover, shared celebrations and institutions of nearly all kinds only until one or more individual groups were numerous enough to separate into discrete organizations along national lines. Once that happened only a minority, though often a prominent and steadfast one, maintained the pan-Scandinavian ideal.⁸

The leadership among organizers and speech-makers for the 17th of May remained exclusive far into the 20th century, but the very next Norwegian Constitution Day, the 1870 celebration, was public. As the decade progressed, Minneapolis roughly tripled its population and became one of the nation's largest cities by 1880. At the same time its Norwegian-born population rose to over 2,500, or over one in every twenty of the city's residents. St. Paul also grew explosively, but in the course of the decade fell clearly behind its sister city in size and attracted only about one-fourth as many Norwegian immigrants. In Minneapolis the number and variety of Norwegian organizations multiplied, and a pattern of multiple Norwegian Constitution Day observances – the biggest of them public – emerged. The public event remained pan-Scandinavian, in both program and audience. A few prominent Norwegians from St. Paul con-

7. Hansen, *My Minneapolis*, 26-27, contains the quotation and describes the toasts at the first celebration of May 17 in Minneapolis. See *Nordisk Folkeblad*, May 19, 1869, for the original newspaper notice of the occasion.

8. Hansen, *My Minneapolis*, 85-86. Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, 147, 178, 278, 296-297.

tinued to appear on the programs of these events.⁹ On the 17th of May many Scandinavians in Minneapolis, especially the Norwegians among them, practiced public ways of being American – and simultaneously of being acceptably Norwegian or Scandinavian in America.

The festivities continued to be firmly pan-Scandinavian through the 1880s. In view of the demographic realities in the Twin Cities that is hardly surprising. At the start of the decade foreign-born Swedes and Norwegians in Minneapolis made up slightly less than 13 percent of the population, with Swedes the larger group by only a small margin (537). Ten years later the Norwegian-born population had increased five-fold, but the city's Swedish immigrant component had expanded even more and exceeded the Norwegian total by nearly 7,000 people. Together, however, they comprised close to 20 percent of the city's total population. With their American-born children and the smaller Danish-American community, they included many more voting citizens and amounted to nearly 30 percent of the people in Minneapolis! The Norwegian-born population of St. Paul also increased five-fold, but the first and second generations there made up only one-third as much of the city's whole population as they did in Minneapolis – and they were much more outnumbered by Swedish-Americans, who early provided St. Paulites with their model for local Scandinavians. From the 1880s onward the Norwegian-American community in St. Paul, though one of the largest of the group's urban settlements in the nation, has lived in the double shadow of the larger Swedish-American population in the capital city and the much larger Norwegian-American presence in Minneapolis.¹⁰

The local demographic situation in the Twin Cities encouraged mutual accommodation even as the tensions leading to the separation of Norway from the union with Sweden grew sharper. By the later 1880s events surrounding the day in Minneapolis had expanded into an array of private

9. U.S. Census, *Statistics of the Population*, 1880, 226, 229, 541. Hansen, *My Minneapolis*, 27, 30. *Nordisk Folkeblad*, May 25, 1870; May 24, 1871; May 19, 1875; April 16 and 30, May 14 and May 21, 1879; May 11, 1880; *Minneapolis Daily Tribune*, May 19, 1873; May 18, 1875; May 18, 1877.

10. U.S. Census, *Statistics of the Population*, 1880, 541, and *Population 1890, Part I*, 198, 203, 670-673, 710, 716, 722, 726, provided the data from which the percentages and comparisons in the text were derived. A comparison of census figures for the Norwegian-born and their children in Brooklyn, Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Seattle shows that the St. Paul community was the third largest of these urban enclaves – as a portion of the whole city's population – in 1900, 1930, and 1960.

