

## Creators, Collectors & Communities

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*Making Ethnic Identity Through Objects*

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# Introduction

## *Making Ethnic Identity through Objects*

Ann Smart Martin

In the 1870s Cathinka Tank Doderlein Otteson, wife of the Lutheran pastor at Koshkonong, WI, hosted a young woman soon to become a pastor's wife in her home. In the young guest's memory, the older woman's advice was simple: life in parsonages in America was simply different from those in Norway. The "old way" was just not practical. Moving to America dramatically changed the homes, work, and identities of women. Later generations of Norwegian-Americans would change them again.<sup>1</sup>

This exhibition highlights 150 year-old cycles of voluntary immigration, adaptation, and re-formulation of ethnic identity across different situations and generations. Such cultural shifts often are most successful when changes are incremental, regularly practiced by individuals in their daily lives, and reinforced as part of group experience. Hence, immigrant groups like the Norwegians in Wisconsin were able to navigate their new lives and maintain their ethnic identities through the making of distinctive buildings, dress, and household furnishings.<sup>2</sup>

Studying the Northern Europeans who flooded to Wisconsin and subsequent generations by examining their possessions in a historical society is a surprisingly fruitful way to understand such evolutions in history and humanity. What would a life in a completely new country require? What would a Norwegian farmer bring along to maintain a livelihood or his wife to clothe and feed a family? What objects helped maintain a human connection to one's past? As important, how did the making and enjoying of such objects change as these immigrants attempted to both replicate and improve their lives in a new set of conditions? How did such ideas as taste and style persevere and how did they change?

The relationship that my students and I formed with the Mount Horeb Area Historical Society has allowed us all to ponder these connections. I am a scholar of the history of objects, both fine arts and everyday things. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I teach the topic of material culture, a specialized name to describe that set of expectations and personal relationships between humans and the material world. I am particularly interested in how and why people relate to objects and often to each other through them. So too, I wonder about the "lives of objects" and how the varying stages of making, buying, and living with objects intersect with what their later fate when they leave the home as heirlooms or enter museums, second-hand stores, or landfills.

The MHAHS has many objects in their collections, but often only cursory research had been done to build upon the notes in the files. Beginning in the fall of 2015, my classes have researched varying items to understand their history and the stories of their users, savers, collectors and donors. The classes were usually small and a mix of advanced undergraduates and graduate

1. L. DeAne Lagerquist, *In America the Men Milk the Cows: Factors of Gender, Ethnicity and Religion in the Americanization of Norwegian-American Women* (Brooklyn, N.Y. Carlson Publishing Inc. 1991)

2. Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999)

students. They came from many different backgrounds, with specialized studies in Art History, Design Studies, Folklore, History, Interior Architecture, Library and Information Studies, Material Culture, Philosophy and Textiles.

Each semester the ever-patient Johnna Buysse provided a selection of possible objects to research based on their overall interest and good family connections. Each student learned and used material culture research methods to tweak and prod them to tell extraordinary stories. The first semester's class (Fall 2015) studied some objects related to ethnic emigrants, but all were some of the "greatest hits" of the collection. Three Art graduate students made an installation of their own works that were inspired by the historic objects they studied. The class presented their research papers in January 2016 at Mt. Horeb to an impressive turnout of families and fans of the town. Another research semester followed in Spring 2016, focusing on the Donald family and related "make do" culture of the late 19th and early 20th century.

During a class visit early in the spring of 2016, the Mt. Horeb staff and I decided to join forces in their opening exhibition. The next year's students would take an additional semester and help curate by writing interpretative labels. I have coordinated six student exhibitions of art, artifacts, decorative arts, and science—yes, even taxidermy and physics instruments—and each had presented unique challenges. But only one had managed to create a catalog. Steel Wagstaff of Learning Support Services at UW-Madison was just beginning a new initiative of creating electronic books as a form of university publication and he thought this would be a great opportunity to present our course research and produce a catalog. The students went far beyond normal classwork expectations to research and produce the interpretive labels for the catalog and the amazing e-book document. Laura Schmidt skillfully managed electronic book production and Larissa Cangussa designed the book cover. A great collection, talented professionals, determined students, classes that teach good writing and critical thinking, and brand-new technologies at the UW-Madison all came together in just the right moment. Such a coming together is also proof of the special nature of the Wisconsin idea when the university brings ideas to and gains knowledge from local communities around the state.

What can we learn by studying the effects of northern Europeans to American culture more than a century ago? Beginning in the eighteenth century, repeating patterns of intolerance and discrimination against each of the major European immigrant groups—German, Irish, Italian, Pole, and others—prevented many immigrants from melding into the anonymous American identity. Others gladly self-segregated with their in-group, creating a community with separate languages and distinctive architecture, dress, and household furnishings.

Evolving governmental policies changed the importance of ethnicity and nationhood in the twentieth century. The Immigration Act of 1965 removed many kinds of preferential treatment for Europeans who wished to move to America. This action created different problems of ethnic identification. Like the experience of enslaved Africans centuries before, this legislation opened the gates to more and different people whose physical appearances set them apart from the white majority. Moreover, the further blending of multiple ethnic and racial groups through inter-marriage only further complicate our understanding. Modern governmental policies like the

census allow for racial and ethnic identity to be *self-identified*. This leads us to ask if American society is pluralist (defined by groups) or flexible and multi-cultural.<sup>3</sup>

Another important shift in our quest to understand preferred ethnic identity occurred in the last half of the twentieth century. Generations away from the immigration of their ethnic forebears, Americans searched for authentic heritage in the marketplace. They “shopped for it” as American marketers of consumer goods both embraced and exploited a wish for an authentic heritage. Fashion borrowed details of ethnic costume; cuisine took in global scents and tastes. Musicians borrowed and sampled the sounds of the world, even as they turned backward and inward to old-fashioned pump organs and fiddles in American “roots music.”<sup>4</sup>

In a trend throughout the twentieth century that peaked around the nation’s bicentennial (1976), many communities donated funds and created institutions to accept and interpret objects deemed important to mark their heritage. Such was the case to establish the Mount Horeb Area Historical Society in 1975 and to create their new Driftless Historium forty-two years later. Through these institutions, we learn about communities, customs, and collectors. Through careful curation of objects in an exhibition, we see more clearly how history, ethnicity, and identity intertwine.

This exhibition introduces us to many people and teaches us about many household objects. The trunks and mangle boards that immigrants brought to a new settlement were made to be useful, appear beautiful, and remind of home. Craftsman Azaak Lie updated his native Norwegian woodworking skills to fit American styles and tastes. The “artist farmer” Martin Cliff drew upon both his Norwegian heritage and popular arts and crafts of the period. When Oljanna Cunneen and Patricia Edmundson crafted trolls or rosemaled dishes, they looked back at a romantic heritage. Isaak Lee established little Norway to revel in his beloved mythical landscape of buildings and objects and commissioned Olaf Colberson to decorate walls and furniture, including a traditional *kubbestol* updated with rockers.

The pride in these artists and their work was a hallmark of a community that valued their ethnic heritage. Ultimately, the Mt. Horeb Chamber of Commerce officials would decorate a town water tank with rosemaling and support a roadway series of troll sentinels to create a cultural landscape that would solidify the town’s own identity. In sum, they used all these kinds of objects to define ethnicity, remember Mt. Horeb’s past, and guard its future.

A simple plate can go unnoticed, but its purpose and value can tell many cultural stories. This exhibition has demonstrated how to use an object to think about historical patterns, such as whether an immigrant packed an item for a long journey or its creator updated its traditional form after settling in America. Perhaps it shows a passion for a re-invented and romanticized past or how heritage can be a commodity. In all these instances, a material object demonstrates that ethnicity is not a static trait but something slowly evolving as it is lived and experienced. Each item in this exhibition is a unique expression of a person’s identity and a clue to the special something that makes the Mount Horeb community so vibrant today.

3. Mary C. Waters, “Multiple Ethnic Identity Choices” in Wendy F. Katkin, Ned Landsman, and Andrea Tyree, *Beyond Pluralism: The Conception of Groups and Group Identities in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998). pp. 28-32.

4. Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000)

## PART I

# THE OLD WORLD IN THE NEW

Southwestern Dane County was settled by diverse immigrants in the latter half of the 19th century. Irish, Swiss, Scots, Norwegians, Germans, English and Eastern Yankees all took up residence in the rolling hills and glens of the Driftless region. These transplants brought centuries-old material forms of ethnic expression that adapted their European, Old World heritage to their New World homeland.

The pieces in this section are some of the oldest in the Mount Horeb Area Historical Society collection. All were carefully transported from locales across the globe—for reasons both sentimental and practical, decorative and utilitarian—by immigrants preparing for a new American life.

# I. Snuff Box

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**Snuff Box**  
Norwegian  
Maker attributed to Gude, Norwegian sculptor,  
c.1800  
Wood  
Gift of Nancy Pearson  
MHAHS 1978.004.0001

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For Norwegian immigrant Arne Kulterstad, a settler in the Mount Horeb area, this snuff box was more than just a gift from one of Norway's greatest authors. It was a gift from the man who had saved his life. Before leaving Norway, Kulterstad had been found guilty of murdering his landlord when the author Børnstjerne Bjørnson heard of the case. Without Bjørnson's public appeal for leniency, Arne Kulterstad would have been executed. Instead, he served time in jail before starting a new life in the United States. This delicately-carved snuff box, once a practical item for storing tobacco, became a sentimental object with a story to tell subsequent generations.

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This little snuff box is part of an unusual story of immigration; one which involves a murder, two kings, and the aid of one of Norway's greatest authors. The immigrant at the center of the story is Arne Kulterstad. He was born to a freeholding family in the mountainous region of Valdres in central Norway in 1825. He was, by all accounts, a rough man. Tall and broad-shouldered, he possessed a nasty temper and was prone to violence, especially when drunk. Kulterstad served for some time in the Norwegian military, achieving the rank of sergeant, before he was dishonorably discharged for insubordination and disorderly conduct.

Beginning around 1844, Kulterstad became involved in a feud with a man named Ole Olsen Høiland. Høiland, possibly through suspect methods, acquired the Kulterstad family farm from Arne's brother at an extraordinarily low price. Arne challenged the sale in court, but the case was denied. Under Norwegian law at the time, when a freeholding farmer retired, they passed on ownership of the land, but continued to live on it under the care of its new owner. In buy the

Kulterstad farm, Høiland took on the legal obligation to supply Arne's parents with an allowance and shelter. Høiland, who was himself regarded as a cruel man, left the elder Kulterstads in poverty and when Arne's father died, Arne believed Høiland's neglectfulness had hastened it. Under these circumstances, the animosity between Ole Høiland and Arne Kulterstad grew.

These tensions came to a head in 1858. At a public event, a squabble between the two men erupted into a brawl. Høiland, in the presence of the local magistrate, drew a knife on Kulterstad and stuck it through his right hand, permanently injuring it. Kulterstad sought compensation by bringing a lawsuit, but the case lingered in the courts. On November 17th, 1858 Kulterstad was out hunting when he spied Høiland driving his cart to the mill. Perhaps impatient with the lawsuit, Kulterstad fired his rifle at Høiland, striking him in the chest. He had not seen Kulterstad shoot at him, but their well-known feud led everyone to suspect Kulterstad immediately. Nine days after Høiland died from the gunshot wound.

Arne Kulterstadt was convicted of murdering Ole Høiland and was sentenced to be executed. The case was appealed to the Norwegian Supreme Court, but the verdict was upheld. At this point, Kulterstad, who had hitherto been silent at the recommendation of his lawyer admitted to shooting Høiland, but asserted he was only attempting to maim the man in retaliation for the injury to his own hand. Kulterstad had been recognized in the military for his marksmanship and was noted for his skill at bird hunting and was thus capable of such precise shooting. However, he contended, a sudden movement by Høiland resulted in the shot hitting Høiland in the back, mortally wounding him. Kulterstad's confession did not elicit clemency from the courts, as he had hoped, but it did attract the attention of the author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson.

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was a member of the Norwegian Romantic Nationalist movement and one of the most prominent literary figures in the county. His works often dealt with and celebrated Norwegian rural life and people. Bjørnson visited the condemned Kulterstad in prison, where on Arne pleaded with the author to help him. Bjørnson began a series of public appeals for leniency, not shying away from Kulterstad's guilt or unflattering character, but argued that based on the because he did not intend to kill Høiland, Kulterstad, morally, should not be executed. Bjørnson, since witnessing an execution as a child, had been an opponent of the death penalty. The public appeals found a receptive audience and public pressure led to King Karl XV commuting the sentence to life of hard labor. After serving twenty years, Kulterstad's good behavior in prison led to King Oscar II pardoning him with the condition of exile. During his 20 years in prison, Kulterstad's children had emigrated to the Blue Mounds area of Wisconsin and he followed them there in 1880.

Kulterstad had one more meeting with Bjørnson the following year, when the author was on tour in the United States. Bjørnson was staying in Madison and Kulterstad travelled to meet with him. Emotions ran high as Kulterstad thanked Bjørnson and told him he was like a second father to him. It was likely during this reunion that Bjørnson gave Kulterstad this elaborately decorated snuff box. Arne Kulterstad died in 1902, not living to see Bjørnson win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1903. Kulterstad kept the snuff box as a treasured keepsake until, on his death bed, he passed the box on to the man who wrote his will.

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## 2. Box

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**Box**  
Norwegian  
Maker unknown, c.1848  
Wood, paint  
Gift of Ella Mavis  
MHAHS 1987.024.0001

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This Norwegian storage box was turned from a single log in the first half of the 19th Century and decorated in traditional Norwegian motifs. It was brought to Dane County by one of the first Norwegian immigrant families to settle in the area. The initials “GOD” painted on its lid are believed to stand for Guri, Daughter of Ole. This treasured heirloom was passed down through the Thompson family.

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This round box, probably used to store food, is decorated with rosemailing. Made in Norway in the 1830s or 1840s, it belonged to Guri Gaarden Thompson, who brought it to America when she emigrated in 1848. Both the box and its lid were turned from a single log. It was acquired from Guri Thompson’s granddaughter, Ella Mavis, who donated it to the Mount Horeb Historical Society. While there are ambiguities surrounding certain aspects of the box and its history, it nevertheless serves as an example of the rosemailing artistic tradition.

