

# Scandihoovian Space in America's Upper Midwest: Impersonating Ole and Lena in the Twenty-First Century

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***Abstract:** Settled by Norwegians and Swedes in the nineteenth century, America's Upper Midwest has come to be regarded imaginatively by residents as a "Scandihoovian" space, thanks largely to the evolving presence of Ole and Lena. These comic, fictitious, regionally significant folk characters emerged out of the linguistic and cultural challenges confronting immigrants, but by the late nineteenth century they had begun to figure as well in plays and songs performed by traveling artists specializing in broken-English dialect. Ole and Lena thrived in the twentieth century as they were not only impersonated by comic performers throughout the region, but also popularized through jokebooks, sound recordings, and radio broadcasts. Initially regarded as more Swedish than Norwegian, and typically performed by Scandinavian Americans, Ole and Lena have come to be viewed as mainly Norwegian and their impersonators may be non-Scandinavian-Americans who consider the characters to be emblematic of Upper Midwesterners, whatever their descent.*

***Key Words:** Folklore—humor—ethnicity—identity—Scandinavian Americans—Upper Midwest region*

The first Scandihoovian Winter Festival occurred from February 3 to 5, 2012, in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, the village where I have lived since 1988. Officially supported by the local Chamber of Commerce, touted in the weekly *Mount Horeb Mail* as a "lighthearted weekend of fun" featuring

a nocturnal bonfire, trolls, and a range of cold weather sports, the festival emphatically embraced New World Nordic identity. Regarding its name, organizer Tracy Thompson declared: “Scandihoovian is just a term we Scandinavians call one another . . . My grandpa was all Swede and my grandma was Norwegian so we said we had an inter-ethnic marriage. Scandihoovian. It’s like telling each other Ole and Lena jokes” (Schuetz 2012:1). Open to all comers, many of whom were of neither Norwegian nor Swedish descent, the Scandihoovian Winter Festival was also immediately familiar to me, a fifth generation Irish American raised nearly 250 miles further north. Indeed, this recently created southwestern Wisconsin event resembles other community festivals throughout the Upper Midwest, a place wherein the mention of Scandihoovians, the telling of jokes about Ole and Lena, and the impersonation of these figures—all of which have flourished since the nineteenth century—combine to create and sustain a recognition of this region as an unarguably Nordic American, indeed a Scandihoovian, space.

But whence the term “Scandihoovian”? Who are “Ole and Lena”? How and why did these names, characters, and the jokes about them come to be embraced publicly by individuals, groups, and communities throughout an American region? Although comprehensive answers to such interrelated questions are beyond the scope of this short essay, I will hazard a historical sketch before concentrating on contemporary Ole and Lena impersonators and what their performances tell us about the often complicated, sometimes contested, constantly evolving, and persistently prevalent nature of Scandihoovian space in the Upper Midwest. Finally, I will offer brief observations regarding the contribution of regionally grounded Scandihoovian folk humor to our larger understanding of American folk and vernacular humor in relation to American Studies.

### **Scandinavian Immigration, Folk Humor, and the Imagination of an American Region**

The Upper Midwest has a greater concentration of Scandinavian Americans than any other part of the United States. The historical influx of Norwegians and Swedes especially to this region has contributed to the formation of numerous communities that, despite their culturally plural nature from the past to the present, came to be recognized as Scandinavian. Commencing in northern Illinois where Norwegian immigrants first arrived in the 1830s, such settlements expanded incrementally throughout the nineteenth centu-

ry into southern and western Wisconsin, northern Iowa, southern and west central Minnesota, and the eastern realms of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska (Zelinsky 1973:30). Although often built around a core of immigrants from a particular Old World locale—Telemark or Valdres, Dalarna or Småland—New World Scandinavian settlements were rarely completely homogenous. Most included at least some residents who hailed from various districts of Norway or Sweden and regarded themselves as quite distinct from one another, perhaps attending different churches and speaking different dialects—indeed some could not understand one another's speech at all (Haugen 1969:345-348; Ostergren 1980; Gjerde 1985:141-143). Even the most heavily Scandinavian American areas were also situated amidst and adjacent to established and emerging settlements of American Indians, French Canadians, Anglo-American "Yankees," and such new immigrants as Czechs, Finns, Germans, Irish, Poles, and more. The resulting interactions between Scandinavians and their New World neighbors contributed to an inevitable in-group recognition by Norwegians and Swedes that their collective physical appearance, speech, naming patterns, occupational predilections, and expressive traditions were more alike than dissimilar (Blanck 2012: 7). Indeed such deep cultural similarities were also widely recognized by non-Scandinavian Upper Midwesterners who were simultaneously engaged in establishing their own sense of ethnic consciousness alongside of and as distinctive from their regional neighbors (Gjerde 1997: ch.8). Put another way, the particulars of both cultural commonalities and cultural differences in Upper Midwestern communities were actively constructed by many individuals compelled to interact with one another. Over and over again, as we shall see, both ordinary and remarkable people cast into the roles of inter-cultural and cross-cultural social actors found traditional yet creative ways to perform their emerging identities and to mimic those of their neighbors.