church and organization-sponsored parties and a panoply of public events including concerts, a gala banquet-ball, and a colorful parade – that contained a “Norwegian military company” that came by train from St. Paul to march with the Normanna Infantry and the Swedish Guard. Under the surface of amiable Scandinavian-American co-operation, nonetheless, an avid and exclusively Norwegian nationalism gained strength. It was precisely the agitation in liberal circles at home in Norway for separation from Sweden that inspired the birth of independent Norwegian associations in Minneapolis in the mid-1880s, according to Carl G. O. Hansen, who claimed the decade, witnessed the pinnacle of the immigrant group’s pride in and identification with *norskdøm*, the homeland culture. Hansen asserts that the lectures of the visiting Norwegian radical free-thinker, the poet and novelist Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, in 1880-1881 lit the initial spark of the local immigrant leaders’ nationalist campaign. But the Norwegian-born leaders of Augsburg Seminary, Lars Oftedal and Georg Sverdrup, who arrived in Minneapolis in the early 1870s, had been avid supporters of the liberal movement before leaving Norway. Sverdrup’s great uncle Georg helped lead the Eidsvoll assembly that wrote the Norwegian Constitution in 1814, and his uncle Johan had long been a leading Liberal and led the party when it assumed power as Norway’s first parliamentary government in 1884. The staff and students of Augsburg had held their own 17th of May observations, with speeches advocating the country’s independence, since the mid-1870s. By the mid-1880s the city’s Norwegian-American Liberal Society, in whose founding both Lars Oftedal and Georg Sverdrup participated, had sent money it raised through social events and mass meetings to the Liberal Party in Norway and talked publicly of raising more funds to send rifles for use in the liberation of the homeland.¹¹

11. Hansen, *My Minneapolis*, 41-47, 57-60, 62-63. In a speech about Norwegian-American associational life in the Twin Cities, especially Minneapolis, given in 1915 or 1916, Hansen commented at length on the passionate support of the city’s Norwegians for *norskdøm* in the 1880s. The untitled typescript of the speech is found in the Carl G. O. Hansen Papers, P543, Box 12, Speeches, pages 3-4, at the NAHA-Archives, Northfield, MN. Eva Lund Haugen and Einar Haugen, *Land of the Free: Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson’s America Letters, 1880-1881* (Northfield, MN: NAHA, 1978), 249-251; see also 157, 159-161, 163-165. Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, 156-157. James S. Hamre, *Georg Sverdrup: Educator, Theologian, Churchman* (Northfield, MN: 1986), 20-21. Carl Chrislock, *From Fjord to Freeway: 100 Years – Augsburg College* (Minneapolis: Augsburg College, 1969), 10-12. For Augsburg Seminary’s May 17th observations, see for example, *Nordisk Folkeblad*, May 21, 1879.

On May 17, 1887, Norwegian-American para-military units from both Cities and the Swedish Guard marched as they had before, but the usual Nordic peace was broken when the main speaker on the program, Attorney John W. Arctander – a Norwegian prominent in the local Liberal Society – announced from the West Hotel balcony that Norwegians had “thrown the Swedes flat on their backs away from Norway’s border.” During the rest of the decade, Norwegians used Constitution Day to consolidate their south-town community’s strength, parading to the center of the Cedar-Riverside district and ceremoniously laying the cornerstone for a common meeting house – Normanna Hall, on *syttende mai*, 1888 – and dedicating the completed building there a year later. By that time the classic *Norsk* form of the parade had taken shape: In the lead were Norwegian-American notables, prominent Norwegian visitors, American dignitaries (in 1888 and often after that, both the mayor and the governor), and honored members of other immigrant groups. Following them strutted Norwegian-American para-military groups – former soldiers and sailors from both cities in dress uniforms. Last, each contingent led by a “commander” and banner-bearers, marched members from Norwegian-American organizations of many kinds and colorful bodies of small businessmen and tradesmen – from liquor dealers to furniture dealers and from butchers to bricklayers.¹²

This period more than any other in the history of *syttende mai* in the Twin Cities fits Conzen’s concept of a shared homeland culture that maintains a sense of community in the group’s new home. At the same time, the public display of community organizations, businesses, and tradespeople suggests the motives of showing both strength in and contributions to the Cities. The organizers and celebrants were aware of the need for assent (and gratitude) to American society but placed most emphasis on their descent from and loyalty to *norskdom*. Norway’s movement toward separation from Sweden accelerated at the same time when the exodus from the country to the United States reached its peak. Heavy recent immigration produced in the Cities a phase of Norwegian-

12. Hansen, *My Minneapolis*, 62-63, 68, 142-144, 226-228 (the quoted phrase is the author’s translation of the Norwegian phrase cited on page 62); and “Minneapolis’ Historie. – Kapitlet om den norske Koloni: De Første Nordmænds Ankomst, Nybyggets Dage, Festlige Stunder,” *Minneapolis Daglig Tidende*, January 24, 1912.

American community development during which the local enclaves' populace was predominantly foreign language speaking and foreign-born. Its social and religious life, neighborhood stores and saloons, its press and leadership functioned in Norwegian or were bilingual. Under these circumstances, a heightened expectant patriotism among emigrés eager to demonstrate their support for Mother Norway hardly seems surprising.