Rosemailing is a decorative art, unique to Norway, developed in the early eighteenth century as an off-shoot to the country’s carving tradition. When acanthus carving was introduced to Norway

in the late seventeenth century, the style was popular with aristocrats and wealthy merchants. As the acanthus-leaf motif spread throughout Norway adorning churches, parishioners desired objects decorated in a similar fashion. However, the skilled work required to carve the intricate acanthus designs was too costly for most Norwegians. Rosemaling developed as a translation in paint of the carved designs. This allowed the decorative style to be accessible to the larger society.

Rosemaling is Norwegian for “floral painting”. The dramatically colored floral images are set-off against a solid painted background. Rosemaling is characterized by its curved and scroll-like representation of flowers and leaves. It took these traits from the Baroque and Rococo styles as expressed in acanthus carving. Both of these styles emphasized curving “S” and “C” shaped lines. The Baroque style maintained symmetry in its designs, whereas the Rococo style frequently used asymmetry to create dramatic forms and outlines. In the same way that both symmetry and asymmetry are present in acanthus carvings, local rosemaling traditions vary in the degree to which they rely on symmetry.

In the valleys and fjords of Norway, separated by rugged mountains, rosemaling developed into several distinct regional styles. These styles, while all hewing to solid-colored backgrounds with floral painted designs, nevertheless relied on different color schemes and depictions of flowers. For example, the Telemark style from southern Norway features highly asymmetrical leaves and flowers emanating from a root to fill the surface on which it is painted. In contrast, rosemaling in Os on the western coast tends to be more geometric, displaying symmetry in two or four directions with more restrained curves.

Guri Thompson, like most Norwegian immigrants to the Blue Mounds region, came from the Valdres region and the rosemaling on this box is characteristic of that region’s style. Rosemaling in Valdres is often painted on a blue or teal background. The flowers and leaves tend to be grouped together like bouquets, which can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical. Such bouquets appear on the lid of this teal box where identical flowers spout in five directions from a circular blossom depicted in the center. Another element common to the Valdres style, a string of flowers connected as if they were tied in a garland, appear around the sides of the box.

One aspect of the history of this box remains unclear. The initials “G.O.D.” appear in the center of the lid. Museum records relay that this stands for “Guri Olsdottir” (Ole’s daughter). However, the records also indicate that Guri Thompson’s maiden name was Guri Thorson Gaarden. The reason for this discrepancy in the initials on the box is unknown. According to Norwegian naming conventions Guri should have had a name ending in “dottir”. It is possible that “Olsdottir” was part of her name, but without genealogical information that cannot be resolved.

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### 3. Trunk

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**Trunk**

Norwegian

Maker unknown; decorated by Ole Haugen, 1835

Wood, metal, paint

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Raymond &

Margaret Vicker Charitable Trust

MHAHS 2014.073.0020

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Decorated Norwegian chests served as vessels from a distant homeland for families making the long journey to America. They were transformed from a decorative yet functional container to an enclosure protecting the personal, the practical and the sentimental. They embodied psychological and physical security. Decorated approximately 20 years before arrival in America, this particular chest brought a family's possessions to Perry Township in the mid-1850s. Having been passed down in the family, the chest was proudly offered to Little Norway by Guri Jeglum as a memorial to her Norwegian ancestry. Rosemaling, a specialized form of stylized floral painting with centuries-old roots in Norway, decorated these chests and many other household items that you will see in this exhibition.

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Once the decision to emigrate was made, the Norwegian farmer and his family coming to the

United States for a better life had to separate their personal belongings into what to keep and what to permanently abandon. The objects that were selected themselves became vessels of nostalgia, as each object was a memory of their heritage.

Trunks that transported those items of importance made it through thick and thin on their voyage to the United States. Across oceans on ships and ox carts to the Midwest, you can read the stories in the scrapes and dings. Not all trunks were originally made for immigration, many of them were actually dowry chests that were made for young women to store their belongings in preparation for marriage. These dowry chests were often used for storage as the tradition began declining toward the height of immigration. When new trunks were constructed, they were specifically rosemaled for the journey to the United States.

The addition of rosemaling had the purpose of assigning the Norwegian folk art symbol of identity. A way of reminding them forever of where they came from, and to keep their homeland with them no matter where they traveled. Since they had to leave so much behind when they left, rosemaling gave immigrants a chance to bring much more than belongings with them. Dates were painted on the chests to mark important dates like emigration, or marriage on the dowry chests. Property like livestock, homes, and land had to be sold or auctioned off, as it could not be taken with to the new world. In *The Trauma of Moving: Psychological Issues for Women*, the feeling of loss experienced by immigrants is described as follows, “Leaving behind whatever embodies special memories and experiences— can feel like an amputation. It is the loss of a segment of family continuity, of personal history, the loss of a fragment of self.”[1] This is why chests themselves became so important to the Norwegians.

What Norwegians put in their chests gave them the ability to control something in the midst of all of the separation. The chests kept their most important belongings safe on their journey. Every. Single. Object. That was packed was touched by the emigrant, thus adding an intimate connection to the objects that were packed. Emigrants had to pack for a country that they knew nothing about, which added to the difficulty of what to leave behind. *True Account of America* by Ole Rynning, a guidebook for Norwegians coming to the United States, was published in 1838, and it provided advice that would be used on the trip and what was needed in the new world. Types of food, medicine, toiletries, durable goods for the home: bed clothing, furs, vadmæl (a heavy woolen cloth used to make basic male and female traditional dress), artisan tools, items that would be unavailable to buy in the United States: spinning wheels, bakstehelle (a round flat iron plate for baking flatbread); things that could be sold in America to raise money: silver goods, tobacco pipes, rifle.[2] In other words, it was recommended that Norwegians bring items that were rare, or expensive in the United States.

Tara Bohn interviewed children of the immigrants to create lists from memory:

Mr. Nicholas Gunderson, also of Madison, remembers the following Norwegian items from his childhood home: huge decorated chests for clothes and food, a spinning wheel, ale bowls, a quantity of smaller chests and boxes, brass candlesticks, sleigh bells, silver brooches and other jewelry, a heart-shaped smelling-salts case, and a large silver spoon. Among the various books that were brought along, he remembers especially well Tresehow’s *Predikener over høimesse-texterne*, published in Copenhagen in 1787.[3]

These chests carried more than just belongings. They carried memories, dreams, and hope of what a new world may bring. They are reminders of where emigrants came from, reminders of Norwegian roots that lived on through generations, constant reminders of the Norwegian ethnic identity.

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Tara Bohn, "A Quest for Norwegian Folk Art in America: Immigrant Mementos in Private Homes." NAHA // *Norwegian-American Studies*: 129, [http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/nas/volume19/vol19\\_6.htm](http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/nas/volume19/vol19_6.htm)., 129

## 4. Trunk



### **Trunk**

Norwegian

Maker unknown, 1821; decoration attributed to Per Lysne, c. 1930

Wood, metal, paint

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Raymond & Margaret Vicker Charitable Trust

MHAHS 2014.073.0019

This chest, dated 1821, was brought to “Madison:Visskonsin” by S.A. Bolstad who hand-lettered his name and destination on the back panel. Although little is known about Bolstad, we do know that this piece was one of the first furnishings acquired for local tourist attraction Little Norway. The rosemaled design on the chest, attributed to artist Per Lysne, was likely added at the time of that acquisition. Little Norway displayed the chest for more than 80 years.

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[More information](#)

## 5. Traveling box

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**Traveling Box**  
Norwegian  
Unknown, 1841  
Wood, metal, paint  
Little Norway Collection, Gift of  
Raymond & Margaret Vicker  
Charitable Foundation  
MHAHS 2014.073.0005

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Once the decision to emigrate was made, the Norwegian farmer and his family had to separate their personal belongings into what to keep and what to permanently abandon before embarking to the United States for a better life. Some objects they selected were practical items needed for surviving in their new lives, while others were sentimental items. But each might become a vessel of nostalgia and a memory of heritage. Small boxes like this one were used for food on the voyage or for the most personal of belongings. This trunk was passed down in the Langland family before it was gifted to Little Norway by Knud Langland, Isaak Dahle's cousin.

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Find more information here <https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/driftless/chapter/chests-and-traveling-box/>



## 6. Mangle Board (Mangletre)

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### **Mangle Board (Mangletre)**

Norwegian

Maker unknown, 1806

Wood, paint

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Raymond & Margaret Vicker

Charitable Trust

MHAHS 2014.073.0025

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Imagine carving and painting a board with wonderful symbols to iron your clothes. The maker of this mangle board (also called mangletre) does just that by creating a flat finished surface on the bottom and a carved and painted top. Used with a kind of rolling pin, a woman could properly press her family's linen.

This mangle board's overall landscape scene includes many symbols and stories that had been shared across Europe for centuries before this board was made. Some specific signs to bless a marriage were in the form of animals: swans (eternal love) and storks (childbirth). So too the figure of a horse, used here as a handle, was a long-time symbol of strength and virility throughout Scandinavia. Orange, green, yellow, red, and blue paint made the board more vibrant.

This object is an extraordinary example of the way Norwegians produced beautifully crafted

practical household items. It also demonstrates how cultural signs were preserved, translated, and understood for centuries.

For a complete essay on this object, [click here](#).

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Unlike traditional mangle boards, this board has a story of two lovers etched in it for eternity. The board is carved, with colors of orange, green, yellow, red, and blue painted on it to make the board more vibrant. The bottom is smooth like traditional mangle boards, and the top appears to be chip carved. The swans are a symbol of love and partnership, the flowers are a symbol of fertility, and the storks are a symbol of children. The traditional horse handle is a symbol of strength and virility throughout pre-Christian Norway and the rest of Scandinavia. The horse has survived in Norwegian folk culture to this day. The maker of this board carved a detailed landscape full of signs of blessed future happiness for the couple.

The origins of the board are unknown, but the board is carved with the date of 1806. While dates on objects often denote the date they are made, this year might have been added later for the actual wedding or as a commemoration. We can be sure that the board though was on display in Little Norway for over eighty years, which is why it is in poorer condition today as it was not in a climate controlled area. Nonetheless, beetle damage was already seen when Little Norway cataloged the board in 1935.

The swans at the bottom of the board, and the couple near the top located above the flowers and vines indicate their love growing. The man that carved this board appears to be more into the idea of having a relationship and growing with someone rather than just having authority over them. A more romantic love than the traditional mangle board depicts. This man wanted more than a housewife; he wanted someone to love and to love him back. This man must have really loved the woman that he carved this board for, so that she would always be reminded of their relationship as she did her housework.

## 7. Walking Stick

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### **Walking Stick**

Irish

Maker attributed to Michael Casey, c.1850

Wood (blackthorn)

Gift of Veronica (Sally) & Demi McGinley

MHAHS 2004.062.0006

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A shillelagh (pronounced shi-LAY-lee) is sometimes a walking stick, but it is always also a club. When needs arose, a whack from the knob end could pack quite a punch! Shillelaghs have a history in Ireland going back hundreds of years. Receiving one was part of a young man's transition into adulthood and he would continue to carry it as part of being a man. Male immigrants leaving Ireland often brought their shillelaghs with them to America. Like the shamrock, the shillelagh has become closely associated with Ireland and Irish-American identity. This one, made and owned by Michael Casey, is a reminder of the many immigrant groups that settled in the Blue Mounds area.

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Michael Casey, like scores of other Irish immigrants, brought his shillelagh with him when he left Ireland. A shillelagh (pronounced shi-LAY-lee) is a type of walking stick and club particular to Ireland. Generally ranging from between three to four feet in length, shillelaghs are also sometimes called "knob-sticks" because of the large bulbous head on one end. Throughout their history, shillelaghs have variously been symbols of manhood, used in depictions to mock the Irish, and as emblems of Irish pride.

This specific shillelagh was made by Michael Casey himself, probably around 1850. To make it, Casey would have cut a section of the trunk with a limb extending from it from a blackthorn bush. Blackthorn is a species of European bush noteworthy for long, sharp thorns. The blackthorn limb formed the length of the cane, whereas the trunk became the knob at the top. Casey would have carved the section of trunk to make it rounded and comfortable to hold in the hand. To finish the shillelagh, Casey would have either smeared it with butter and hung it in a chimney, or buried it in a pile of manure for several weeks. These processes both serve to cure and strengthen the bark of the cane, which gives the shillelagh its characteristic black color. That Michael Casey left the thorns on the cane's shaft suggests that he primarily used it as a walking stick. A shillelagh meant to be used as a weapon generally has these thorns cut off so that its user can wield it comfortably by the shaft.

The history of shillelaghs in Ireland spans several centuries, but they are poorly explained in much of the historical record. Use of clubs in Ireland appear in art and the literature at least as early as the seventh century. Whether these clubs are related to the traditions surrounding shillelaghs is unclear. The absence of shillelaghs in historical documents likely stems from their use primarily by members of the lower classes. Shillelaghs begin to appear frequently in historical

sources during the late eighteenth century while Ireland was under British rule. During this time period and continuing through the nineteenth century, there are reports of shillelaghs being used in “factional fighting”. These fights occurred between gang-like groups or factions and often occurred at fairs and other social gatherings. These fights probably were somewhat recreational in nature, following certain rules and allowing participants the opportunity to demonstrate their skills. In this regard, shillelagh fights bear a resemblance to other combat sports, such as boxing. In any case, British authorities suppressed the practice and it gradually declined by the start of the twentieth century, with the last major fight taking place in Carrickmacross, Ireland in 1929.

Shillelaghs have taken on different symbolic meanings depending on place and time. In Ireland, itself, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, shillelaghs were given from fathers to sons as a rite of passage to manhood. The importance of the shillelagh is apparent by the way in which they retained the form of the club even when that was no longer their primary purpose. With the increase in immigration from Ireland to England and America as a result of the Potato Famine in the mid-nineteenth century, shillelaghs took on a negative connotation. Anti-Irish sentiment ran high in both countries. Exacerbated by religious differences, the English and Anglo-Americans stereotyped the Irish as backwards, belligerent people. Newspapers frequently printed caricatures of Irish men as drunk and wielding a shillelagh. As Irish immigrants gained stature within American society, they reclaimed the shillelagh as a positive symbol of Irish identity. Today it stands among shamrocks and Saint Patrick as emblems of Irish heritage and pride.