Most fundamentally, recurrent experiences that included blunders and misadventures, between Scandinavian newcomers and fellow Upper Midwesterners, spawned many locally appreciated and more widely disseminated expressions, anecdotes, and jokes. In the 1930s the linguist Einar Haugen, for example, recorded instances of longstanding bilingual puns that not only called attention to homophony between words in English and Norwegian that had quite different meanings—*crop/kropp* (body) and *barn/barn* (child)—but also formed the basis for comic anecdotes about, to cite two popularly circulating instances, the Yankee merchant who approached

a Norwegian farm woman about selling her crop, and the Norwegian newcomer who was terrified upon hearing that in Wisconsin a barn is always painted red (Haugen 1969:66-68). Bruce Bollerud, born in 1935, grew up in a Norwegian extended family on a farm near Hollandale in southwestern Wisconsin where many of his neighbors were also Norwegians, although there were Irish, Swiss, and Yankees roundabout as well. One comic story acquired from a maternal uncle, Lawrence Venden, concerned young Norwegian and Yankee women seated side-by-side on a train. Unable to speak one another's language, they nonetheless struck up a friendly relationship through facial expressions and gestures. When a good looking young man strode down the aisle at the same moment that a foul smell suffused the compartment, the Yankee sighed, "Oh, what a handsome face." Mistaking her companion's meaning, the Norwegian responded with a homophonic query, "*O, hva det han som fes*" / Oh, was it he who farted? (Bollerud 2012).

The creation and circulation of such stories were complemented by the grassroots emergence of standard names for and common conceptions of male and female Scandinavian immigrant types who, although far from resembling individual newcomers in all of their complexities, nonetheless embodied many shared traits. Scandinavian men were stereotypically fair-haired and good natured, fond of pickled herring and *snus*, hardy and impervious to cold weather, hard-working and sometimes hard-drinking, and most at home on farms or in the woods. Scandinavian women were likewise fair-complected and cheerful, fond of making coffee and visiting, good Lutherans, similarly hard working yet inclined toward temperance, and frequently employed as urban domestic servants or as "hired girls" on farms. The broken-English speech of these immigrant stock characters, like that of actual newcomers, was scattered with words and phrases from Norwegian or Swedish, and marked by features departing from standard English usage that included a sibilant "sszz" for "s," as well as the substitution of "d" for "th," "y" for "j" and "v" for "w."

Sometimes named Axel, Yon (Jan), Lars, or Sven, the comic male Scandinavian American folk character, since perhaps as early as the mid-nineteenth century, has been called Ole most often. As it was with Irish male immigrants of the era who, irrespective of their real names, were generically dubbed "Pat" or "Paddy"—in part because Patrick is a longstanding, extremely common, quintessentially Irish given name—so it was with Ole. For example, Wisconsin's "Norwegian Regiment," formed during the Civil War of 1861-1865, included 128 soldiers whose first name was "Ole" (Rip-

pley 1985:35; Rosholt 2003). By the 1880s “Ole Olson the Hobo from Norway,” a narrative folksong in dialect-laden English, was in wide circulation, with its significantly recurring chorus:

Ole Olson, yah dey all call me Ole.  
 Ay don't know how dey found out my name.  
 Ay never told none of dem fellows,  
 But dey all call me Ole yust da same. (Leary 2006:107-108)

In other versions of the song, the immigrant's name is not Ole, but that is how he is addressed “yust da same.” About the same time, an immigrant lumber mill worker in central Wisconsin, Osten Ostenson Ingolfsland, known as *Stor* (Big) Osten to fellow Norwegians, was called “Big Ole” by Anglo-Americans (Rosholt 1959:95). Douglas Malloch, “the Lumbermen's Poet,” used Ole subsequently as a generic name in a retrospective portrayal of ethnic groups who toiled in Upper Midwestern forests:

They talk of the Oles,  
 The foreigner stranger  
 Who works when the flood of  
 The pine is at hand. (Malloch 1917:76)

Elsewhere journalist Fred Holmes found that in the predominantly Irish settlement of Elba in Columbia County, Wisconsin, two Norwegians, neither of whom was named Ole, were nonetheless called “Skunk Foot Ole” and “Big Foot Ole,” “because of their distinctive occupations and physical characteristics” (Holmes 1944:189). The companion term “Scandihoovian”—sometimes spelled “Scandahoovian,” “Scandihuvian,” “Scandinoovian,” and “Skandihoovian”—must have been circulating in the late nineteenth century as an aggregate designation for Norwegians and Swedes. The *Dictionary of American Regional English* reports the word's appearance in print in 1901 (Hall 2002:772), with “Scowegian,” a composite of Scandinavian and Norwegian, emerging during the same approximate era (Hall 2002:798; see also Allen 1983:63, 68).

The status of Ole as a stock character was enhanced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the antics of actual and theatrical Scandihoovians who became well known in the Upper Midwest. In the 1890s Ola Värmlänning, a brawling but good natured Swedish immigrant farm hand, logger, and musician—whose name, like “Olle,” was a variant spelling of the more frequent “Ole”—figured in a legendary cycle of comic anecdotes

circulating in oral tradition and, eventually, an illustrated chapbook published in Minneapolis (Swanson 1948; Andersson 1992:149-150).