Ole Bull and Henrik Ibsen, Icons of Public Acceptance on Norwegian Constitution Day in Minneapolis-St. Paul

In the 1890s pan-Scandinavianism took a back seat at 17th of May commemorations that focussed on champions of Norwegian national romanticism. Severe economic depression early in the decade forced a general lull in free-time activities as families and ethnic organizations in both cities weathered the hard times. Still, by 1895 fund-raising efforts to erect a statue of the patriotic violinist Ole Bull in a Minneapolis park re-inspired the tradition of Constitution Day celebrations. Over ten months of choir and orchestra concerts raised money in a campaign that culminated in a lavish and at one point moving weekend of 17th of May activities. The unveiling of the plaster model of the statue at the Minneapolis Exposition building in 1896 was an incandescent moment that many long remembered. The renowned Norwegian-American sculptor who created the likeness, Jacob Fjelde, had died suddenly less than two weeks before the event. As the drapery around the statue dropped, according to Carl G. O. Hansen, perhaps the largest assembly of Norwegian-Americans gathered under one roof up to that time (around 6,000 people) rose in silence to pay homage to the sculptor and his inspiration, while a beam of sunlight rendered the sculpted face of the violinist dazzling.

Thus the larger community joined the immigrant group in viewing Bull as a cultural figure of wide significance, not only by the official intent to place his image in a public park but by joining in an explicitly inter-ethnic marking of that intent. The orator on the 17th of May was Ignatius Donnelly, the famous Irish-American political radical, social critic, and author from St. Paul. The program also included a singing competition among nine men's choruses – two German, three Swedish,

and four Norwegian. A German-American orchestra and an American soloist completed the polyglot musical cast.¹³

The prominence and confidence of the Norwegian-American community produced a form of inter-ethnic celebration on the 17th of May in Minneapolis-St. Paul around the turn of the century. Although the enclaves were still largely parts of a foreign-language sub-culture, many of their members, especially the leaders, had been in the Twin Cities or America for decades. By 1900 second-generation Norwegian Americans in the Cities were about twice as large a group as the Norwegian-born, and the third generation was assuming significant size. Together, Swedish and Norwegian immigrants, their children and grandchildren still comprised over half of the population in Minneapolis and over a quarter of the residents of St. Paul.¹⁴ As Norwegian-American leaders' concern for the prospects of the younger generations in America grew steadily more important, they sought public proofs that the group enjoyed an honored position in the Cities' civic arena appropriate to its own and Scandinavian Americans' large presence locally.

Spokesmen for St. Paul's Norwegian-American community in its largest Sons of Norway lodge exhibited this concern when they presented the city with Fjelde's bust of Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen, in 1907 and asked that it be set up in a city park. The efforts to place a monument to a Norwegian cultural hero in each city indicated a new stage in the "tri-angulation" by Norwegian-American leaders, one that appropriated these cultural icons for the project of establishing a positive public reputation for the group locally. Norwegian-Americans' confidence and sense of having arrived, therefore, expanded with pride at 17th of May ceremonies in 1897 during the dedication of the statue of Bull in Loring Park and in 1912 at the dedication of the bust of Ibsen in Como Park, prime locations in each city outside the ethnic group's areas of concentration. The municipal authorities, mayor and parks commissioner, were of course present, and so were the governor and his staff. The local and state stamp of approval as an integrated and valued part of the public that was then bestowed on Norwegian-Americans could not be missed by anyone.

13. This and the next section build on and interpret the significance of events reported in Hansen, *My Minneapolis*, 159-162, and 236.

14. U.S. Census of Population, 1890 and 1900.

Mobilizing Group Resources in the Norwegian-American Upper Midwest and its Capital

Yet perhaps as significant are other dimensions of the campaigns to erect Norwegian-American public monuments in the Twin Cities. Between 1895 and 1897 the Minneapolis enclave appealed for the first time for funds throughout the Cities' vast hinterland, a region stretching from northern Iowa and western Wisconsin through the Dakotas – where Norwegian immigrants had concentrated their rural and small-town settlement as nowhere else in the nation. This regional fund-raising for erecting the statue of Ole Bull in effect proclaimed the city's status as the nationality group's hub or capital, the place where such a public monument as the Bull statue should naturally stand. To gather funds leaders in the city mobilized one of the most vital and best organized networks in the sub-culture at the time, the male singing societies that gave concerts in almost every sizable Norwegian-American community in support of themselves or some local project.¹⁵