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- Kavanagh, Peter. “The Shillelagh: A Weapon of Honor.” *American Mercury*, May 1951. <http://www.unz.org/Pub/AmMercury-1951may-00525?View=PDF>

## 8. Spinning Wheel

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### **Spinning Wheel**

Norwegian

Maker unknown, c.1840

Wood, metal

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Scott & Jennifer

Winner

MHAHS 2014.050.0081

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Spinning wheels were vital, if ordinary, objects that a family often brought from Norway to America. Spinning thread to make yarn was an important way that women contributed to family life during early immigrant days. Like the mangle board on display, these items were utilitarian. But by adding traditional Norwegian motifs and decorations, like the acanthus leaf carving seen here, another level of meaning is bestowed on these pieces that would become heirlooms for Norwegian-American families. Of unknown origin, this spinning wheel was acquired by Little Norway creator Isaak Dahle and displayed in the museum's Norway Building for more than 80 years.

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Museum records are silent regarding the identity of the original owner of this spinning wheel. However, the carved acanthus ornamentation and particular configuration of the spinning wheel's components signal its Norwegian origins. The most likely scenario is that it belonged to a Norwegian woman who selected it as one of the handful of possessions she brought with her when she emigrated. Other possibilities are that a woman, likely a Norwegian immigrant, purchased the spinning wheel from a Norwegian craftsman in the United States or even from a company that imported spinning wheels from Norway. The piece probably dates to the mid nineteenth century.

Though infrequently used for decorating spinning wheels, the acanthus carving establishes the Norwegian character of this piece. Acanthus is a spinney-leafed plant that grows around the Mediterranean Sea. Since Antiquity, motifs based on acanthus leaves have been popular throughout Europe. The Norwegian tradition of acanthus carving has its roots in the Baroque and Rococo styles. These styles, emphasizing curvilinear design and heavily carved surfaces, came to prominence in England and France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the first half of the eighteenth century these styles spread to Norway through port cities like Oslo and Bergen. Furniture in the Baroque and Rococo styles became popular among Norway's noble and merchant classes. From the affluent port cities, these designs spread to the rest of the country through decoration adorning parish churches. Rural craftsmen incorporated the acanthus designs when making furniture and other wooden items.

As the acanthus style spread and was reproduced throughout Norway's isolated valleys, it took on new attributes distinct from its Continental counterparts. Norwegian acanthus carving tends to have rounder shapes departing from the more naturalistic sharpness of the leaves that continued in European design. This gives Norwegian acanthus design softer appearance. Norwegian carvers also incorporated flowers into their interpretation of the acanthus mode. Examples of this can be seen on the fineals of the turned sections of this spinning wheel which are carved into blossoms. While the carvings on this spinning wheel are unpainted, Norwegian acanthus carvings were often painted in bold colors. Examples exist with leaves painted in a combination of sky blue, maroon, and gilt gold; this effect is unlike any use of the motif in other parts of Europe.

While decoration on the level of acanthus carving was rare for spinning wheels, it's presence on this piece illustrates the importance of this object to the woman who owned it. Spinning wheels stand apart from most other domestic items as the objects of exclusively women's use. During the nineteenth century, women in rural Norway produced the majority of textiles and garments used by the household. Women not only spun yarn and wove it into fabric, they also were involved in both tending and shearing the sheep, producing the fibers to be transformed into yarn. Textile production was essential to home economy and a fundamental part of feminine gender roles in Norwegian culture.

When Norwegians immigrated to America, spinning and weaving continued to be critical to the family livelihood. Letters immigrants sent back to friends and family in Norway who were considering immigrating themselves often advised women to bring their spinning wheels with them. While factory-made yarns and textiles were available in much of the United States, they were still often less available on the frontier. Additionally, many Norwegian women considered the mass-produced yarn to be of inferior quality and not capable of keeping their families warm. By producing their own thread and textiles, immigrant women were able to contribute financially to their households. By continuing Norwegian gender roles in caring for their own sheep, Norwegian

immigrant women possessed a greater degree of financial autonomy than their Anglo-American counterparts.

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## PART II

# MADE IN AMERICA WITH FOREIGN PARTS

Some newly-minted Americans, like Norwegian immigrant Aslak Lie, found personal satisfaction and financial profit in gracefully, capably adapting Old World traditions. A second generation of ethnic-influenced but homegrown artistry soon emerged.

Others, two or three generations removed from initial settlement, built upon a cultural framework ingrained in their family lives and communities to produce artwork which blended ethnic traditions, their own burgeoning American identities and trends in popular culture.



## 9. Norwegian Wafer (Krumkake) Iron



### Norwegian Wafer (Krumkake) Iron

Norwegian-American

Torgrim Fjeld/Field, c.1870

Metal (iron)

Museum acquisition

MHAHS 1991.044.0001

For many Norwegian-Americans, *krumkake* represents the sweet flavor of Christmas served with their favorite hot drink, coffee. After the batter is cooked in the krumkake iron, the delicately stamped cookie is rolled into the shape of a cone while still warm. Once cooled, the crisp cookie is filled with whipped cream or fruit.

Torgrim Fjeld, a Norwegian immigrant and Mount Horeb blacksmith, designed this iron. It features an ornate relief image of a sheaf of wheat encircled by the biblical prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread,” written in Norwegian. The text may reveal Fjeld’s religious response to the prominent wheat farming industry in his new home.



Torgrim Fjeld's  
blacksmith shop in  
Mount Horeb, c.  
1870. MHAHS.

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As the holiday season begins, many of us share warm and delightful memories of time spent with family and friends. So much of that time spent together is enriched with personal, regional, or cultural traditions. Few traditions remain as timeless as the recipes passed down from generation to generation, seasoning memories of celebration. For many Norwegian-Americans, krumkake is reminiscent of the sweet flavor of Christmas served aside their favorite hot drink, coffee. [1] This light, crisp cookie is made by setting a dollop of batter onto the iron, closing the iron, and cooking it over a stovetop or fire. Once it is cooked, the wafer is rolled into a cone and filled with whipped cream or fruit. These delicate, holiday-favored wafers annually reiterate a family's Norwegian cultural heritage to generation long past and new ones yet to come.[2]

When Norwegian immigrants first arrived in America, they were surprised by the regions' culinary preferences and by differences in what ingredients were available. For instance, certain Norwegian-Americans were taken aback by the preeminence of pork in the American diet and had to adapt recipes to their new home's preferred meat source while learning to stomach a richer diet. On the other hand, they were delighted by the surplus of sugar used as a primary ingredient in traditional pastries such as the krumkake.[3]

Though referenced as an easy recipe, krumkake requires a specific cast iron mold to cook the thin wafer over an open fire. Some Norwegian-American immigrants valued their heavy krumkake irons enough to take them on the journey from Norway to America, but for those who didn't transport the iron in their already limited luggage space, skilled immigrants like Torgrim Fjeld could make an authentic iron for them in their new hometown.[4]

Torgrim Fjeld was a Norwegian immigrant and blacksmith who owned a wagon repair shop in Mt Horeb in the nineteenth century. Born in Valdres, Norway in 1849, he moved to America in 1860 with his father Reverend John Fjeld, his mother Gunhild Torgrimsdatter Hesjebakken Fjeld and three siblings.[5] Though Fjeld primarily repaired wagons, he discovered that krumkake irons were in such high demand that he needed help delivering and selling them to neighboring communities. Marten Venden, the grandfather of Mt Horeb resident Olianna Cuneen who was locally well-known for her Norwegian arts and crafts such as rosemallings, drove a wagon to nearby towns to sell Fjeld's krumkake irons, stamped with TJ Fjeld should anyone admire his work.

Fjeld designed this iron with an ornate relief representing his Norwegian-American identity. The iron impresses the traditional cookie with the image of a sheaf of wheat encircled by the biblical prayer, "give us this day our daily bread," written in Norwegian.[6] The biblical text referencing wheat and bread hint at Fjeld's personal background. As the son of a minister, he would likely be familiar with the biblical quote, but he designed the plate with something truly local to the American Midwest: a wheat sheaf. Perhaps, we can imagine the design binding together Fjeld's religious upbringing with his new home and its prominent wheat farming industry. In turn, the plates might indicate his new community identity, Wisconsin farmers recalling their memories of home through the food they share.

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- [2] For more on food and ethnic identity, see Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- [3] Richard J. Fapso, *Norwegians in Wisconsin*, (Madison, Wisconsin: The Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2001) 27.
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- [6] “Giv Os I Dag Vort Daglige Brod”

# Magazines — Making Art by Making Do



Cover of *The Girl's Own Paper*, March 19, 1898.

From about 1860 forward, and particularly during America's "Gilded Age," a surge in mass-produced magazines spread artistic and craft trends to households across America.

These inexpensive publications could be found in the hands, parlors, sewing rooms – and smoking rooms – of all Americans, whatever their social class, ethnicity, or region. Their articles – richly illustrated with step-by-step instructions, tips, and recommendations – made popular art accessible to and executable by nearly anyone.

Encouraging the re-use, modification, and decoration of otherwise unused and unserviceable, though sometimes sentimentally valuable, household items, such magazines appealed to limited budgets and frugal sensibilities, while providing a wide-ranging palette for domestic creativity.

This pervasive "Make Do" movement inevitably affected the traditional repertoires of ethnic artists.

## 10. Chairs (Kubbestols)

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**Chair (Kubbestol)**

Norwegian-American

Maker unknown, c. mid-1800s

Wood, paint

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Raymond & Margaret

Vicker Charitable Trust

MHAHS 2014.073.0003



**Chair, child-sized (Kubbestol)**

Norwegian-American

Maker unknown, c. mid-1800s; decoration attributed to Per Lysne, c.1927

Wood, paint

Little Norway Collection Gift of Raymond & Margaret

Vicker Charitable Trust

MHAHS 2014.073.0009

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The *kubbestol* is a traditional Norwegian chair carved from a single section of a green log, or *kubbe*. It is first hollowed out and carved to shape the chair's back. Then, after allowing the log to cure for several months, a piece of wood is cut and fitted into the hollow to form the seat where the chair back begins. The full circumference of the log is almost always left intact, with the trunk base used as a sturdy chair seat support, in lieu of legs. The diminutive size of the smaller chair displayed here is particularly unusual.

*Kubbestols* were traditionally set aside for the head of the household. But due to their large size and weight, they were not considered a necessity for immigration. These *kubbestols* were almost certainly made here in Wisconsin by recently settled immigrants.

For a complete essay on the child-sized *kubbestol*, [click here](#).

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## II. Hammered Dulcimer

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**Hammered Dulcimer**  
American  
Orrin Sweet, 1857-1858  
Wood, metal  
Gift of Delma Donald  
Woodburn Estate  
MHAHS 2002.001.0147

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A relative of the zither, the hammered dulcimer is a stringed percussion instrument with different names and styles and a history beginning in antiquity. This dulcimer was made by Orrin Sweet, a cabinet maker that moved from New York to the Midwest to build and sell dulcimers. In 1857, he lived in a log house on the Donald family farm and gave them this dulcimer as payment. While the Donald family children were young, Ellen Sweet Donald supposedly played the dulcimer at get togethers, while her brother James played second fiddle, and their sister Addie played melodeon.

Photograph of Ellen Donald Sweet playing the Dulcimer with her son John S. Donald  
For a complete essay on this object, [click here](#).

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The hammered dulcimer is a type of stringed percussion instrument that has many different names and styles across the world. A relative of the zither, it has a long history dating back to antiquity. This hammered dulcimer follows the style that emerged in New York during the mid-nineteenth century. Manufacturers in Chautauqua, New York began mass producing the dulcimer style for a growing population interested in performing and entertaining friends and family. The dulcimer was ideal for immigrants, pioneers, and frontiersman moving westward because of its compact size and weight.

This dulcimer was made by Orrin Sweet, a cabinet maker that moved from New York to the Midwest to build and sell dulcimers. For a time, he lived in a log house on the Donald family farm and in 1857 he gave the family this dulcimer as payment for his lease. While they were young, Ellen Sweet Donald would play the dulcimer at gatherings. According to her brother James's scrapbook, James played second fiddle, their sister Addie played melodeon, and Ellen accompanied on the Dulcimer.<sup>[3]</sup>

Dulcimers were favored alongside popular instruments such as the fiddle because they did not require a great deal of musical knowledge. In fact, most dulcimer players played “by ear” with

no set written music. [1] Since the dulcimer did not have a standard set of music, it developed very distinct regional playing styles. When music and styles were shared, they were passed by word of mouth rather than being officially documented. Over time, an improvisational style called “chording” developed in the Great Lakes region. [2]

Around the time of the Civil War, the Dulcimer began to fall out of use. Firstly, people didn’t move around as much. Wisconsin and the greater Midwest started to become more permanently settled. Secondly, since the region was developing so rapidly, it became more feasible to own a piano, both financially and logistically. Finally, the quality that made the dulcimer so popular initially, its appeal to novice players and regionality, impaired the survival of the dulcimer to future generations. Since the older generation didn’t possess shared songs with written music, the next generation didn’t have any documents to guide them.

Overall, the dulcimer represents the central role music played in the lives of Wisconsin’s mid-nineteenth century settlers. It was an important source of entertainment for people living in small farming communities. Moreover, it might even be said that instruments such as the dulcimer were fodder for building new communities. For new communities are built from more than wood and stone; they are also built from the relationships of the community members. As self-reliant as the pioneers were, they relied upon one another in forging their new territory. Music, especially music that anyone could play, provided a platform for community members to gather, enjoy one another’s company, and share their lived regional experience.

### **References**

[1] Paul Gifford, *The Hammered Dulcimer: A History*, (Scarecrow Press, 2001): 252.

[2] *Ibid.* (2001): 252.

[3] John Sweet Donald Scrapbook page, excerpt from a newspaper article.



## 12. Hammered Dulcimer Performance, 1976



An audio element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can listen to it online here:  
<https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/driftless/?p=1103>

Gale McAfee and Paul Gifford playing “Liverpool Hornpipe” in 1976.

Ellen and James Donald’s hammered dulcimer is a remarkable artifact in the Donald collection at the Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society. The duo played in Madison circa 1925-30. The family story is that the instrument was made by Orrin Sweet (1834-1910) and given to the Donalds in exchange for living in a log cabin on their property in 1857.

Based on e-mail information from Paul Clifford, Sweet was living in 1850 in the town of Poland, Chautauqua County, NY, near the dulcimer factory of Henry Ransom (1856-1859) or his brothers-in-law Harrison and Lewis Wade (1855-1860). Both firms hired local salesman to travel the country, demonstrating the instruments, taking orders or selling them. Sweet may have been hired to travel and sell these dulcimers in Wisconsin, but may have begun making his own. In any case, he was back in Chautauqua County to enlist in the Civil War but died in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.