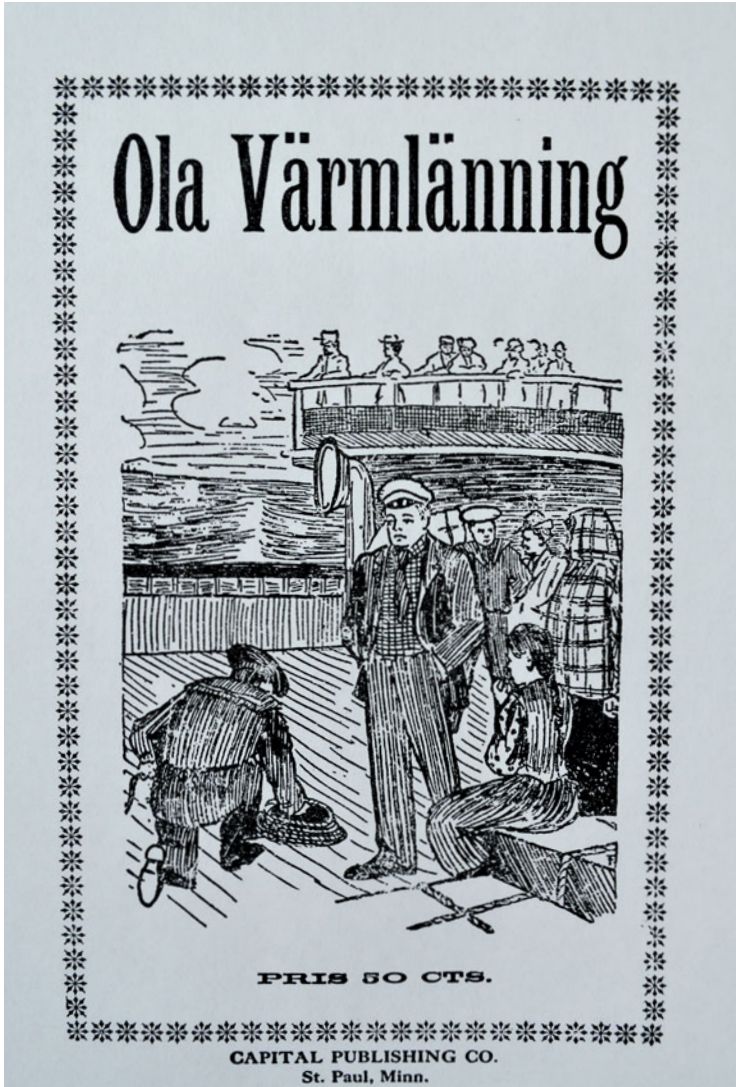


Image 1: Cover drawing of *Ola Värmlänning* from the chapbook, *Ola Värmlänning*, published in Swedish by J. Leachman and Son, Minneapolis, Minnesota, c. 1910.

Meanwhile “Ole Olson” and assorted sweethearts starred in a succession of dialect- inflected plays performed on New York City’s vaudeville stages, in Chicago and Minneapolis, and in small town opera houses throughout the Upper Midwest (Harvey 1996; Magnuson 2008). Through the first two decades of the 20th century Hjalmar Peterson, an immigrant performer from Värmland, dominated the region’s Swedish language vaudeville circuit in the guise of Olle i Skratthult/Ole from Laughtersville (Schneider 2012).



Image 2: Hjalmar Peterson in the guise of Olle i Skratthult, Minneapolis, c. 1925. Minnesota Historical Society (negative 97994).

The Olson Sisters, Eleonora and Ethel, were born in Chicago to immigrant parents and performed in a Norwegian-inflected English in opera houses, church halls, and Chautauqua tent shows for audiences who were predominantly Norwegian Americans but also included Upper Midwesterners of varying descent (Anderson 2012).

Although Olle i Skratthult’s comic style and repertoire derived from an established Swedish *bondkomiker* or peasant comedian tradition (Ericson 1971), his Upper Midwestern rural and working class fictitious bumpkins were not just country boys come to the city—as might be the case with humorously imagined migrants from the Hallingdal or Småland hinterlands to Christiania or Stockholm—but immigrant farm workers, lumberjacks, and hoboes struggling to sustain elements of their culture while adapting to a relatively unfamiliar language and way of life. The Olson Sisters, mean-

while, created comic yet sympathetic female characters come lately from rustic Sogn to encounter New World telephones, portrait photographers, department stores, baseball games, and Ladies Aid organizations. As a result, they contributed mightily to the eventual imaginative formation of Ole's female counterpart who—although sometimes named Olga, Helga, Tilly, or Tina—has been mostly Lena since the 1950s. Both *Olle i Skratthult* and the Olson Sisters supplemented their live performances with a series of 78 rpm recordings and books including photographs, songs, and comic routines (Olson 1929).

Thereafter an unending, interrelated succession of Scandihoovian humorists have made recordings, created images, issued publications, performed on radio and in Upper Midwestern communities, and offered songs, jokes, and costumed representations bound up with the characters of Ole and, increasingly since the 1970s, Lena. The most noted professional promoters and impersonators of Ole, Lena, and related Scandihoovian personas active and (in the case of several from the Pacific Northwest) influential in the Upper Midwest from the 1930s through the end of the



Image 3: This gravestone from rural Iowa County, Wisconsin, shows the existence of an actual Scandinavian couple named Ole and Lena. Photo: Jim Leary, 2008.