The men's choruses had met annually for regional or national conventions in the latter 1870s and 1880s. Accustomed to co-operative action, in 1892 they formalized their organization in the Norwegian Singers Association of America – with headquarters and a monthly publication in Minneapolis. Efforts to energize the choirs on behalf of the statue in Minneapolis represented a new use of this musical network. An important precedent that would bear more fruit at centennial celebrations in the next century, this first attempt at regional mobilization provided only a small part of the money needed in 1895-1897. On the other hand, it brought an unheard-of number of out-of-town visitors to the weekend of celebrations and dedication in Loring Park, including a Norwegian men's chorus from Duluth that joined other visiting singers and the local men's choirs to sing at high points of the festivities.

Another form of mobilization among Norwegian Americans, the Sons of Norway, also first made itself visible to the larger community through the commemoration of Bull and *syttende mai* in 1897. A mutual benefit fraternity of working-class men that was destined to become by far the largest of Norwegian-American organizations, the Sons of Norway was

15. Information on the male chorus network is found in Hansen, *My Minneapolis*, 74-77, 164-165, 198-199.

founded in the north Minneapolis Norwegian community only two years earlier and was viewed skeptically among south and northeast Minneapolis Norwegians until its members assembled an impressively large, well decorated and organized group on May 17th of that year, met the south town organizations in the city center, and marched together to dedicate the statue of Ole Bull in Loring Park. Until that day the city's Norwegians had not successfully gathered their separate urban neighborhoods – and the Sons of Norway had not caught on, even in the rest of its home city. A little over a decade later the order had organized lodges across the nation and their being headquartered in Minneapolis had become another reason for viewing the city as the nationality group's premier urban center.¹⁶

In the first decades of the 20th century, the Sons of Norway succeeded as no one had before in generating large crowds and making the *syttende mai* truly a people's festival for the community's broad mass of working and middle-class families. From 1898, the year after its founding, the Daughters of Norway cooperated with the Sons in bringing working-class Norwegian-American women actively into the public commemorations of the day. In St. Paul, the Nordkap Lodge of the order rallied this new national network in support of its campaign to place Fjelde's bust of Ibsen in Como Park. The bust provided a public center for the ceremonies in St. Paul, and like the statue of Bull in Minneapolis, local leaders hoped, it might serve several goals. Diverse elements in the community could come together with Ibsen as a symbol of their common cultural heritage and co-operate in a larger public event than they could have mounted separately. The result would also be a show of unity that enhanced the ethnic group's reputation.

The year that Norway won full independence, 1905, saw a united 17th of May parade in Minneapolis and a single public program of observances in St. Paul, but the occasion was more tensely expectant and accommodating than triumphant. The crisis between Norway and Sweden contained the potential for armed conflict, and no outcome was evident until

16. This and the following paragraph build on Carl G. O. Hansen, "Det norske foreningsliv i Amerika," in Johannes B. Wist, ed., *Norsk-amerikanernes festskrift 1914* (Decorah, IA, 1914) 281-284, and *My Minneapolis*, 156-158, 163, 236, 259-261.

June 7. In an apparent about-face, moreover, the main speaker at the *syttende mai* ceremonies in Minneapolis – the same John Arctander who in 1887 had publically rejoiced at the thought of Swedish soldiers being repulsed from Norway’s border – now read letters of greeting from President Theodore Roosevelt and King Oscar of Sweden that emphasized the “brotherly” relationship between the two nationality groups. Again local demographic realities were very likely decisive. Swedish Americans were much the larger of the two groups in the Cities, and only if they cooperated could Scandinavian Americans outweigh German and Irish Americans in municipal affairs.¹⁷

Norway’s liberation inspired a swell of ethnic pride that supported a huge expansion of activities among Norwegian Americans. In some places, such as the Norwegian-American colony in Brooklyn, solidarity behind the homeland’s full independence encouraged unity within the community through the formation of the Norwegian National League, a representative assembly of local ethnic organizations that worked to pool resources for events such as joint observances of May 17th. But in Minneapolis-St. Paul after Norway’s independence was confirmed, local unity dissolved in a multitude of smaller, often private celebrations on the 17th, with churches and secular associations competing, sometimes divisively, for Norwegian Americans’ attention on Constitution Day, so that public parading was a rarity until 1914. The Sons of Norway arranged the biggest and best attended secular celebration at a large central auditorium in each city, and the churches expressed their disapproval of lodges and “secret fraternities” – and the insurance policies the organization sold – by discouraging their flocks from participating.¹⁸ Once national identity