Many thanks to Paul Gifford for his contribution of music and information.

## 13. Hardanger Fiddle

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### **Hardanger Fiddle**

Norwegian-American

Martin Cliff, 1895

Wood (maple, spruce, ebony), mother of pearl,  
metal, bone

Museum acquisition

MHAHS 2003.028.0001

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Martin J. Cliff, a Norwegian immigrant spent the second half of his life in Mt. Horeb. Cliff was a devoted patron to his community, serving as a treasurer for the local parochial school, as well as treasurer of a cheese company closer to Blue Mounds. Cliff also found ways to give back through art and music. Having learned carpentry skills from his father, Cliff took up the trade as a pastime and cultural inheritance, crafting his own fiddle at the age of 19, around 1895. Accounts from Cliff's former neighbors recall him playing the fiddle for members of the community on his front porch, as well as at family gatherings. ([Click here to listen to a local Hardanger Fiddle recording](#))

For a complete essay on this object, [click here](#).

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The music of Norway is as rich with cultural heritage as it is beautiful. With a sound so unique that reflects the pride and prowess of its homeland, Norwegian music easily produces a sense of solidarity between those of Norwegian descent. One of the most important instruments that defines the sound of Norway is the Hardanger fiddle. Around the turn of the 20th century, with the mass immigration of Norwegian peoples to the United States, cultural unity was in need more than ever in order to preserve the ethnic traditions and customs of Norway in a novel and foreign land. Keeping these traditions close to heart, first generation Norwegian-Americans imbued the techniques of crafting these instruments to their successors in order to ensure that their homeland's culture would persist over time with strength and dignity. Serving as a definitive cultural icon, the Hardanger fiddle represents not only the proud traditions of music and its importance to Norwegian culture, but as well the success of the establishment of a new, hybrid ethnic culture in America from the first Norwegians to arrive here seeking a better life for themselves and future generations to come.

I had the opportunity to research a Hardanger fiddle made by a Martin J. Cliff hailing from Blue Mounds, Wisconsin who spent the second half of his life in Mt. Horeb. Cliff was a devoted patron to his community, serving as a treasurer for the local parochial school, as well as treasurer of a cheese company closer to Blue Mounds. Cliff also found ways to give back through art and music.

Having learned carpentry skills from his father, Cliff took up the trade as a pastime and cultural inheritance, crafting his own fiddle at the age of 19, around 1895. Accounts from Cliff's former neighbors recall him playing the fiddle for members of the community on his front porch, as well as at family gatherings. The specifics of Cliff's fiddle in comparison to traditionally crafted styles reflect the ethnic changes of immigrant lifestyle and support a theory by Jean Baudrillard on the nature of objects made in the image of an original "model" object with variations to each "series" object to come from it.

In Baudrillard's *The System of Objects*, he details a theory based on the notion that objects which are made and manufactured must derive from one original object: a model object. All objects to come after the model object are series objects, which differ from one other by slight variations that can be stylistic, cultural, functional, etc. In the case of Cliff's Hardanger fiddle, he reduces some of the intricacies of detail to more basic fundamental aesthetics, reflecting both his age and the transmutation of cultural as part of being an immigrant. The personalization of this fiddle is the most critical element in understanding its relative cultural value as an iconic instrument and object of unity throughout the local community because each detail has something more to reveal about the considerations Cliff took into account in crafting one of his early achievements of carpentry.

Overall, this Hardanger fiddle represents much more than the local culture it embodies: it represents a sense of tradition and pride for one's homeland and background heritage. Martin Cliff inherited a tradition of artistry which gave him the ability to continue a powerful lineage of Norwegian descendants. His impact on not only his bloodline, but as well his local community and the greater Norwegian-American population of Wisconsin runs deeply in his crafted fiddle, as well as the rich music he produced with it. The Hardanger fiddle elegantly embodies the history of a nation proud of its accomplishments, whether domestically achieved, or done across the sea in a rural town in Wisconsin.

# 14. Hardanger Fiddle Performance, 1940



An audio element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can listen to it online here:  
<https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/driftless/?p=1101>

This recording is of fiddler Dagny Andrea Veum Quisling (1869-1952) of Madison playing a Halling, an athletic rural Norwegian dance that involves leaps and kicks performed by young men.

Quisling was born in Fyredal, Telemark, Norway, a stronghold for Hardanger fiddlers. Her husband was Sverre Quisling, a physician in Madison. Sometimes called Andrea, Quisling was the only woman active in the Kappleik (Competitions) of the Hardanger Fiddle Association of America. She competed in a 1921 Kappleik in Mount Horeb. Please visit the HFAA for more information: <http://www.hfaa.org/Home/articles-on-the-hardanger-fiddle/kappleiks-in-the-united-states>

1921, Mt. Horeb, WI

Over 8,000 attend this Kappleik!

Winners: Eilef Smedal , Harald Smedal

Participants: Tolleif Strand (Chippewa Falls, WI), Eilef Smedal (La Crosse, WI), Harald Smedal (McFarland, WI), Andrea Quisling (Madison, WI), Hans Fykerud (Stoughton, WI), Bjørgulv Bjørnaraa (Wanke, MN), Sjur Bjotveit (Chicago, IL), Helge Thyresen (Dentybow, MN), John Gudvangen (Chicago, IL), I.G. Nordgaard (Setesdal), Olav Smedal (Albert Lea, MN), S. Indeleggen (Chicago, IL), Gunnar Helland (Chippewa Falls, WI)

This recording was produced by Helene Stratman-Thomas for the Library of Congress on May 16, 1940.

Many thanks to Professor James Leary for this information and recording.

## 15. Music Cabinet

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### **Music Cabinet**

Norwegian-American

Made by Erick Goli; decorated by, Margrethe and Amanda (Chestelson) Goli, c.1910

Wood (pine), paint

Gift of Fredrick & Loraine Hanneman

MHAHS 1984.009.0009

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In Norwegian mythology, dragons are guardians of sacred places and precious goods. Dragons incised on this cabinet's door protected a church organist's treasure—her printed music. Music was an important community-builder in Norwegian-American settlements; Kristine Goli played in Perry Lutheran Church for a remarkable 69 years.

Three members of the Goli family contributed to the creation of this cabinet. Kristine's father, Erick Goli, was the cabinetmaker. Her sister Margrethe added the incised dragon and chrysanthemum details. Kristine's sister-in-law, Amanda Goli, painted the lake scene typical of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Finally, an over-painting of yellow paint and stain was applied to the entire cabinet, presumably to accentuate the detailed incising.



The Goli Family, c. 1905; Kristine Goli is standing at left, Margrethe Goli is standing in center, Erik Goli is seated at right. PHOTO COURTESY OF EILEEN HANNEMAN.



An audio element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can listen to it online here:  
<https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/driftless/?p=87>

<https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/app/uploads/sites/30/2017/05/Kristine-Goli.-O-Come-All-Ye-Faithful.mp3>>Kristine Goli: O Come All Ye Faithful</a></li> <li><a href="https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/app/uploads/sites/30/2017/05/Kristine-Goli.-Silent-Night.mp3">170516\_005</a></li> <li><a href="https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/app/uploads/sites/30/2017/05/Kristine-Goli.-Away-in-a-Manger.mp3">170516\_002</a></li> </ol> <p></p>

For a complete essay on this object, click here.

Despite its simplicity, the Goli music cabinet has a great background story and relevance, not only due to its artistic attributes but its history: it belonged to an active member of the society and it came from a family that represents well the community life of the Norwegian-American people early established in the Midwest. This object encapsulates the importance of traditions, ethnicity and cultural manifestations in music and religion. The collaborative process of making of this piece is an interesting aspect of this distinct piece.

Constructed of pine, this music cabinet has a curved backboard and sides and an arched apron. The wooden interior of the cabinet is unfinished and there are three internal shelves that fit with standard music sheets size. An original hardware pull to open the cabinet door and a lock to secure the music inside are missing. The object's exterior is painted in yellow-mustard color that could be milk paint with a layer of varnish due to its glossy finish. This rather plain surface ornamented with traditional pigments created a simple backdrop to a later striking painted design,

an oval vignette that depicts a tropical landscape with a couple of swans on a lake surrounded by mountains and palm trees. The upper front corners, backboard and sides have incised floral motifs (acanthus flowers) and dragons. The dragons are important symbols to Scandinavian ancient people and are often viewed as guardians of treasures. The presence of this element on the music cabinet's door is coherent: music sheets can be considered precious goods. The acanthus flowers, very popular in Norwegian culture, can be seen in many other artifacts with rosemailing painting and wood carving. Both dragons and flowers were added with the traditional Norwegian decorative technique known as *kolrosing*, constantly used on folk art wooden utensils like spoons and caskets. In *kolrosing*, the pattern is scribed into the wood surface with a knife tip and then rubbed on a dye that adheres to the etched lines. The mustard color paint on the surface obscured these earlier details of *Kolrosing*, exemplifying one possible update on the music cabinet.

This cabinet is a unique folk art piece with a peculiar combination of the decorative elements that don't seem to belong in the same context, but since this is a collaborative piece, these singular elements appear to be more independent, generated between the three makers with different temporal artistic tendencies. Each maker worked in a different stage of this fluid process and the influence of new aesthetics could be interpreted as an attempt to make it more modern. Analyzing the aesthetics as a whole, the Music Cabinet does not have immediate features expected in a Norwegian-American piece of furniture, although it does have a naïve charm and individual expressiveness. Nonetheless, the traditional Norwegian decorative technique is not the focal point of the music cabinet. The object's dramatic centerpiece added by the object's third maker is the oval landscape vignette. The couple of swans painted in opaque and dull colors could be a representation of the cabinet's owner love for music and the scene can be associated with the artistic Naturalism movement that focused in landscapes and rural themes, responding to economic and political changes in Norway.

According to the records of the Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society, this music cabinet was constructed by Erick Goli between 1900 and 1920, for his daughter Kristine Olava Goli (1886-1985), by that time, a piano apprentice. His other daughter Margrethe Goli (1883-1971), the second maker, was a pianist at the Perry Lutheran Church. She was the one responsible for adding the *kolrosing* adornments. The third maker, Amanda Goli, sister-in-law of Kristine, was married to her older brother Martin, painted the central element of the cabinet inside the oval shape line done also in *kolrosing*, by Margrethe. Kristine Goli was a piano teacher, church organist for 69 years and the director of the Perry Lutheran Church choir.

For more information click [here](#) Goli Music Cabinet

## 16. Plant Stand

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### **Plant Stand**

American

Neighbor of Stugard Family, 1899

Wood (willow sapling)

Gift of Lucille (Stugard) McKee

MHAHS 2001.101.0121

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This handmade willow plant stand was once a neighbor's wedding gift to a young farming couple from Wisconsin's Springdale township. Toward the end of the 19th century, the Arts and Crafts Movement shaped England and America's preference for artistic handmade domestic goods. Movement commentators emphasized the economic and moral health of communities whose members practiced artistic skills utilizing local resources. Such sentiments survive in today's non-professional Do-It-Yourself culture and professional crafts, which market the decorative appeal of rustic, unfinished furnishings and home adornments.

For a complete essay on this object, [click here](#).

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This 1899 Plant Stand exemplifies rural handicrafts in the Midwest circa 1900 while commenting on 19th century do-it-yourself, or D.I.Y. culture, not entirely different from our own in 2017.



Today, a web search for willow or twig furniture returns dozens of do-it-yourself samples from popular craft sites such as Etsy, Pinterest, and HGTV announcing nostalgic descriptors such as “homemade” and “rustic”. Woven into the twists and folds of willow furniture is a craft tradition still alive today, sustained by practiced craftsman or by novice consumers drawn to the rustic charm of unrefined accessories.

Such 19th through 21st-century craftsman share common experiences involved in gathering and utilizing resources from the land in aesthetic and utilitarian ways that contribute to a sense of place-connectedness and to community prosperity. Some 19th century writers advocated for the transformative power of crafts for the well-being of the entire rural community. At the same time, the craftsman’s individual talent and character was essential to their practice. Commentator on the American Arts and Crafts Movement, Zueblin says, “thus are fashioned objects to be cherished and valued on account of their personal feeling and character, and such are the fireside arts done by talented individuals.”[1] Such sentimental writings on the Arts and Crafts movement expresses the romance such objects held for people in 1903.

Twig furniture, occasionally referenced in 19th and 20th century home fashion magazines, is typically associated with anonymous craftsmen and rustic styles, appealing to consumers’ desire for local and natural materials. In the case of the Stugard plant stand, the craftsman is unidentified; even their sex and trade are unknown, shrouding him or her in a degree of mystery. Though the plant stand’s anonymous maker leaves viewers with little indication of his or her personal biography, the plant stand, a neighbor’s wedding gift preserved for over 100 years, likely possessed the “cherished and valued” personal worth Zueblin describes. Furthermore, the Zueblin connects rural handicraft with ties to both nature and personal feeling along with the satisfaction of working out technical problems and skill development.

In addition to speaking to the 19th and early 20th century philosophies on the qualities of a prosperous rural town dependent upon the participation and skill specialization of its population, the plant stand is an interesting impression of a much larger 19th and early 20th-century interest in wicker or rattan furnishings often made from willow twigs, reeds, and other pliant twig plants. In her book, *Rustic Furniture*, Sue Honacker Stephenson argues that twig furniture possesses a “decorative symbolism” that functions as a rebellion against commercial and industrial excess, an ideology directly referencing and responding to the Arts and Crafts Movement. She goes on to interpret the furniture as a statement against modern consumption through the objects denial of industrial facture and its embrace of unfinished material. “As a decorative symbol, a rustic seat is astonishingly literal, being constructed of the bare roots of trees.”[2] Richard Saunders claims that wicker furniture “captured the mood of the times to a ‘T,’ reveling in the adoration of the home as an island of refuge that celebrated any handmade or eclectic decoration.”[3] Likewise, countless primary sources, from advertisements to articles on home decoration, emphasize the appeal of willow furnishings. Between 1911 and 1915, the periodical *Art & Decoration* published articles by various authors titled “The Informal Note in Summer Furniture,” “The Use and Beauty of Willow Furniture,” (Figure 4.) and “The Adaptable Willow: Its Appeal of Structure Line and Form.” (Figure 5.)[4] At the same time, advertisements use language such as “The Final Note of Comfort,” “Hand – Wrought Willow Furniture commands a place in even the most lavish home,” “no other investment insures artistic results at such a low cost,” (Figure 6.) [5] and “see these unique pieces to realize the home-like atmosphere they impart.”[6] Advertisements highlight desirable qualities inherent in willow furnishings including being handmade, artistic, and low cost.