twentieth century are far too numerous to even sketch in this short essay, but the most important among them include: Olaf the Swede, a singing comedian for Chicago's WLS Barn Dance who supplemented radio broadcasts with personal appearances at county fairs around the region; the Iverson brothers, Slim Jim and the Vagabond Kid, North Dakota natives whose popular programs on Minneapolis radio, 78 rpm records, and shows in small towns pleased audiences in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota; "Big Ole," impresario of the Big Ole Show, featured on radio out of Grand Forks, North Dakota, and in public appearances throughout the rural North Dakota/Minnesota border country; from that same area, a trio of comic performers—Jimmy Jenson "The Swingin' Swede," Luther Bjerke "The Wild Norwegian," and "Olaf Harvey"—involved variously with radio shows, LP recordings, and public appearances; "Little Oscar" Hoberg, a one-time Big Ole sidekick who relocated to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to perform in the micro-region where South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska intersect; another South Dakotan, Eider Clifford "Red" Stangland, a radio broadcaster and joke book publisher who sometimes put on comic shows with his sidekick "Uncle Torvald"; Charlene "Queen Lena" Powers from the North Dakota hinterlands; and a pair of performers from the far away Scandinavian American stronghold of Seattle, Stan Boreson and Yogi Yorgesson (the stage name of Harry Skarbo), who toured the Upper Midwest and featured the region in best-selling Scandihoovian 78 rpm and LP recordings.

Their regionally notorious representations helped inspire purely local enactments by non-professional Scandihoovian humorists throughout the Upper Midwest that continue to persist and thrive in the twenty-first century. Nowadays Ole and Lena flourish through such overlapping narrative, material, and visual forms as frequently told jokes, web sites, joke books, performances on compact disc, products like "Ole and Lena Fortune Cookies," and public appearances by numerous impersonators at informal parties, Lutheran church dinners, school programs, theatrical reviews, the joke contests of Nordic American organizations, community parades, and ethnic festivals. Although their invocation of Ole and Lena, exaggerated Scandihoovian dialect, frumpy rustic clothing, and friendly yet foolish personalities have remained relatively stable for decades, these comic folk characters have nonetheless changed with the times.

### Impersonating Ole and Lena in the Twenty-First Century

My Bohemian neighbor Charlie Jachim told the first Ole and Lena joke I'd ever heard. It was 1956, he was nine years old, I was six, and the joke involved Ole and Lena's conversation with an immigration official as they arrived in America. Noting Lena's sturdy figure and that Wisconsin was the couple's destination, the official exclaimed, "You're big enough to play for the Green Bay Packers." Misunderstanding the fellow's reference to Wisconsin's celebrated professional football team, blurring the distinctions between the sounds of short "e" and short "a," and somehow sufficiently savvy with vernacular English to know that "pecker" was a vulgar word for "penis," Lena objected, "Aye only play with Ole's packer."

Since then, while living, working, and traveling in the Upper Midwest, I have heard regionally-grounded dialect jokes on hundreds of occasions. Since the mid-1970s I have recorded several thousand such jokes and humorous anecdotes systematically amidst field research throughout the region from humble and notorious raconteurs alike, and have encountered as many more through the efforts of fellow folklorists. The accumulated ethnographic evidence— complemented by the longstanding regional presence of Scandihoovian humorists and their associated jokebooks, commercial recordings, and newspaper accounts in the historical record— demonstrates emphatically that Scandihoovian speech, as well as the figures Ole and Lena, are the most prominent and continuously popular forms of ethnic folk humor throughout the Upper Midwest. What's more, the tellers and audiences for these jokes have included people of diverse ethnic heritage. With regard to descent, for example, the performers of selected Scandinavian jokes in my anthology *So Ole Says to Lena: Folk Humor from the Upper Midwest* included not only Norwegian and Swedish Americans, but also people of Bohemian or Czech, English, Finnish, German, Irish, Polish, and Scottish descent (Leary 2001). Intrigued by this discovery, and well aware of the twenty-first century persistence of humorists in the region who not only performed jokes amidst the give-and-take of storytelling sessions, but also assumed costumed Scandihoovian personas for extended, advertised public performances, I began to wonder about their backgrounds and motives.

In summer 2008, by way of complementing prior field research historical inquiries, I sought interviews across the Upper Midwest regarding Ole and Lena, their audiences, and their critics with six twenty-first century Scandihoovian humorists: Art Bjornjeld, raised in Minneapolis in an

extended family with North Dakota roots, and the leader of Ole Olsson's Oldtime Orchestra; Bruce Danielson, another Minneapolis native, who has been playing Ole to fellow school teacher Ann Berg's Lena in Cambridge, Minnesota, since 1986; Robert Heinze, a founder of the Mighty Uff-Da Players, who has performed as Ole for twenty years in his hometown, Haugen, Wisconsin; Hans Peter Jorgensen, long known in Decorah, Iowa, as a great joketeller and hence enlisted to perform a string of Ole and Lena jokes as part of the program for that city's 2008 Nordic Fest; Suzann Johnson Nelson, who grew up in a conservative farming community between Alexandria and Fergus Falls in west-central Minnesota and founded the Lutheran Ladies comedy duo with Janet Letnes Martin; and Carol Haas Winters from southern Minnesota's Albert Lea, but a long-time resident of the state's north woods where she has performed as Lena Olson since 1994 for Akeley's Woodtick Theater.