17. Lovoll, “The Changing Role of May 17 as a Norwegian-American ‘Key Symbol,’” begins with a description of the letters John Arctander read. I owe a debt of gratitude to Lovoll for giving me a copy of his manuscript and thus making me aware of the report in *Decorah-Posten* on May 23, 1905. U. S. Census, *Population 1920*, II:746, 750, provides figures on the number of first-generation Norwegian and Swedish Americans in the Twin Cities in 1900, 1910, and 1920.

18. Carl Chrislock, *Ethnicity Challenged: The Upper Midwest Norwegian-American Experience in World War I* (Northfield, MN: NAHA, 1981), 3-4, 18. Hansen, *My Minneapolis*, 193, 259, 282-283. Lovoll, “The Changing Role of May 17,” 7. David C. Mauk, *The Colony that Rose from the Sea: Norwegian Maritime Migration and Community in Brooklyn, 1850-1910* (Northfield, MN: NAHA, 1997), 194-195, notes that once the enthusiasm related to Norway’s independence waned, consolidating resources for a common observance of May 17th was difficult in Brooklyn too, even though the Norwegian National League continued to operate. As Carl G. O. Hansen notes in *My Minneapolis* (282-283), no lasting and active representative body of Norwegian-American organizations formed in Minneapolis until 1927.

and sovereignty were secure, it seemed, the motivation to pull together for common Constitution Day commemorations lost its decisive strength in the Twin Cities.

One notable exception occurred in 1908, when *syttende mai* observances were unusually unified and noteworthy in both cities. In St. Paul leaders laid a strategy that they hoped would help remove a source of divisiveness related to 17th of May festivities. As *Decorah-Posten* in Iowa reported concerning the situation among Norwegian Americans in the city, some elements in the community complained that the "17th of May should be a celebration of the people and not an occasion exploited by one or another organization as a source of income for its treasury." To diffuse such suspicions, local leaders selected a community-wide goal that could galvanize and consolidate community interest without favoring any element in the group. They convinced the congregations, choirs, and associations that wanted to mark the day to join in a single program at a large city auditorium and stipulated that all proceeds from the event would be donated to the city's Norwegian-American Luther Hospital.¹⁹

Of course, the same strategy also played an important role in mobilizing Norwegian Americans behind efforts to place iconic ethnic monuments in parks in the Twin Cities and elsewhere. One of the attractions of fundraising for presenting Norway with an impressive memorial gift on the centennial of its 1814 constitution was the hope of making the 17th of May celebrations between 1909 and 1913 part of a noble exercise in collective gratitude to the homeland. Even that prospect, however, failed to unify Norwegian Americans in the Twin Cities behind a single *syttende mai* program. Their associations and institutions instead held separate observances that suited the range of tastes in the community, even though almost all donated the income from these events to the memorial gift. Nonetheless, larger goals, especially those related to charitable causes or historic milestones, did attract notable figures from Norway as speakers for 17th of May ceremonies. In 1908 Norway's Minister to the United States accepted the invitation to speak at the St. Paul observances dedicated to both Norway's Constitution Day and Luther Hospital. As has

19. "17de Maifest den 16de i St. Paul," *Decorah-Posten*, May 5, 1908, and "Den 17de Mai feires," *Minneapolis Søndags Tidende*, May 18, 1913. Lovoll translated the quoted passage from the Norwegian.

often been the case with such visitors, local leaders arranged for the Minister to speak in the other Twin City before leaving the region. This practical arrangement contributed to the perception of the Cities as a unit, a single "capital" for Norwegian America. Naturally, like the erection of public monuments and the funding of community institutions such as hospitals, sending a large sum of money from Norwegian America to the homeland also demonstrated the considerable resources and success of the ethnic group.

In Minneapolis that year the Sons of Norway moved their customary program to the 16th so that the Norwegian Minister could give an address there while he was in the vicinity. The memorable purpose of the commemorations on the 17th in Minneapolis consisted in raising a monument to Norway's much loved poet Henrik Wergeland. By 1908 important new organizations contributed greatly to Norwegian Americans' sense of having a single, though richly varied, *national* heritage and of relating to their former homeland as a nation-wide group in the United States – as "Norwegian America."