Handmade willow plant stands demonstrate the resourcefulness and skill of the 19th century rural community and the anonymous individuals that contributed to binding and supportive relationships that created a prosperous community unit. Aesthetically appealing wicker furnishings introduced nature to the home through its rustic, natural finish and simple, plantlike structure, resonating with both ideals of natural beauty and tranquility as well as contemporary home fashions with its class implications. In developing and exercising their skill, rural craftsmen supported both the utilitarian as well as aesthetically moralizing needs of his or her community.

## References

- [1] Rho Fisk Zueblin, "The Arts and Crafts Movement: The Production of Industrial Art in America II," *The Chautauquan; A Weekly Newsmagazine (1880-1914)* 37 (April 1903): 59.
- [2] Sue Honacker Stephenson, *Rustic Furniture*. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1979).
- [3] Richard Saunders, *The Collector's Guide to American Wicker Furniture*, (New York: Hearst Books, 1983).
- [4] Matlock Price, "The Adaptable Willow: Its Appeal of Structural Line and Form," *Arts & Decoration (1910-1911)* 1 (October 1911): 482-483.; D. D. McCall, "The Use and Beauty of Willow Furniture." *Arts & Decoration (1910-1911)* 1 (March 1911): 221-222.; Mortimer Marke, "The Informal Note in Summer Furniture," *Arts & Decoration (1910-1918)* 10 (April 1915): 232-233.
- [5] "Back Matter." *Arts & Decoration*. (September 1911): 456.
- [6] Advertisement by Joseph P. McHugh & Son of New York.

## 17. Basket

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**Basket**

German-American  
Henry Haberland, c.1910  
Wood (willow sapling)  
Gift of Marlyn Grinde  
MHAHS 2011.112.0001

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This basket is a surviving example of the “make-do” attitudes of rural community members around the turn of the 19th Century. By using local resources, they created unique, artistic home decorations with lasting sentimental value. At the same time, the larger British and American Arts and Crafts movement heralded such artistic production to bolster the ideal economic and moral health of these communities. Such sentiments survive in today’s non-professional, Do-It-Yourself culture and professional crafts, which market the decorative appeal of rustic furnishings and home adornments.

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A resident of Middleton, Henry Haberland made this basket from willow branches that he gathered from the creek that runs all the way to Lake Mendota. He made the basket for his daughter, Elsie Grinde, a resident of the Springdale Township in Dane County. The basket shows a great deal of wear at the bottom suggesting that it was well used throughout the years and though the woven branches have also darkened significantly with age, the chevron design on both sides of the basket are still bound tightly so we can continue to appreciate his craftsmanship today. The basket stayed within the Haberland family for generations and was eventually left to Marilyn Grinde, the donor and Elsie Grinde’s daughter-in-law, or Henry Haberland’s great-grandson’s wife!

Today, many of us are used to quick ready-made products and a basket might seem to be a humble thing; but, Haberland’s basket is a testament to the nineteenth-century rural Wisconsinite’s self-sufficiency and ingenuity because he used his skills and nearby resources to create objects that were kept by family members for generations.

## 18. Wooden Frame

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### **Frame**

American

Attributed to the Donald/Sweet Family, c.1890

Wood, walnut shells

Gift of Delma Donald Woodburn Estate

MHAHS 2002.001.0073

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The willow plant stand, basket and ornamental frames are surviving examples of the “make-do” endeavors of rural community members around the turn of the 19th Century. By using local resources, they created unique, artistic home decorations with lasting sentimental value. At the same time, the larger British and American Arts and Crafts movement heralded such artistic production in response to the Industrial Revolution. Making hand-crafted items reinforced a return to more ideal economic times and better moral health of communities. Such sentiments survive in today’s non-professional, Do-It-Yourself culture and professional crafts that market the decorative appeal of rustic furnishings and home adornments.



*Handwritten note on the back with information on the portraits*

For a complete essay on this object, [click here](#).

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The residence of the Donald family was an emblematic representation of life in the early 20th century Wisconsin through its many objects and artifacts. These are some of the dozens of artifacts that came to the Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society from the estate of Delma Donald Woodburn (1899–2001), who carefully documented and preserved the material heritage of her family’s life in Mount Horeb and Madison, Wisconsin. The artifacts span several generations, beginning with two early pioneer families who came to the rural Mount Horeb area from New York state in 1855–William Sweet and Sally Clark Sweet and Reverend James Donald and Margaret Strong Donald.

The large collection of objects of Delma Donald Woodburn included many objects of different categories, utensils, clothes, and other artifacts.

By this time in the 19th century, women’s magazines promoted household craft and decorations. Young ladies were expected to learn domestic skills and even common household goods became a pallet for artistic expression. Parlors and family spaces were filled with this kind of craft, making her home more inviting and following the Victorian magazine arts of the time. Vona Donald chose bucolic rural winter scenes to enhance and decorate her environment. With paint and inspiration, the rural landscapes were one of the frequent motifs that brought character to these daily objects.

Objects such as the butter paddle, the wood panel, the picture frames and the cutlery box are examples of the use of daily artifacts as the folk artist’s canvas. Their work added personality to

each object making them unique. Some of those artifacts later became a piece of remembrance of a loving relative.

Besides decorative painting, many other elements were used in these craft projects. Norwegian-American folk art went far beyond rosemaling and acanthus wood carving.

### **WOODEN PICTURE FRAME**

Nature and its perfect shapes were the inspiration for this picture frame. Given by a mother to her son, this piece has the portraits of two brothers side by side. In a house-shaped wooden structure, the curious ornaments were made of sliced nut shells glued to the wood frame. The nutshells were probably collected from the trees of the family yard. This object has hand written notes on the back, telling about the history of the photographs, names, and dates in a way to preserve family heritage through daily life objects.

The black and white photographs of Ellen Sweet and her brother George Clark Sweet, Madison or Town of Springdale, Dane County. Notecard on verso is printed with monogram "EDJ" (for Ellen Sweet Donald Jones). A note in black ink reads: "George Clark Sweet, and his sister Ellen, who is mother to John Sweet Donald. These pictures were taken in 1867-1871 respectively. Madison Wisconsin Dec. 25, 1933" A second note, in blue ink, reads: "Given to John S. Donald by his mother 1933."

### **References**

For a history of the Donald and Sweet families, see :

"Settlement" Friends of Donald County Park (accessed December 9, 2008)  
<http://donaldpark.org/pdf/historyDonaldPark2.pdf>

For more information on Delma Donald Woodburn, see "Delma Donald Woodburn" in "Pages of the Past" Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society (accessed December 9, 2008)

<http://www.mounthoreb.org/ppDelma.htm>

Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database

## 19. Shell Frame

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### **Frame**

American

Attributed to the Donald/Sweet Family, c.1890

Wood, snail shells, seeds

Gift of Delma Donald Woodburn Estate

MHAHS 2002.001.0067

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The willow plant stand, basket and ornamental frames are surviving examples of the “make-do” endeavors of rural community members around the turn of the 19th Century. By using local resources, they created unique, artistic home decorations with lasting sentimental value. At the same time, the larger British and American Arts and Crafts movement heralded such artistic production in response to the Industrial Revolution. Making hand-crafted items reinforced a return to more ideal economic times and better moral health of communities. Such sentiments survive in today’s non-professional, Do-It-Yourself culture and professional crafts that market the decorative appeal of rustic furnishings and home adornments.

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The large collection of objects of Delma Donald Woodburn included many objects of different categories, utensils, clothes, and other artifacts.

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Objects such as the butter paddle, the wood panel, the picture frames and the cutlery box are examples of the use of daily artifacts as the folk artist's canvas. Their work added personality to each object making them unique. Some of those artifacts later became a piece of remembrance of a loving relative.

Besides decorative painting, many other elements were used in these craft projects. Norwegian-American folk art went far beyond rosemaling and acanthus wood carving.

### **SHELL FRAME**

Picture frames are objects often connected to sentimental value and, because of that, they were common in the make-do practice. This frame received peculiar natural elements as ornaments: snail shells and watermelon seeds, materials probably abundant in rural communities, glued to a rectangular wooden structure. Make-do was a vivid activity among Norwegian-American self-taught folk-artists. By adding new elements, the pieces were modified and became unique in character. Until today this habit inspires people around the world with the DIY – Do It Yourself-movement.

### **Sources**

For a history of the Donald and Sweet families, see "Settlement" Friends of Donald County Park (accessed December 9, 2008)

For more information on Delma Donald Woodburn, see "Delma Donald Woodburn" in "Pages of the Past" Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society. Accessed December 9, 2008. <http://donaldpark.org/pdf/historyDonaldPark2.pdf>

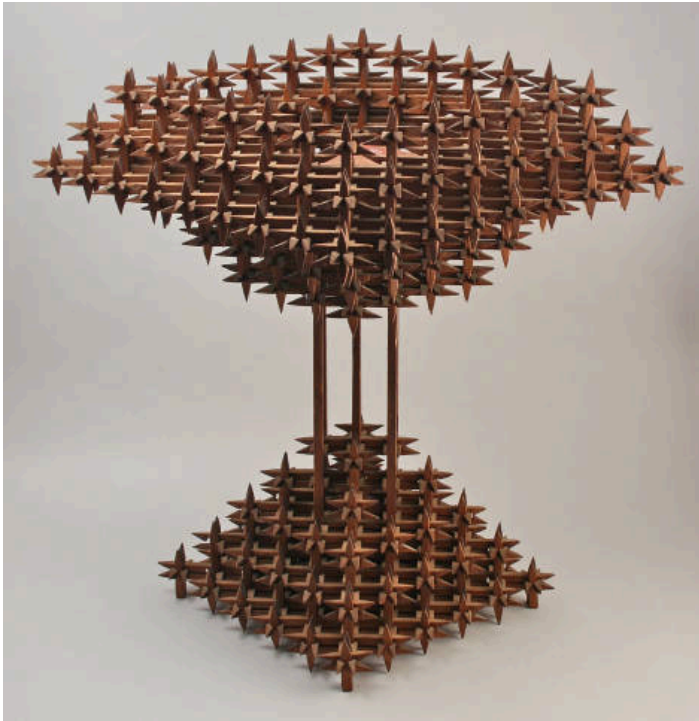
<http://www.mounthoreb.org/ppDelma.htm>

Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database



## 20. Tramp Art Stand

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### **Tramp Art Stand**

Norwegian-American

Martin Cliff, c.1910

Wood (used cigar boxes)

Gift of Lila Martin

MHAHS 1980.001.0006

Photograph by Emily Pfothenauer

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With ingenuity and skill, even cast-off materials like cigar boxes were transformed into unique and artistic household items. This skillfully executed stand in the “Crown of Thorns” pattern contains hundreds of hand-carved wood pieces held together without the use of glue or nails. A popular vernacular art form, this style is dubbed Tramp Art because of the romantic association with homeless workmen who might trade this work for food. Martin Cliff, the maker of this piece (and also the Hardanger fiddle in this exhibition), was known as an “artist farmer.” He drew his inspiration from both his Norwegian heritage and the popular arts and crafts of the period.

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In spite of its name, tramp art was not only made by tramps and other itinerants, but was a popular craft taken up by both hobbyists and professional artisans. Tramp art is the name given to a type of woodworking popular in the United States between about 1865 and 1940, characterized by simple techniques such as chip-carving and whittling and the use of small bits of wood assembled into or applied to larger forms. Very common for small or large pieces like furniture, it was more commonly produced by men. This stand could be used for plants or other purposes in the household.

This stand is constructed from  $\frac{1}{4}$ " wide strips of unfinished wood reused from old cigar boxes,

whittled to points and layered in a lattice formation. Five long vertical strips (willow saplings) protrude from the four-sided pyramidal base to support the top, which is a shallow basket shape lined with cardboard. This lattice of pointed bits of wood is a style of tramp art known as “Crown of Thorns.” The use of discarded materials was very common with the make-do practice and today can be interpreted as a form of recycling, concept that did not exist by that period.

According to the records of the Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society, this unique design was made by Martin Cliff, descended in the Cliff family of Mt. Horeb. He did not have had a nomadic life, something common among many tramp artists, but he moved from time to time. He was born in March 3, in 1876, son of Siri and Arn Klevgaard, pioneers of the Township of Blue Mounds where he engaged in the carpenter’s trade. In 1904 he got married to Miss Klara Kompelien and set down to a farm near Blue Mounds. In 1911 they bought a new land, establishing in a farm near Sand Rock where they lived until 1936. After that, they moved to Mount Horeb where he worked as treasurer of Lukken school and secretary and treasurer for the Sand Rock Cheese Factory.

He also joined the Blue Mounds congregation where he worked serving the community and helping to keep his ethnic roots and traditions, like Norwegian folk music, alive.

Cliff also is the author of the Hardanger Fiddle in this exhibit, a fine piece very skillfully hand made with techniques that are completely different from the tramp art carving style, with even higher standards of craftsmanship. Martin Cliff’s Hardanger fiddle is unique to his craft.

### **References**

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- “Tramp art bureau” Virginia Historical Society (accessed October 8, 2010); <http://www.vahistorical.org/trampbureau.htm>
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## 21. Decorated Spoon



### **Decorated Spoon**

Norwegian-American

Maker unknown, mid 1800s; decoration attributed to either Carrie H. Larsen or Lars Bakken, c.1900

Wood, paint

Gift of Brian Bigler & Ken Scott

MHAHS 2016.012.0001

In 19th century Norway, utilitarian items such as spoons were carved from wood and used on a daily basis. When packing for a trans-oceanic voyage to America, immigrants included spoons like this as necessary objects of daily use. Decades later, a landscape painting typical of the American Arts and Crafts movement was added to this Norwegian spoon. And in a manner reminiscent of traditional Norwegian decoration, the names Carrie H. Larson and Lars Bakken were also added. This spoon shows how notions of utility, beauty and heritage evolve in ethnic objects as they move between places and times.