Through observing their performances, examining their products, conducting tape recorded interviews with each, and reflecting on the historical record, it became evident that for twenty-first century Upper Midwesterners: 1) Ole and Lena are portrayed as frequently as not by performers who are of neither Norwegian nor Swedish descent; 2) although once deemed most often as either Swedish or "Scandinavian" by the region's populace, Ole and Lena are increasingly viewed as exclusively Norwegian; 3) the fictitious duo have been implicated gradually in escapades linked as much or more with a regional and national cultural present than with a Scandinavian old country and immigrant past; and 4) despite strong objections from a vocal minority, they are widely understood and esteemed as belonging to all of the region's European American citizenry, irrespective of ethnicity.

Taking up the first point, of the six performers interviewed, only Art Bjorngjeld and Suzann Johnson Nelson are Norwegian American. Art assumes the persona of Ole within Ole Olsson's Oldtime Orchestra, scattering dialect jokes and songs throughout his performances. But Suzann Nelson, although quite familiar with and sometimes appreciative of jokes concerning Ole and Lena, distances herself from these fictitious characters by asserting a comic realism in her performances.

I lived Ole and Lena. All my aunts and uncles were Ole and Lena—not the jokes. There were thirteen children in my dad's family. You'd think they could come up with thirteen names? Two of them were named Ole. And they called them Big Ole and Little Ole . . . My brother tells Ole and Lena jokes, he's wonderful, and he never forgets a one. But it's not the jokes to me, it's just the way we dress, the way we eat, and what we do. [Suzann

slips into Scandihoovian dialect with a facetious tone.] Ah, I don't think it's good to laugh a lot, because you might go to hell . . . I think laughing is mainly a waste of time. You could be dusting. [She shifts back to her normal voice.] No I didn't hear Ole and Lena jokes, but I lived with Ole and Lena. (Nelson 2008)

Meanwhile Bruce Danielson is decidedly Swedish; Hans Peter Jorgensen is Danish but grew up in a predominantly Norwegian community. Carol Winters' background and home territory are "very German," although she married into a family of mixed Norwegian and Swedish ancestry. And Bob Heinze is self-described "Bohemian" (Czech), while his Mighty Uff-Da Players, with surnames like Baumberger and Uchytíl, entertain in a Czech hall. Farther afield, North Dakota's Charlene Powers, the self-proclaimed Queen Lena, is Irish, while Garrison Keillor, the novelist and radio performer known for his humorous portrayals of Norwegian bachelor farmers and members of the Sons of Knute fraternal lodge, is of Scottish descent.

With regard to Ole and Lena's cultural roots, they and fellow characters in humorous dialect plays, songs, and stories were overwhelmingly portrayed as Swedes through roughly the first half of the 20th century, presumably because of the numerically larger late nineteenth century influx of immi-



Image 4: Suzann Johnson Nelson dressed as a conservative Norwegian Lutheran lady of the 1950s, Moorhead, Minnesota. Photo: Jim Leary, 2008.

grant Swedes into American cities where publishing, theater, and recording industries flourished, but likely also because—as an established imperial power, at least relative to Norway—Sweden had considerably more name recognition in America (Leary 2012). Whatever the explanation, to cite a prominent example, George T. Springer's classic jokebook, *Yumpin' Yimminy*, published in 1932, included 64 jokes mentioning Swedes, 23 concerning Scandinavians, and only 5 about Norwegians.

In the late 1940s, Harry Skarbo, the son of Norwegian immigrants, adopted the radio persona of Yogi Yorgesson, the Swedish Swami, and went on to record a million-selling dialect hit, "I Yust Go Nuts at Christmas." Jimmy Jenson, who began performing in the early 1950s as "The Swingin' Swede," is in reality a Norwegian American (Wallevand 2011). The tide began to turn in ensuing decades, however, as Norwegian Americans in Upper Midwestern rural and small town communities sustained folk humorous portrayals of Ole and Lena to a greater extent than their more urban Swedish counterparts. As Suzann Johnson Nelson wryly observed:

A lot more Swedes stayed in Minneapolis. Took the train from Chicago to St. Paul and stayed there, moved to Minneapolis when they had a few cents. But the Norwegians took the train from Chicago to Minneapolis and the ox cart to St. Cloud and then went out in the country where they belonged. (Nelson 2008)

In the 1970s, at the request of local audiences, the rural South Dakota disc jockey and raconteur Red Stangland published the first of many Norwegian joke books that sold widely throughout the Upper Midwest (e.g. Stangland 1979; Stangland 1986). As Bob Heinze of Haugen, Wisconsin, told me:

The Ole and Lena style jokes were very familiar to people here in the north woods and we decided we wanted to put those into acted out pieces. And so, probably '91, '92, we started to pull a combination of jokes out of sources like the Red Stangland [books] . . . An early piece we did was called Norwegian Helpmates where we put characters of an Ole and Lena who were having marital problems. (Heinze 2008)

Notions of Swedes as more sophisticated or arrogant than Norwegians—whether seriously subscribed to by members of either group, or the playful basis of friendly rivalry—also factor into the Swedish-become-Norwegian tendencies of Ole and Lena. Bruce Danielson and his partner in performance Ann Berg are both of Swedish descent, while their home community takes considerable pride in its Swedish heritage, "but we pretend that Ole and Lena are Norwegian . . . I can't say when it was that we made that de-