The popular awareness of these two identities – the Norwegian and the Norwegian-American, that was taking shape among the immigrants and their descendants around that time, received essential birthing from the Norwegian Club (*Det Norske Selskapet*) and the Norsemen's Federation (*Nordmanns-Forbundet*). The Club, founded in Minneapolis in 1903, was a cultural society for the well-educated that developed a national network of chapters in towns and cities. The Federation, established in Oslo in 1907 while the glow of full national independence lingered – and in response to the frequent visits of Norwegian Americans – was from its inception a highly placed, Norway-based organization that recruited chapters from a similar elite across the US and other countries to promote ties between the mother country and its emigrated population globally. It presented the Club – as an appropriate representative of Norwegian America – with a statue of Wergeland, and given the top-flight circles involved, both the Secretary-General of the Federation and the primate of the country's state church travelled to Minneapolis for the presentation of the statue. All parties agreed on the 17th of May in the city as the appropriate date and site for the occasion, even though the statue was to be permanently installed in the city park at Fargo, North Dakota, a month later. The Norsemen's Federation thus became the first important organization

in Norway to treat Minneapolis as the capital of Norwegian America.²⁰ In the process of accepting the role assigned it by the Federation, the leaders of the Norwegian Club in Minneapolis again adjusted the meaning of the triangular relationship between Norway, America, and Norwegian America for the immigrant group, in this instance by strengthening their bonds to influential opinion-makers in the homeland.

From Regional to National Capital of Norwegian America

By 1914 there were notable precedents for centering the remembrance in the United States of historic events concerning the whole of Norwegian America and Norway in Minneapolis or St. Paul – the regional mobilization for dedicating a statue of Ole Bull, the Sons of Norway's effort on behalf of the bust of Henrik Ibsen, and the presentation of the Wergeland statue from the Norsemen's Federation. But the main celebrations in the United States for the centennial of Norway's Constitution in 1914 loomed as an event so big that just one of the Cities seemed too narrow a stage for the drama of nationhood that leaders in Norway and the United States had in mind. The planners hoped to gather Norwegian America as much as possible in one place, and the single best way of doing that was by bringing multitudes in from the Twin Cities' enormous Norwegian-American hinterland, which was precisely the advantage the Cities had over the other urban Norwegian centers. Minneapolis-St. Paul was the natural gathering place for Norwegian Americans in five states, which together held by far the largest portion of the group in America.²¹

The solution found was to hold the three-day complex of programs for the centennial at the Minnesota state fairgrounds at Midway, a place about equidistant from the center of each city with facilities large enough to hold tens of thousands. People were used to travelling to Midway for the Fair, and its location provided a neat means of including both munic-

20. Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, 295-298. Hansen, *My Minneapolis*, 250-252, 260, 293-301.

21. The greatly larger Norwegian-American hinterland of the Twin Cities is evident from the bar charts of the Norwegian-born residents of Minnesota, Illinois, New York, and Washington state by county total in 1900 that can be generated from the University of Virginia Library internet site (<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-local/censusbin/census/cen.pl>).

ipal and state authorities as partners in planning, funding, and filling the speakers' list for the affair. Originally, the festivities were planned under the auspices of yet another relatively new and powerful force in the sub-culture's life – the *bygdelag* or provincial societies representing people originating in the different local, mostly rural districts and regions of Norway. These societies, whose members were largely small town and farm folk, emerged partly as a reaction against the intrusions of modern urban life, in exactly the same years as Norwegian nationalism reached its peak at home and abroad near the beginning of the 20th century. Ironically perhaps, these societies formed to express provincial pieties soon discovered that their common experiences in America drew them together at least as strongly as their shared local origins in Norway did. As Odd Lovoll has recently pointed out, members of the ethnic group's educated elite, that had often been prominent in *syttende mai* celebrations, resisted relinquishing control of the centennial commemorations to the *bygdelag* for fear that it would present Norwegian Americans through old-fashioned and countrified peasant folkways, while neglecting the high culture of modern Norway. The root issues in this conflict were class differences, control over what kind of "descent" Norwegian Americans claimed in their adopted country, and a disagreement over what reputation the group should cultivate in the United States. A threat of a competing celebration eventually convinced the *bygdelag* to share decisions about the centennial with a broad spectrum of Norwegian-American groups in the Twin Cities.²²