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During the mass immigration of Norwegian and Swedish populations in the mid to late 19th century, many people brought their utensils and wooden ware to the United States because they were necessary for survival. This spoon traveled across the ocean in a chest, kept as a precious family item heirloom.

Norwegian folk art traditions were still vibrant at the time of immigration, so those skills were brought over. Although industrialization in urban centers removed the need for wooden crafts, there was an active folk arts tradition in rural regions of Minnesota, particularly in the southeast. These crafts often became symbols of the immigrants' identity and heritage, passed from one

generation to the next. In contemporary culture, Scandinavian handmade wooden bowls are still used as a way to commemorate significant life events like birthdays and weddings. This Norwegian hand carved spoon with its painted bowl is unique. It dates 1800 but the landscape with boats painting was added around 1900.

This antique piece, years after it was made, received a painting, probably to update it, making it more fashionable and modern. It's possible that the spoon had other decorative elements like *kolrosing* details that were later covered in paint.

This object is an unexpected example of wooden spoon analyzing the most common motifs for Norwegian folk art and crafts: *rosemaling*.

The rebirth of the Norwegian state in 1814 was the scenery of the national romanticism movement when with the improvement in the economy facilitated the development of the artist's skills. Through high education, including studies abroad painters started to explore different themes like naturalism and realism.

Since this is an artifact used in the kitchen it's likely that it was used with the ancient resource of the milk paint. Milk paint is ideal to use in wooden ware because is very durable and non-toxic. The paint is a mixture of pigment, lime and the milk protein, casein. The casein makes the paint absorb into porous surfaces like wood, and the lime makes it soluble in water. One of the drawbacks however, is that the lime in traditional milk paint creates a relatively opaque and dull hue, limiting most of the color pallet to pastels. This miniature painting is the highlight of the piece.

## 22. Butter Paddle

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### **Decorated Butter Paddle**

American

Decoration attributed to Vona Donald, c.1910

Wood (maple), paint

Gift of Delma Donald Woodburn Estate

MHAHS 1997.038.0001

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Re-purposed objects such as a butter paddle or a wood panel became the canvas of a folk artist. Making her home more inviting and following the Victorian magazine arts of the time, Vona Donald chose bucolic rural winter scenes to enhance and decorate her environment. With paint and inspiration, the rural landscapes brought character to these daily objects.

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York state in 1855–William Sweet and Sally Clark Sweet and Reverend James Donald and Margaret Strong Donald.

The large collection of objects of Delma Donald Woodburn included many objects of different categories, utensils, clothes, and other artifacts.

By this time, in the 19th century, women’s magazines promoted household craft and decorations. Young ladies were expected to learn domestic skills and even common household goods became a pallet for artistic expression. Parlors and family spaces were filled with this kind of craft, making her home more inviting and following the Victorian magazine arts of the time. Vona Donald chose bucolic rural winter scenes to enhance and decorate her environment. With paint and inspiration, the rural landscapes were one of the frequent motifs that brought character to these daily objects.

Objects such as the butter paddle, the wood panel, the picture frames and the cutlery box are examples of the use of daily artifacts as the folk artist’s canvas. Their work added personality to each object making them unique. Some of those artifacts later became a piece of remembrance of a loving relative.

Besides decorative painting, many other elements were used in these craft projects. Norwegian -American folk art went far beyond rosemaling and acanthus wood carving.

#### **BUTTER PADDLE**

Wooden butter paddle painted with a heart-shaped vignette of a rural landscape, including two buildings, a fence and trees. The entire image is frosted with gilt. Woodburn attributed this paddle to her mother, Vona DeCrow Donald, who came to the Town of Springdale, Dane County from Valparaiso, Indiana in 1898 after her marriage to Springdale native John Sweet Donald (1869-1934), a state assemblyman (1903-1906), state senator (1909-1912), and Wisconsin secretary of state (1913-1917). In 1917, the Donald family moved to Madison, where John Sweet Donald joined the faculty of the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin and Vona Donald worked on a number of progressive causes, including the Dane County Child Welfare Board and the League of Women Voters.

#### **References**

For a history of the Donald and Sweet families, see “Settlement” Friends of Donald County Park (accessed December 9, 2008)

<http://donaldpark.org/pdf/historyDonaldPark2.pdf> For more information on Delma Donald Woodburn, see “Delma Donald Woodburn” in “Pages of the Past” Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society (accessed December 9, 2008)

<http://www.mounthoreb.org/ppDelma.htm>

Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database

## 23. Cutlery Box



### **Cutlery Box**

American

Decoration attributed to Donald family, c.1880

Wood, paint

Gift of Delma Donald Woodburn Estate

MHAHS 2002.001.0165

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The kitchen, positioned physically and figuratively at the heart of the home, is where family members gathered at the table to share a meal and spend time together. In the late 19th Century, everyday household objects were decorated to enhance the space in which these social encounters occurred. In the early 1880s when John S. Donald brought his city bride, Vona, to his farm in the Town of Springdale, the house was updated and redecorated in the popular late Victorian style of the period. Even this utilitarian cutlery box received a newly decorated surface, ornamented with painted stencil designs to compliment the new décor of the Donald farmhouse.

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The wooden cutlery box from the Donald family kitchen is one of many pieces donated to the

historical society from the estate of Delma Donald Woodburn, Reverend James Donald's great-granddaughter. It was made used on the Donald family farm during the late 1800's, possibly handmade by the Reverend or one of his sons and decorated by feminine hands. Overall the box is simply designed, constructed, and decorated, but appears to have several decades of use in storing cutlery.

Constructed of a hard maple or oak, the cutlery box was carved and nailed, measuring approximately 12"x10"x7.5". It is an open box with four canted sides, and a bipartite compartments, separated by an arched central divider with a cut-out handle. Its interior sides and divider are painted white, and the exterior sides are painted red with gold stripes and black stencils of a floral design. This kind of craft was common among young women, most of the times inspired by magazines with step-by step graphic tutorials. These publications helped improving the household aesthetics with the Make-Do practice, combined with family traditions and heritage.

The residence of the Donald family was an emblematic representation of life in the early 20th century Wisconsin through its many objects and artifacts. A historical object that is seemingly ordinary, like the Donald family's cutlery box, can help uncover an entire history surrounding its existence, such as traditions in dining, social status through one's property, and the creation of containers for intended items.

This is one of the dozens of artifacts that came to the Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society from the estate of Delma Donald Woodburn (1899-2001), who carefully documented and preserved the material heritage of her family's life in Mount Horeb and Madison, Wisconsin. The artifacts span several generations, beginning with two early pioneer families who came to the rural Mount Horeb area from New York state in 1855—William Sweet and Sally Clark Sweet and Reverend James Donald and Margaret Strong Donald.

The large collection of objects of Delma Donald Woodburn included many objects of different categories, utensils, clothes, and other artifacts.

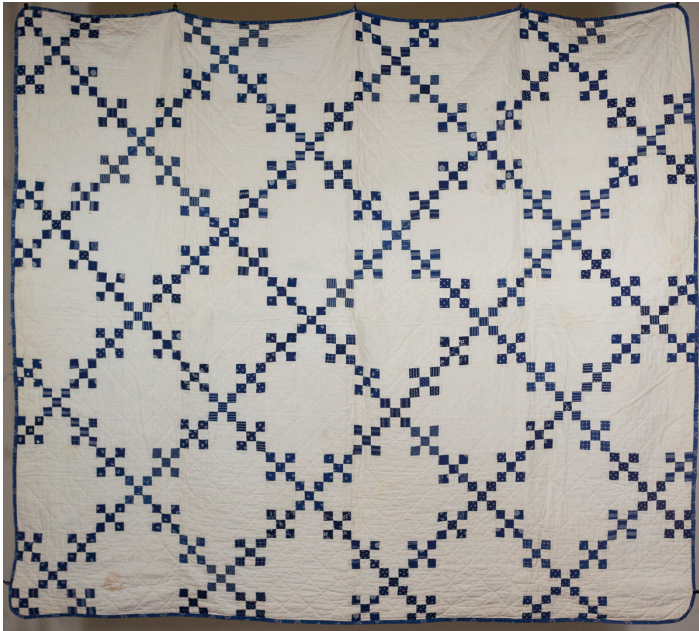
By this time in the 19th century, women's magazines promoted household craft and decorations. Young ladies were expected to learn domestic skills and even common household goods became a pallet for artistic expression. Parlors and family spaces were filled with this kind of craft, making her home more inviting and following the Victorian magazine arts of the time. Vona Donald chose bucolic rural winter scenes to enhance and decorate her environment. With paint and inspiration, the rural landscapes were one of the frequent motifs that brought character to these daily objects.

### **References**

MORITZ, Bri, 2016 , Donald Family Cutlery Box  
Mount Horeb Historical Society  
Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database



## 24. Quilt



**Quilt**  
American  
Ellen Sweet, c.1865  
Cotton  
Gift of Delma Donald Woodburn Estate  
MHAHS 2002.002.0367

Late 19th century women's magazines promoted household craft and decoration in a reactionary movement against the Industrial Revolution's factory-line production of undifferentiated, machine-made items. Young ladies were expected to master these domestic skills, and common household goods often became their palette for artistic expression. Parlors and family spaces were filled with this kind of craft, like this 1865 quilt created by the young Ellen Sweet of the Town of Springdale.



Ellen Sweet Donald, 1870.  
MHAHS 2x4.00578.

For a complete essay on this object, [click here](#).

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Despite the countless technological and aesthetic developments of the past 150 years, few objects possess the degree of personal resonance inherent in a warm quilted blanket. Though centuries pass, it ties us to peoples long before us through our shared basic needs for warmth, home, and family. Ellen Sweet Donald Jones stitched this quilt when she was only 16 years old. Sweet's granddaughter, Delma Donald Woodburn, wrote of the quilt, "My grandmother told me she pieced this when she was 16 because every girl had to piece a quilt" (Figure 1.) Set alongside the artistic quilts of more mature seamstresses, her work might seem unpracticed and simplistic because this quilt documents Sweet's quilting education. The popular "Irish chain" design constructed in a double nine patch pattern in which nine block patches construct larger blocks, was a common and easy design particular favored by learners, while the combination of indigo patterned calicos and white squares were affordable fabrics for a large immigrant family new to the Midwest.

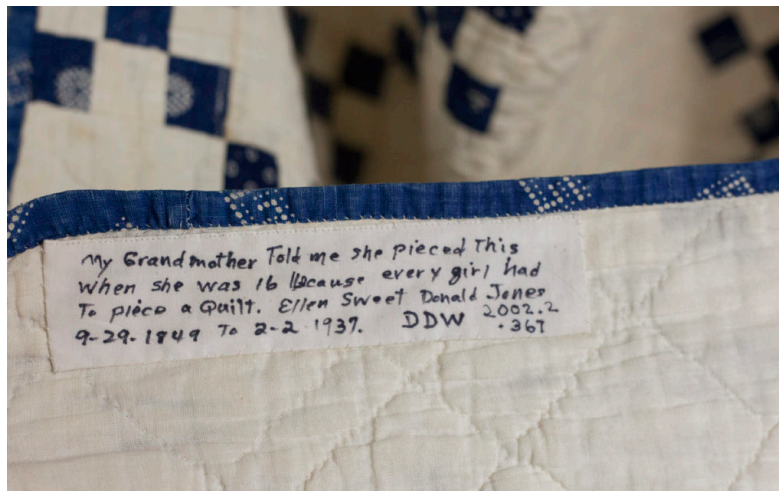


Figure 1.

Sweet moved to the Springdale township of Wisconsin in 1855 at the age of six. She arrived with her family of eight from Chautauqua County in New York at a time when Springdale didn't even have a general store. Moving to a small town before the age of ready-mades demanded that the family be self-sufficient in producing their own domestic goods such as blankets or quilts and clothing. The family chores were divided largely along gender lines so that Ellen's mother, Sally Clark Sweet, would have been responsible for producing blankets so that her family would have a warm bed.

She was also responsible for teaching her daughters, including Ellen, how to sew so that she could help provide for her someday married household. Three years after she finished the quilt, Ellen married local farmer John Donald. We might assume that she continued to develop her skills

as a quilter since technologies like the sewing machine and ready-mades were still not widely available.

Oftentimes, quilts such as Ellen's go unremarked upon because they possess simple designs typical of American quilts of the mid-nineteenth century and betray an unpracticed hand; but Ellen's quilt is special for these reasons because it represents the passage of knowledge from one generation of women to the other. Though her quilt does not possess the ingenuity and creative freedom exercised in seasoned seamstress works, Ellen's material, the common indigo blue dyes and affordable calico, refer to her industrious use of nearby resources. Ultimately, Ellen's ordinary quilt tells the extraordinary story of domestic self-sufficiency practiced in rural America.

## 25. Painted Wooden Panel, Framed

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**Painted Wooden Panel, Framed**

American

Attributed to Donald/Sweet Family, c.1890

Wood (pine), paint

Gift of Delma Donald Woodburn Estate

MHAHS 2002.001.0063

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Re-purposed objects such as a butter paddle or a wood panel became the canvas of a folk artist. Making her home more inviting and following the Victorian magazine arts of the time, Vona Donald chose bucolic rural winter scenes to enhance and decorate her environment. With paint and inspiration, the rural landscapes brought character to these daily objects.

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The residence of the Donald family was an emblematic representation of life in the early 20th century Wisconsin through its many objects and artifacts. These are some of the dozens of artifacts that came to the Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society from the estate of Delma Donald Woodburn (1899-2001), who carefully documented and preserved the material heritage of her family's life in Mount Horeb and Madison, Wisconsin. The artifacts span several generations, beginning with two early pioneer families who came to the rural Mount Horeb area from New York state in 1855—William Sweet and Sally Clark Sweet and Reverend James Donald and Margaret Strong Donald.

The large collection of objects of Delma Donald Woodburn included many objects of different categories, utensils, clothes, and other artifacts.

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Objects such as the butter paddle, the wood panel, the picture frames and the cutlery box are examples of the use of daily artifacts as the folk artist's canvas. Their work added personality to each object making them unique. Some of those artifacts later became a piece of remembrance of a loving relative.

Besides decorative painting, many other elements were used in these craft projects. Norwegian-American folk art went far beyond rosemaling and acanthus wood carving.