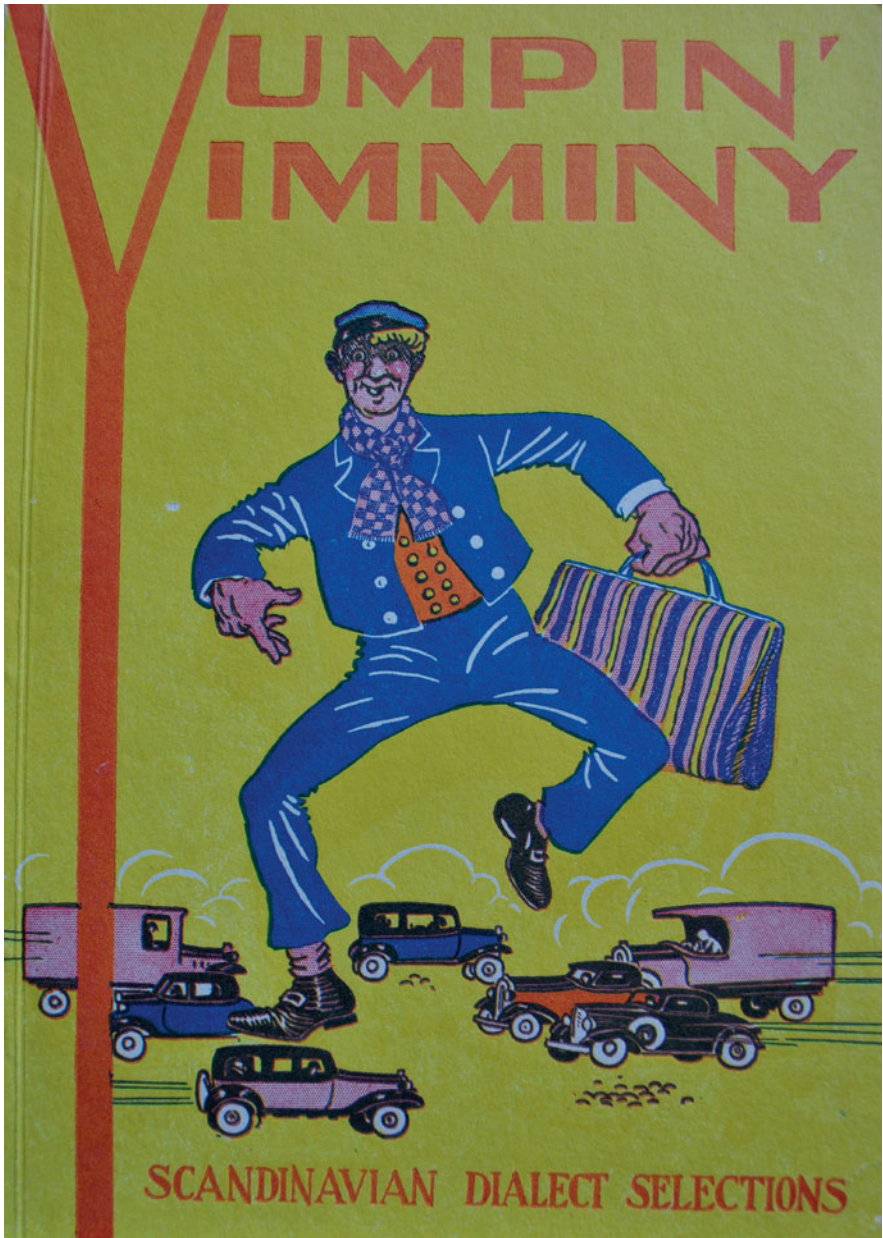


Image 5: George T. Springer's *Yumpin' Yimminy*, published in Long Prairie, Minnesota, c. 1932.

termination, that we're going to be Norwegian versus Swedish, but it's just always been that way" (Danielson 2008).

However these characters might be regarded ethnically, the distinctively Norwegian, or Swedish, or Scandinavian nature of Ole and Lena in the twenty-first century is a matter of degree and debate. To be sure, they continue to be performed with a marked Scandihoovian dialect, and they remain fond of lutefisk and lefse. Nonetheless they are typically no longer immigrants; nor do they still hold working class jobs on farms, in the woods, on fishing boats, or in domestic service. Instead they occupy a contemporary, technological, bureaucratic, suburban, and increasingly culturally diverse global landscape. In the jokes and estimations of twenty-first century performers, Ole and Lena have kids, go shopping, visit the doctor, fish, cheer their favorite football team, get speeding tickets, repair and remodel their home, are baffled by computers and electronic garage door openers, and vacation throughout America and the world. Indeed they live in much the same world as their contemporary impersonators, albeit with consistently greater bewilderment and a lesser sense of fashion. No longer garbed as old world peasants, they wear the ill-fitting, outmoded clothing of regional American rustics. As Bob Heinze put it, Ole favors "that north woods farmer look, with the flannel shirt and the overalls and beat up work shoes," while Lena has to wear "an old-fashioned dress" with an apron (Heinze 2008).