With a compromise negotiated among disparate elements in the group, the way was open for the most elaborate *syttende mai* commemorations the Twin Cities had ever seen. Never again would so large a mass of Norwegian Americans or so notable a collection of their leaders and honored guests be assembled for Norwegian Constitution Day in the Cities. The number of visitors from out of town was estimated at 25,000 to 30,000. During three days of mild sunny weather, the provincial societies held their annual meetings, separate parades of Norwegian-American institu-

22. On the conflict over control of the planning of the centennial commemorations, see the Chicago Norwegian-American newspaper, *Scania*, May 20, 1911, and November 9, 1912, cited in Lovoll, "The Changing Role of May 17," 8-9, 15. See also his "'Better than a Visit to the Old Country': The *Stevne* of the Sognalag in America," in *Norwegian-American Essays 1996*, Øyvind Gulliksen, David Mauk, and Dina Tolfshy, eds. (Oslo: NAHA-Norge and the Norwegian Emigrant Museum, 1996), 3-29.

tions and associations marched from the Cities' downtown districts and met in Midway, and a host of smaller festivities took place. Local newspapers – American and Norwegian – published elaborate pictorial front-page features about Norway's history and the extensive centennial programs. Streets displayed Norwegian and American flags, and local stores showcased both the flags and majestic Norwegian scenery and historic tableaux.²³

At the main programs on two successive days in the fairgrounds' largest hall, overflow crowds listened to Norway's Minister to the United States, one of North Dakota's senators and the state's governor as well as Minnesota's governor, and several pastors, consuls and professors. Massed choirs and the St. Olaf College band provided music. The most spectacular display of the group's large presence and public acceptance burst on the audience as 500 Minneapolis school children, directed by the city school system's supervisor of music, used their costumes to form the American and Norwegian flags as they sang patriotic songs from each country. Only at the Centennial celebrations 100 years after the first immigrant ship arrived from Norway in 1825 would these earlier festivities be eclipsed, and in 1925 the arrangements borrowed most of their planning, structure, and even the flag-forming chorus of children from the fabulous long 17th of May weekend in 1914.

Conclusion

The centennial festivities represented the culmination and apotheosis of earlier 17th of May celebrations in Minneapolis-St. Paul. They provided a grand summation of the stage that negotiations between the ethnic group and mainstream society had reached by 1914 concerning respect for "descent" and "assent." In the center of the group's greatest strength, they demonstrated in symbolic form several of the group's successes in

23. The interpretation of the commemorations of the 1914 Centennial festivities builds on "Syttende mai Parade as Seen by Camera," *The Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, May 17, 1914; "Festligholdelsen," *Minneapolis Søndag Tidende*, May 17, 1914; Eiliv O. Bakke and T. O. Walby, "17de Mai Festen paa Minnesota Statsudstillinger Grund i 1914," in Bygdelagenes Fellesraad, *Aarboek og Julehilsen 1929* (Minneapolis: MN, 1929), 107-117; Chrislock, *Ethnicity Challenged*, 9-10; and Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, 281-282.

accommodating to life in the United States while maintaining filial loyalty to their old-world heritage. The economic importance of the group was evident in the local business community's willingness to deck out their stores in jubilee regalia and historic Norwegian scenes. For the first time the whole downtown of both cities put on Norwegian-American holiday garb. The municipal cooperation that lay behind this and the official recognition on state and regional levels that was obvious from the titles on the speakers' program left no doubt that Norwegian Americans had learned to participate effectively in the American political system. Their social responsibility was apparent in floats and parade contingents representing local Norwegian-American hospitals, homes for the elderly, charities, and church bodies. The reunions honoring surviving Norwegian-American veterans of the Civil War showed how members of the ethnic group had offered their lives in defense of the American Union.

In all these and other ways the Centennial commemorations announced that Norwegian Americans had assented to finding their place, meeting citizens' duties, and making good on American society's terms. Prior to the festivities, the organizers revealed their concern that mainstream America should understand the purpose of the Centennial by waging an extensive public relations campaign, placing a series of articles explaining their plans in local American dailies, and widely distributing a leaflet in English entitled "The American 17th of May Celebration, 1914.... Why and How?" The text of the leaflet stressed how Norway's constitution defied the "high-handed act of the [European] powers" that ceded Norway to Sweden in 1814 and "declared Norway to be.... free and independent" under a "representative government."²⁴