### **FRAMED WOOD PANEL**

The bird sitting on an oak tree branch announces: Spring is coming. The bucolic winter landscape of a cottage by a frozen lake received a stroke of warmth with the vivid oil paint colors of the mustard-yellow creature. This panel, now framed like a painting possibly came from a door that was so carefully painted that it was repurposed, promoted in status to dress up the house interior walls. It is possible to assume that it had a lot of emotional connections to the family where it belonged.

### **References**

For a history of the Donald and Sweet families, see:

“Settlement” Friends of Donald County Park (accessed December 9, 2008)

<http://donaldpark.org/pdf/historyDonaldPark2.pdf>

For more information on Delma Donald Woodburn, see “Delma Donald Woodburn” in “Pages of the Past” Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society (accessed December 9, 2008)

<http://www.mounthoreb.org/ppDelma.htm>

## 26. Outhouse Wall

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### **Outhouse Wall**

American  
Decoration attributed to either Anton or Albert  
Bruflat, 1905  
Wood (pine)  
Gift of Bob & Vicki Applegate  
MHAHS 1986.040.0001

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This carved interior outhouse wall is a remnant from the Bruflat family's homestead. The artist, likely one of the Bruflat sons based on the initials "AB", incised a dove with an olive leaf and a scroll, possibly inspired by religious motifs from their local Perry Lutheran Church or common design themes found in religious publications. It is interesting to contemplate why they chose to decorate such a mundane space with an elegant carved scriptural reference.

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The human impulse to mark and write, to claim ownership or personalization of an environment whether public or private, forms a continuum from the first human cave drawings to today's graffiti culture.[1] Today, there is hardly a public restroom stall that has not been christened with the scratchings and writings of visitors driven to leave a permanent relic of their transient presence. Their wall writings are often categorized as Graffiti, defined by Howard Pearlstein as

“any coherently-intended presence written, scratched, painted, engraved, printed or pasted or otherwise impressed in a public place.” Pearlstein then goes on to identify two motivations for graffiti, suggesting that the definition of graffiti is wrapped up in its drive as much as in its manifestation: “the need of the moment to personalize, integrate and possess the environment, and the desire to make one’s presence and/or perceptions known to otherwise unconnected persons who share that environment.”[2]

The outhouse is one of the most banal, dirty environments visited multiple times during the course of a day and, though we might happily withdraw our human need to visit the facilities if possible, evacuation is a necessary daily experience of every mammalian body. Hygienically separate from the homestead, the outhouse is consigned a functional space often adorned with little more than a carved window, perhaps in the shape of a moon or rooster. How ought one enhance the banality and mock sterility of the outhouse – the flat and unaesthetic space of countless cumulative waking hours. For many, the requisite trip to the loo is bettered by introspection or some solitary activity such as that requiring merely the ever-at-hand pocket knife or pen. Better yet, the bathroom venue provides the spontaneous artist with command of an anonymous, willing or unwilling, temporarily captivated audience, making it an ideal local for untrained, expressive scribbles.

This carved interior outhouse wall belonged to the Bruflat family of Blue Mounds, WI. Andrew Bruflat and his wife Kuri Bruflat married in Norway in 1880 before immigrating to the United States in 1885. The couple had seven children, five of which were born in Blue Mounds.

The pinewood canvas is incised with the outline of a large dove with long tail feathers spanning two boards. Below the bird, the artist, self-identified with the initials “AB” carved below the tail feathers, also carved the date 1905. Two of the Bruflat children possessed the initials AB: Anton (aged 19 in 1905) and Albert (aged 16 in 1905). Although it is plausible that the father, Andrew Bruflat, could have carved the image, the donor claims that it was carved by one of the sons.

The next question is “why carve a dove in an outhouse?” The dove is accompanied by an olive leaf, suggestive of Christian iconography, particularly of the story of Noah’s ark, and a scroll. The scriptures tell of Noah’s discovery of land after the great flood. He sent out a dove anticipating that if it returned to the ark, it did not find an alternative place to perch. If it did not return, that meant that the dove found land, providing Noah and his distressed family with assurance that their tribulation would soon be at an end. After Noah’s first failed attempt, the text about the dove proceeds as follows:

“He [Noah] waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him.”[3]

The story of Noah’s ark and the dove in particular symbolizes God’s faithfulness to provide and the peace that knowledge provides for the recipient.

What is the meaning of adorning an outhouse wall with an elegant scriptural reference? Is it in some way irreverent? The outhouse itself is a sort of floating wooden structure separate from the house. It is also a space out of doors and more deeply connected to nature than perhaps the main homestead. In some ways, it is like the ark. A quiet, isolated space of introspection as much as a functional necessity.

Perhaps the best way to understand the Bruflat graffiti artist is to think of the messages

inscribed in bathroom stalls today. They might be political, religious, personal, comical, pictorial or indecipherable. But nonetheless, we read them on a scale ranging from absentmindedness to thoughtfulness. In this way, it is easy to imagine the Bruflat artist and his family occupying the outhouse and being caused to ponder the dove and the olive branch, calling to mind the story of Noah and of God's faithfulness all while hearing the breeze blow past the small building and the bird, perhaps a dove, chirping outside.

### **References**

[1] Robert Reisner, *Graffiti: Two Thousand Years of Wall Writing*, (Chicago: Cowles Book Company, 1971), 1. 34-35 "Scholars do admit that whereas the writers, historians, and record keepers of various eras have provided panoramic stylization of a civilization, it is the graffiti that attest to the continuity of the common man, and the continued commonness of many of his problems. It was true of Pompeii, and is certainly true of ancient Rome, where the mania for writing on public and private buildings was intense. There was hardly an edifice that didn't bear the scars of a schoolboy's pocket-knife or some idle passerby's nail...Many graffiti show that deeply entrenched in time and history are some of life's daily vexations."

[2] Howard Pearlstein, *Post-Graffiti*, (New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1983), N.P.

[3] Genesis 8:10-12, New International Version of the Bible



## 27. Cupboard

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**Cupboard**  
Norwegian-American  
Aslak Olsen Lie, c.1860  
Wood (pine), glass, metal  
Gift of Ella Mavis  
MHAHS 1984.011.0001

Diamonds were a hallmark of the furniture-maker Aslak Olsen Lie (pronounced LEE), appearing across the many styles of his work. Lie was born in Norway and spent the first thirty years of his career there. When he emigrated, he brought with him the skills and thinking of a mature craftsman. Lie's family was one of the first Norwegian families to settle in the Blue Mounds region. He quickly adapted to making both American and Norwegian styles of furniture. The Norwegian cut-out ends on this stepback cupboards show how Lie would also mix those styles. The result was furniture that is distinctly Norwegian-American.

Compare the unusual interior decoration of this cupboards with that of the traveling box in the previous area of this exhibit.



*Aslak Olsen Lie (second adult from right) poses with family members in front of the home he built with his brother after immigrating from Norway in 1848. WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, WHS-27635.*

For a complete essay on this object, [click here](#).

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In an advertisement he took out in a Blue Mounds area newspaper, Norwegian immigrant Aslak Olsen Lie (pronounced LEE) promoted his cabinetmaking business on his ability to make furniture according to American and European fashions. But while the advertisement seems to suggest that Lie alternated between working in one style or the other, the reality is more complicated. Examination of Lie's post-emigration furniture shows that he regularly mixed forms and stylistic elements from his native Norway with those popular in the United States. The stepback cupboard that he made around 1860 for the Skindrud family is one example of such blending. Considering this piece within the greater context of his life and career sheds light on Lie's own formation of immigrant identity.

Aslak Olsen Lie's career as a cabinetmaker spanned over six decades and straddled the Atlantic Ocean. Lie was born in the Valdres district of south-central Norway in 1798. As a young man in Norway, Lie learned the techniques involved in making furniture and developed an aesthetic sense for Norwegian design. As a cabinetmaker in rural Norway, he developed his own variations

within the decorative traditions of that culture. A fifty-year old man when he emigrated in 1848, Lie came to Wisconsin an already mature craftsman. His family was among the first from Norway to settle in the Blue Mounds area and was a central figure in establishing a stream of immigrants from Valdres to Blue Mounds. In Wisconsin, Lie had to both adapt to the tastes of his new, American, clientele, as well as continue to appeal to other Norwegian immigrants. Lie's resultant work varied based upon the taste of each client, bearing more characteristic of one style or the other. However, the majority of Lie's work in Wisconsin shows some degree of hybridization – the synthesizing of the two influences to create a distinctly Norwegian-American style of furniture.

The stepback cupboard made for the Skindrud family displays characteristics of Lie's hybrid styles in his work in Wisconsin. Stepback cupboards are an American form that have a shallow upper casement that "steps back" to produce a shelf where the deeper base juts out. Cupboards of this form, particularly those with glass upper casement doors, often emphasize straight lines and angularity. In contrast to this American form, the cupboards Lie made while in Norway were dominated by the use of dramatic curving ornamentation. In the Skindrud cupboard, Lie flanked the shelf with scrollwork ends. In doing so, he incorporated Norwegian curvilinear design into the angular American form. Additionally, the red exterior and patterned blue paint inside the cupboard draw upon the Norwegian tradition of decorating furniture with bold colors.

Aslak Lie's hybridization of furniture styles reveals an active formation of immigrant identity. Lie created new designs out of elements he knew from both Norway and America. He was still able to show creative self-expression through his cabinetry. When designing a piece of furniture, Lie knowingly selected what he wanted to take and incorporate from Norwegian and American decorative traditions. In form and style, Aslak Olsen Lie's post-immigration works display a great variation as he interpreted his neighbors' and his own ethnic identity. As a case study, Aslak Lie demonstrates how the process of acculturation and hybridization among first generation immigrants is an active process. Lie consciously shaped and used ethnic character to navigate his new market. By so doing, he pushed his own artistic boundaries, as well as both Norwegian and American furniture to new forms.

### **References**

Bakken, Reidar. *Snikkaren Aslak Olsen Lie: Bygdekunstnar i Valdres og Wisconsin 1798-1886, Craftsman on two Continents*. Oslo: Novus forlag, 2000.

Holzhueter, John O. "Aslak Lie and the Challenge of the Artifact," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Autumn, 1986): 3-20. <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/wmh/id/36301>

## 28. Cradle

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**Cradle**  
Norwegian-American  
Sever Syverson, 1855  
Wood (pine), metal  
Museum acquisition  
MHAHS 1992.036.0001

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Created in a distinct Norwegian style, this well-loved cradle has witnessed a long life as evidenced by its numerous repairs. The date 1846 is carved into its headboard. But this date differs from a 1920s photograph from the Society's archives. A handwritten note on the back of the photo states: "This cradle was made in the year 1855 by uncle Sever Syverson at Black Earth Wisconsin." Often times, family lore and family history present contrasting dates and stories.



*In about 1920,  
descendants pose  
with the cradle and  
another furniture  
piece handcrafted  
by Sever Syverson.  
MHAHS 4x6.04075.*

## PART III

# HERITAGE MEMORIALIZED

With varying degrees of distance from the experience of immigration, many mid-to-late 20th century artists and collectors revived traditional forms of artistry and imaginatively memorialized their ethnic roots. Nearby summer-home-turned-cultural-destination Little Norway and the costumed pageantry of the long-running Song of Norway performances evoked pristine peasant Norway, nudging the Mount Horeb area towards a romanticized folk cultural façade. Motivated variously by nostalgia, familial allegiances, and economic savvy, Southwestern Dane County residents invested both artistic talent and money in the revitalization and re-invention of ethnicity.

# The Creation of Little Norway

Brian Bigler

Little Norway, located just west of Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, was an open-air museum of an idealized 19th century Norwegian homestead that operated for over 75 years.



Little Norway began through the efforts of Isaak J. Dahle who was born in Mt. Vernon, Wisconsin, February 1, 1883. As a child Dahle was fascinated with collecting objects, displaying his finds in cases in his bedroom. After college, he became a successful businessman in Chicago. In 1926 he took his mother on a first-class tour of Europe, including the country of their ancestors, Norway.

Inspired by farms in Norway, Dahle purchased a small run-down farm west of Mt Horeb in 1927, intending it to be a summer retreat for his friends and family. Over the next few years he hired carpenters, painters and stone masons to renovate the property into an idyllic Norwegian farm. Some of these craftsmen were out of work during the Depression and most, like painters Per Lysne and Olaf Colberson, were of Norwegian decent. Dahle advertised locally for ethnic antiques to furnish the buildings, and a Chicago interior decorator he hired toured Norway and shipped crates of artifacts back to America. Additionally, rustic log furniture was constructed from trees on the property and plain antiques were made “more Norwegian” with the application of ethnic decoration.

In 1933 Dahle purchased the Norway Pavilion from the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair and had it moved to his summer retreat. The building’s arrival intensified the interest of curiosity seekers who were often found wandering the site. Interest in the property led to the opening of “Little Norway” to the public in 1934.

Over the years Little Norway attracted visitors from all over the world. In 1998 the site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In the summer of 2012, due to a decrease in attendance and increased costs, Little Norway closed its doors. Thankfully, a number of artifacts were generously donated to and acquired for the Mount Horeb Area Historical Society.

## 29. Log Rocker (Kubbestol)

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**Log Rocker (Kubbestol)**  
Norwegian-American  
Maker, workmen at Little Norway; decoration  
attributed to Olaf Colberson, c.1930  
Wood (oak), paint  
Little Norway Collection, Gift of Scott & Jennifer  
Winner  
MHAHS 2015.021.0004

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*Kubbestols*, traditional Norwegian log chairs, were created from the trunks of trees, their typically over-sized bases making them appear almost rooted to the ground, immovable. *Kubbestols* are a source of national pride in Norway and symbols of Norwegian heritage in America. This ethnic tradition is completely transformed when rockers, typically associated with movement, are added. Although this combination is rare, this rocking *kubbestol* made for Little Norway is a clear example of the reinvention of ethnicity.

For a complete essay on this object, [click here](#).

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Often, chairs are considered utilitarian above all other characteristics. We need them for an easy way to sit down, we need them to sit at the table, we need them in crowded theaters, and we prefer different styles based on our comfort needs. However, chairs represent much more than a

resting position. They communicate our identity and our lifestyle. Think of a rocking chair, a stool, and an office chair. These are clearly not interchangeable, but they all chairs and it matters which one you are sitting in.

Created in the early 18th century, the rocking chair is a distinctly American invention. One of the most comfortable chairs ever created, the rocking chair is so soothing that people often use it to calm infants. When sitting in a rocking chair, the chair matches your center of gravity and keeps you in an unstressed position. It is a chair that refuses to sit still, but carries out its motion in a soft and serene way, shifting back and forth slowly, lazily, as if lulling you to sleep.