As a north woods native, Heinze and his mostly Czech neighbors in Haugen identify with Ole and Lena:

A lot of the signature traits are exactly, set aside the accent, the idea of the country bumpkin in the north woods. It could be Norwegian or Finnish, it could be Bohemian or Polish, it could be Irish. It's more or less just the rural north woods farming, logging culture combination that it arises from. (Heinze 2008)

Even so, he sagely acknowledged Ole and Lena's established status as the most recognizable stock characters in regional folk humor: "I don't know how it would float if we tried to run Bohemian humor" (Heinze 2008). According to Carol Winters, the founders of the Woodtick Theater modeled their variety show after those of Branson, Missouri, a country music Mecca: "Down there it's hillbillies and it's very southern. Why not play on what is northern?" In assuming the role of Lena Olson, Carol found that "it's not that different from my German background. It's just that we have different places that we talk about, but I think the basic ideas are so much the same" (Winters 2008). Peter Jorgensen went further:

They are to me, the kind of character that lives in all of us. Seemingly quite smart on first blush but capable of the most unbelievable faux pas, stumbling embarrassments and fumbling foibles. They mean well and are rarely mean-spirited but somehow manage to misinterpret, misread life's cues and generally just don't get it . . . Actually I don't think this is a particular take on Scandinavians . . . The crux of a lot of this humor to me is the "inside joke" where we get to feel superior to these poor oafs that are bumbling their way through life. But in the dark of the night, most of us know we are a lot like them. And that's what makes it funny because we get to laugh at ourselves at the same time. (Jorgensen 2008)

Despite Jorgensen's profoundly humanistic meditation on the ultimate meaning of Ole and Lena, which in my view is implicitly understood by many Upper Midwesterners, there is also evidence that for some the contemporary use of these characters by and for non-Scandinavians, and non-Norwegians especially, suggests superficiality at best, disdain at worst and, somewhere in the middle, rude appropriation.

Art Bjorngjeld recalled that Ole Olsson's Oldtime Orchestra came into being when the organizers of an ongoing festival devoted to "mostly contra and square dance" decided that, instead of bringing in a Cajun or swing band for a change of pace, they would—in the manner of post-modern foodies palate-shifting from French to Italian to Thai to Brazilian cuisines—"do Scandinavian" as a musical flavor-of-the-day. Asked to put together a band, Bjorngjeld called on some friends, then invented the name Ole Olsson's Oldtime Orchestra, partly because it would offer an opportunity to "play Ole" through dialect jokes and songs, but also because of the title's alliteration and pronunciation possibilities:

I really wanted us to go by the initials, which I thought was really cool-sounding 'cause some of these bands from Norway, they put their initials together and they come up with a new name. I thought O-O-O-O [pronounced with the lip puckering Scandinavian ø sound] would be really good, or if you just strung it together, OOOO, and made a word out of it. And if you actually say it correctly, O-O-O-O, it takes longer than saying Ole Olsson's Oldtime Orchestra. (Bjorngjeld 2008)

While OOOO's every-once-in-awhile performances for ethnically mixed regional audiences resulted in light-hearted pleasantry, one member of Bruce Danielson's ensemble—comprised of mostly Swedes portraying Ole and Lena as Norwegians for audiences in an avowedly Swedish community—took offense:



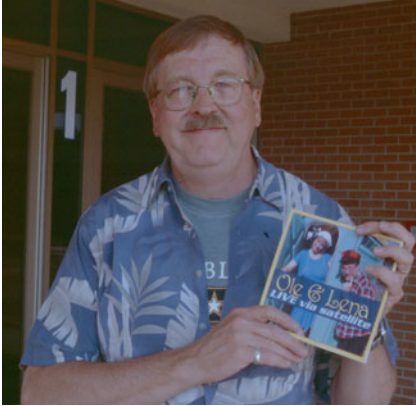


Image 6: Bruce Danielson of Cambridge, Minnesota, poses with the book on Ole and Lena that he created with fellow school-teacher Ann Berg. Photo: Jim Leary, 2008.



Image 7: Bruce Danielson pushes his glasses down his nose and assumes a goofy expression to become "Ole." Photo: Jim Leary, 2008.

The only time we got a complaint from someone, it was someone who was in the show. And they said, "Could we take the show in a different direction? Not that Ole and Lena should leave, but do we have to knock Norwegians all the time?" She said, "I'm full-blooded Norwegian. I'm proud of it. Do we have to do that?" And that was the year that we had the shirt—every year we had a shirt for the show—and that one said something like, "If you're Norwegian, look at the other side of this shirt." And on the back it said the same thing. And you know, you would've just been spinning. And she said, "I've never been offended before, but I'm kind of offended that you're poking this much fun at Norwegians. Couldn't we get away from that?" And we did, for awhile, as long as she was in the district we tried to play down the Norwegian thing a little. Because we didn't want to offend anyone. (Danielson 2008)

His fellow performer's complaint troubled the well-intentioned, kind-hearted Danielson: "We do it in fun. It would've been more natural for us to be Swedish. I don't know why we weren't" (Danielson 2008).

Suzann Johnson Nelson was likewise troubled by non-Norwegian appropriation, and quite articulate about her objections:

We're not going to make fun of anybody else. Maybe that's what bothers me about Garrison Keillor. He steals a lot of our stuff, but Norwegian Lutherans don't sue. [She's being only half-facetious here.] No. I think we're funny. God, we're funny, and we know it.

And we can laugh at ourselves, but we would never laugh at someone else. Not another ethnic group, not someone who is handicapped in any sort of way. This is something Janet [Letnes Martin] and I try and use with reporters often: We never poke fun at things, but we have fun with things. And if I were to tell Irish or German Russian jokes, I would be poking fun at them. But if I stick to Norwegian Lutherans, I'm having fun with them. (Nelson 2008)

Although originally grounded in a politics of culture encompassing a dialectic between immigrant and American status in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ole, Lena, and related Scandihoovians persist in the present as comic fictitious characters whose nonetheless real existence and association with the Upper Midwest—thanks to the sustained efforts of traveling comedians, local humorists, their productions, and their culturally diverse audiences—is continuous yet transformed, consistent yet ambiguous, accepted yet contested, inclusive yet exclusive, benign yet suspect, ethnic yet regional.