At the time, the ethnic leaders who planned and wrote for the Centennial could not know that the 1920s and 1930s would bring severe American immigration restriction laws and a global economic crisis that would end mass immigration from Norway to the United States. As Carl Chrislock points out in *Ethnicity Challenged*, his study of the Norwegian-American experience in World War I, "the centennial stimulated an informal Norwegian-American self-survey.... As might be expected the

24. A copy of the leaflet is preserved in the Olaf Morgan Norlie Papers, collection P 897 at the NAHA Archives in Northfield, Minnesota. For examples of the articles explaining the centennial in American newspapers, see the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 22, 1914, and the *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 23, 1914.

message communicated was with few exceptions strongly self-congratulatory.”²⁵ The group’s leaders showed little concern that the homeland heritage was at risk because the number of newcomers to their ethnic community would fall off drastically. Their agenda prioritized instead negotiating among themselves issues of *descent*, of which aspects of the heritage to pass on to younger generations and how to do this effectively enough to hold the interest of the second and third generations in the ethnic culture. In this regard, the festivities had two audiences, the larger American public and Norwegian Americans, especially the young or those uninterested in the ethnic heritage. Thus, the English-language newspaper articles and leaflet mentioned above aimed as much to educate these elements in the community and enhance their pride in their background as to reach an American public. As Conzen noted about German-American leaders, these community figures were determined to maintain community in the sense of sharing an understanding of a common cultural heritage – and such an in-group cultural intimacy could only survive if the group’s leaders agreed on the essential contents of that heritage and initiated positive action to preserve those aspects of Norwegian-ness in America.

The *syttende mai* celebrations of 1914 took their character in part from a new-found consensus within the group to accept a wide definition of Norwegian-American identity – one that honored the *bygdelag* with their celebration of rural Norwegian folk cultures, the varieties of Norwegian-American Protestantism, the lodge culture of Sons (and Daughters) of Norway with their largely urban working class background, and the “high” culture of more educated elite circles in the ethnic group. Although the strains among these diverse components of the community continued, at the time official inclusion and tolerance of these groups seemed the best answer to the questions of cultural descent and the most appropriate way to use the commemorations as an ingredient in the recipe for the younger generations’ future success in the United States. Left out were organized Norwegian-American labor groups and representatives of left-wing political parties, who appeared nowhere on speaking programs or parade line-ups. Thus *bygdelag* assemblies, veterans’ reunions, and meetings of other organizations dominated the centennial’s first day,

25. Chrislock, *Ethnicity Challenged*, 14–15, contains the quoted passage.

church services and sacred concerts the second, and the parades and a secular civic celebration the third.²⁶

Carl G. O. Hansen, whose comments on May 17th observances we have noted earlier, was well aware of the adamant stance of many local Norwegian-American leaders concerning their community's place in the Cities. As the long-time editor of *Minneapolis Tidende*, the premier Norwegian-American newspaper locally, Hansen was accustomed to attending and speaking at many Norwegian-American community affairs. In 1915 or 1916 in a local speech he noted how these leaders asserted that their community was structurally integrated in the city's cultural, social, economic, and political life. As a result, Hansen commented, they sometimes flashed in anger if people spoke, for example, of the "Minneapolis koloni." In effect they refuted Milton M. Gordon's classic theory that structural integration in American society amounts to assimilation and loss of immigrant or, we might say today, of ethnic identity. It was as Americans the local Norwegians exercised their influence and energies, these Norwegian-American community leaders asserted positively – and the group maintained Norwegian-ness here, they insisted, to enrich their adopted country.²⁷ Their pride and confidence was impressive, but the edge on the assertiveness may suggest that this was a relatively newly won integration. Perhaps such a perception among leaders in the ethnic group, as well as their awareness of how recently Norway had won its full independence, contributed to the strength of the re-assertion of Norwegian-American ethnicity after the anti-foreign hysteria of the World War I years.

26. See *Minneapolis Tidende*, May 22, 1914, and *Decorah-Posten*, May 22, 1914, as well as the sources named in notes 23 and 24, for detailed descriptions of the three-day Centennial.

27. On structural assimilation, see Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 70-71, 80-81. Carl G. O. Hansen, typescript of an untitled speech concerning Norwegian-American organizational life in the Twin Cities, especially Minneapolis, page 9, in the Carl G. O. Hansen Papers, P543, Box 12, Speeches, at the NAHA-Archives, Northfield, MN. Internal evidence in the typescript of the speech suggests that it was written and delivered in the Twin Cities in 1915 or 1916.