At once a geographical and an imaginative space at the outset of the twenty-first century, America's Upper Midwest is likely to remain Scandihoovian for decades to come.

### **Implications for American Studies**

In an essay on “Folklore Methodology and American Humor Research,” contributed to the ambitious survey *Humor in America: A Research Guide to Genres and Topics*, Elliott Oring argued convincingly that “folklorists are probably the most prominent ethnographers of American Humor” (Oring 1988:223). Yet American folklorists whose research concerns humor have always been few in numbers relative to researchers on this topic in mainstream academic disciplines. Fewer still have undertaken ethnographies in the Upper Midwest. Sadly, scholars from other fields whose work intersects with the interdisciplinary discipline of American Studies, and who are also concerned with the folk and vernacular humor of Americans, have largely ignored the Upper Midwest, particularly when making grand pronouncements regarding American folk and vernacular humor.

In 1948, six years after earning his PhD from Harvard's American Civilization Program, the first American Studies program in the United States, folklorist Richard M. Dorson published “Dialect Stories of the Upper Peninsula: A New Form of American Folklore” (1948). Drawing on extensive ethnographic research, he observed that “immigration has planted a remarkably diverse mixture” on this northeastern extent of the Upper Midwest

where “the land has affected its people, and welded them into a regional group [and] so, too, the people have affected the land.” Moreover, “the newcomer groups have made a deep impression on the total population, they have aroused a reaction within the popular mind, especially within the native sense of humor, and this has produced the dialect joke” (Dorson 1948:113). Situating his findings within the larger context of American folk and vernacular humor, Dorson acknowledged the generic kinship of Upper Midwestern dialect stories with “Yankee yarns that liberally strew the mid-nineteenth century press.” Likewise, “Jewish, Italian, Irish, and Negro dialect stories are of course widespread in United States tradition . . . but in their geographic concentration, wide dispersion, multiplicity, and extreme oral popularity . . . dialect tales represent a novel folklore phenomenon” (Dorson 1948:116).

Dorson’s rich field research and astute observations, which hold true to the present, have had far too little impact outside the field of Folklore Studies on the major would-be chroniclers of grassroots humor in American life. Despite being published by the University of Minnesota Press, based in Minneapolis, Walter Blair and Raven McDavid’s comprehensively titled *The Mirth of a Nation: America’s Great Dialect Humor* (1984) included not a single mention of the still vibrant Scandihoovian dialect humor established in that significantly Swedish-American city nearly a century before. Similarly an essay devoted to “Racial and Ethnic Humor” in the aforementioned guidebook, *Humor in America*, ignored Ole, Lena, and the Upper Midwest (Dorinson and Boskin 1988). Drawing upon observations by the Nobel Prize winning novelist and Minnesota native, Sinclair Lewis, Christie Davies at least acknowledged the presence of Swedish American folk humor, albeit exclusively in Minnesota and only for a fleeting historical moment.

Ethnic jokes about Swedes were popular up to and including the 1920s when, according to Sinclair Lewis [1954 (1923), 222 and 224], Minnesota was seen as “these steppes inhabited by a few splendid Yankees—one’s own sort of people and by Swedes who always begin sentences with ‘Vell, Aye tank,’ who are farmhands, kitchen-maids and icemen, and who are invariably humorous” and when old-stock Americans believed that “the Minnesota Scandinavians are no matter how long they remain here like the characters of that estimable old stock-company play ‘Yon Yonson’—a tribe humorous, inferior and unassimilable.”

Such humor supposedly vanished shortly thereafter when “upward economic mobility and social and cultural assimilation . . . made the older ethnic jokes about Scandinavians largely obsolete” (Davies 1990:160-161).

More than two decades after this emphatic declaration, the participants in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin's Scandihoovian Winter Festival, the humorists who impersonate Scandinavian characters on stages and in skits, and the thousands who actively tell and appreciate Ole and Lena jokes across the Upper Midwest would be puzzled to learn that what they have been doing for more than one hundred and twenty years has been "largely obsolete" for nearly ninety years. On the contrary, their folk humor has been vibrant all along, and like any cultural tradition that has persisted it has also changed. Its contemporary existence has nothing to do with an inability to assimilate; on the contrary, it has everything to do with the fusing of shared elements from mainstream American life, from the heritage of Scandinavian and other immigrants, and from the experiences of working and socializing in a distinct region. As a result, the Scandihoovian humor of twenty-first century Ole and Lena impersonators has something profound to say to American Studies scholars about the resilience and complexity of cultural pluralism and creolization in American life. Indeed the Upper Midwest's most enduring and prevalent mode of folk humor is an important form of what UNESCO terms "Intangible Cultural Heritage": a unique component of a culturally inclusive Upper Midwestern identity, a Scandihoovian space. This essay could not have been written without the generous cooperation and keen insights of Art Bjornsgjeld, Bruce Danielson, Bob Heinze, Hans Peter Jorgensen, Suzann Johnson Nelson, and Carol Winters, all of them Scandihoovian comedians extraordinaire. I also owe a great debt to Paul F. Anderson and Carl Schneider, both of whose online publications are inspirational works of scholarship.

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