On the other hand, when you sit in a kubbestol, you are rooted to the ground. The other kubbestols in the exhibit vary greatly in size, but this Norwegian chair demands its presence be felt. It represents power and an immovable, proud sense of self. Comparing a rocking chair to a kubbestol is nearly impossible, which is why this object in the exhibit is so rare.

Observing the kubbestol rocker in the exhibit, the details come to life. Scars cover it, traces left by the axe used to carve this rocker out of a giant log. Though this chair is hollowed out in the center, one would not be able to tell upon moving this massive weight, which demands it stay rooted in one spot. Paint on the end of the seat has worn away from use, showing that this was clearly a loved object even though it was made for Little Norway. Olaf Colberson, an artist with a tragic past, did the large and swooping rosemaling along the bottom of the chair. Horseshoes carved on either side of the chair can be easily scanned over in one's haste to study the rest of the object. A large crack traces the left side of the chair, showing the wood expanding with age, stretching out and making its presence known.

Then there are the rockers. How did they come to be on this kubbestol? This powerful, heavy mass of a chair seems like it would smash the rockers into the ground. This beast of a chair could not possibly move the way the rockers imply. Who thought this was a good idea? Marrying this uprooted tree to such a fluid, calming idea of a rocking chair seems ridiculous and yet it is perfect for this exhibit. Mount Horeb was a community of immigrants that wanted to pass their culture down to their future generations and they clearly succeeded when you look around the Historical Society. However, this Norwegian culture does not remain untouched. Children of these immigrants not only cared for their Norwegian roots, but they also wanted to grasp the shifting nature of American culture. Both the rocking chair and the kubbestol are symbols of the nostalgia that is a focal point at Little Norway. Combining these two chairs by placing rockers on a kubbestol, this object represents a cultural hybrid of idealized identities, highlighting a theme of reinvention and cultural fusion often practiced by Norwegian-American immigrants.



## 30. Mural, Painting on Masonite

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**Mural, Painting on Masonite**

Norwegian-American

Olaf Colberson, 1928

Masonite, paint

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Scott & Jennifer Winner

MHAHS 2016.040.0001

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Norwegian-trained painter Olaf “Ole” Colberson immigrated to Black Earth, Wisconsin. At one point in his life, he was committed to the Wisconsin Hospital for the Insane. He was later released by petitions from his Norwegian community of devoted friends. They provided him a new home and began purchasing his artwork. His talent was later recognized by Isaak Dahle who commissioned Colberson to adorn one of Little Norway’s buildings with a series of murals. Each mural depicts a quiet rural scene in the Norway home region of Dahle’s grandfather.

For a complete essay on this object, [click here](#).

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Olaf Colberson was a trained painter, who learned his trade in Norway before moving to the Midwest. “—not only a house painter, but an artist who created beautiful pictures.”<sup>[1]</sup> He is remembered best for his paintings that decorated the halls of Little Norway. Most of what can learned about Colberson comes from his funeral and wake, where his closest friends spoke about who he was as a person, his talents, and his family. Anne Sinley,<sup>[2]</sup> displayed the majority of what we can infer about his personal life in a touching eulogy. She provides information about his family, his time in Mendota mental hospital, information about his training, and his influence within the community.

She starts her letter by detailing how she came to meet the Colberson family, they were

neighbors in Black Earth, Wisconsin, and because of their shared immigration experiences the families became friends. It was sometime after this move that Colberson's life took an interesting turn.

Sometime about 1922 or 1923, we heard that Colberson was at Mendota, supposedly a mental case. My brother, Ole, was just then taking a degree in Psychology. He and my father went to Mendota to see our old friend. It seems that while he was undergoing some minor surgery, devious means had been implemented to get him committed to Mendota. He was listed as manic depressive and with good reason. He had been completely disowned and deserted by his wife, daughter and son-in-law and stripped of his home and all of his assets.[3]

The people who should have cared for him the most abandoned Colberson, and society had shunned and temporarily forgotten about him.

Anne Sinley then describes how her father obtained a one-month temporary release for Colberson, and when the community saw that he did not have any ongoing mental health illnesses, the governor, Phillip LaFollette, obtained a permanent release for him. According to Sinley, LaFollette then purchased a house for Colberson to reside back in Black Earth, and the community helped assist him get his life back together. While rebuilding his life Colberson started with redecorating. He kept himself busy and spent his time creating artworks, and was even hired by others in the community to create art for their homes. The community was re-embracing him, and he was asserting himself back into the community. It was at this time when Little Norway was searching for a person to help decorate some scenery of the owners' family background. They wanted someone who could paint in a traditional Norwegian style, and they commissioned Olaf Colberson after observing his work displayed throughout Black Earth.

The people of Little Norway began driving him back and forth between Black Earth and Little Norway for the entirety of his commission, and his work was very well received. The Mount Horeb Historical Society has in its possession a letter from Little Norway exclaiming, "Your effort is a marked contribution to the attractiveness of Little Norway and receives very high commendation on all sides...I can imagine no artist but one of Norse birth who could have done this work as they could not have gotten into the spirit of it." [4]

The four artworks displayed here are landscapes that portray scenes from Isak Dahle's, the creator and commissioner for Little Norway, childhood; Mr. Colberson was locally considered a renowned landscape artist, however some of the pieces also included images of animals, people, or buildings. Each of the images had nail holes throughout the center of the images, and was informed that the frames were not original to the paintings. So these were not hung, but were pinned.

Colberson passed away around Thanksgiving in 1931, and his obituary kindly remarks, "Mr. Colbertson [sic], as well as being a musician, was a hand painter of unrecognized ability. Landscape scenes were his specialty and he produced original work." [5] He felt and faced the stigma of mental illness, and how difficult it is to move on with one's life once they have been labeled—even incorrectly. Art can be a therapeutic representation of a community or one's self, and through Mr. Colberson's landscapes we can see a man who was represented by his ethnicity and his

community. There is a story and a message in Olaf Colberson's life and artwork, he can be representative of many groups of people: immigrants, traditional folk artists (Norwegian folk artists), those condemned to a negative label, those redeemed through perseverance, and those who loved and were loved by their community.

### *References*

[1] Simley, Anne. "Remembrances of Olaf Colberson." 1931.

[2] The Sinley name is ambiguous due to document spelling and alternative spellings of her father's name. As stated previously, many immigrants' names had spelling changed during translation.

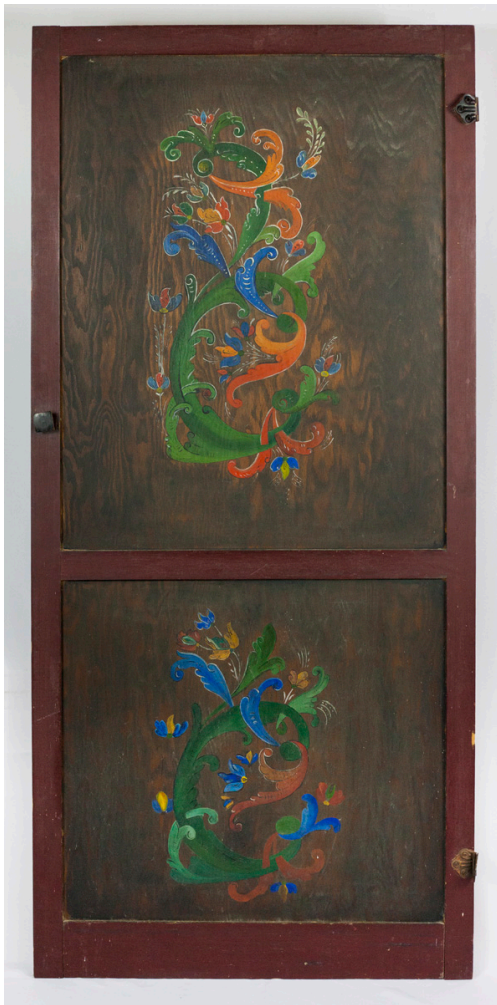
[3] Simley, Anne. "Remembrances of Olaf Colberson." 1931.

[4] Little Norway Records. "Letter of Thanks and Recognition." August 9, 1928.

[5] "Ole Colberson Found Dead In His Home." *Mt. Horeb Times*, December 1931.

## 31. Door (Armoire)

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### **Door (Armoire)**

Norwegian-American

Maker unknown; decoration attributed to Per Lysne, c.1930

Wood, paint

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Beth Burke

MHAHS 2016.043.0001

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Isaak Dahle, the grandson of Norwegian immigrants and the founder of Little Norway, commissioned artists and workers to complete his vision of the Norwegian pioneering spirit. This door, which came from the “Bachelor’s Cabin” on the property, was made for an armoire and reflects a sense of immigrant resourcefulness and frugality. Though unconfirmed, the sophisticated style points to Per Lysne, the so-called father of American rosemaling. Olaf Colberson, Little Norway’s mural painter, is another possible artist. No matter who created the pattern, the rosemaling welcomes you into a world of Norwegian heritage.

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Doors are unusually fascinating and powerful, but often their importance is forgotten and overlooked. They allow or prohibit us to enter spaces, protect belongings, and create change. They can lock us in or out all while being a gateway to a new area. This particular door, not

only protected someone's treasures in the "Bachelor Cabin" armoire at Little Norway, but also exhibits a proud tradition from Norway through its beautiful decoration. This door also holds a mystery—who painted it?

This door's story starts with Isak Dahle, the creator of Little Norway, a living museum. Originally this museum was a summer home for the owner, and was stylized to appear Norwegian. To do this Dahle paraded the building with Norwegian traditions through its building and incredible artistry and crafts. Isak Dahle commissioned many artists and crafters to decorate Little Norway—this included the design of the building itself, through murals that adorned the walls, and painting doors. Sometime between 1920 and 1935 this door was installed in the "Bachelor Cabin" armoire (sometimes referred to as a wardrobe or a moveable cabinet.) This cabin is located near the "Main Cabin" or the previous owner's home and was used when a brother moved into town and needed a place of residence.

The door is adorned with a beautiful and colorful rosemaling. Rosemaling is a Norwegian painting style, which encompasses beautiful, and often floral, patterns. The term rosemaling roughly translates from Norwegian as "decorative painting." This style and the various patterns were popularized in America through Scandinavian immigrants who brought this artistic practice and talent with them. One of the potential artists for this door is often credited as being responsible for the revival of rosemaling in America. There are two artists who could be credited with the decoration on this armoire door: Olaf 'Ole' Colberson or Per Lysene. Both immigrants from Norway, both traditionally trained painters, and both proud of their heritage.

Olaf Colberson was a well-established Norwegian landscape artist in Black Hills, WI. After a period of being institutionalized against his will in Mendota Mental Hospital, he was re-established in his community and began painting again to decorate his own home. His friends and neighbors saw his work and asked him to create beautiful paintings for their homes, and as his popularity rose he garnered the attention of Isak Dahle. We know that Colberson was commissioned to paint landscape murals for Little Norway, and some are even displayed in this exhibit, but it is less likely that he was the painter of this door.

The other artist commissioned for paintings in Little Norway is Per Lysene, who is often credited as being responsible for the re-popularization of rosemaling in America during the 20th century. Because he is well known for rosemaling, and Olaf Colberson is known for landscape murals, it is more likely that Per Lysene was the artist for this door, however we will never truly know.

## **References**

Oleksy, Walter. "Little Norway Tucked Away in Wisconsin Valley." *Chicago Tribune*, May 6, 1966.

## 32. Painting on Masonite, Model Swiss Chalet, and Lawn Windmill

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### **Lawn Windmill**

Swiss-American

Karl Minnig, 1975

Recycled metal, electric conduit, wood, paint

Gift of Fred & Hilda Bigler

MHAHS 1986.042.0001



### **Model Swiss Chalet**

Swiss-American

Karl Minnig, 1972

Wood (recycled cheese boxes), glass, stones,

fabric, plastic novelties

Gift of William Garfoot

MHAHS 1986.025.0001



**Painting on Masonite**  
Swiss-American  
Karl Minnig, 1968  
Masonite, paint  
Gift of Merel Black  
MHAHS 2014.068.0001

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A proud Swiss immigrant and notable Wisconsin cheesemaker, Karl Minnig enjoyed making ethnic crafts to sell alongside his cheese. Three examples appear here: a “whirly gig” lawn ornament, a small-scale replica of a Swiss chalet and a detailed painting of a Swiss farmyard. The fact that both Karl and his older brother were employed as cheesemakers in Wisconsin suggest an identity rooted in farming and particularly dairying. Karl’s heritage deeply influenced the objects he created and they, in turn, reveal his love and passion for a place, a culture, a memory and an identity.

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Through his various artworks and by making cheese, Karl Minnig (1896-1987) brought back his native Swiss culture to Wisconsin. According to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Minnig was originally from Bern, Switzerland and he immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century, According to census records, he became a naturalized citizen in 1928. Minnig married a woman named Florella Ida Minnie Kahl (1904-1975) and together they had a daughter named Ruth in 1932. After moving to America he was drafted for both WWI and WWII. He eventually settled in Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, where he would remain until he passed away at the age of 90. He never forgot of his love for Switzerland and continued using business pursuits and creative outlets to exhibit his love for Swiss products and culture.

Minnig and his wife owned and operated Ridge Cheese Factory where they specialized in making Swiss cheese. Although they stopped producing cheese themselves, the Minnigs continued to sell cheese, as well as other Swiss-style folk novelties within their basement retail store. These crafts and trinkets include: wall shelves, mechanical lawn windmills or “whirly gigs,” and model “Swiss” houses and farmsteads. He was creative in his use of media to channel his artistic works. This included reincorporating cheese boxes, license plates, plywood, plastic animals, and nature itself.

The pieces selected for this exhibit include a painting of a Swiss chalet, a model of a Swiss farmhouse, and a lawn ornament windmill. Each of the pieces showcase Minnig’s love of Switzerland, his old home and his heritage. Two of the pieces include a traditional Swiss housing style (chalet or farmhouse) in a beautifully rustic setting. Adorned by animals and bright colors. The Windmill shows two horsemen as they ride the winds that turn the blades of the mill.

All of the pieces are beautifully bright and were made to bring the artist back to charming memories, but the presumed story as to how the pieces were acquired is unfortunately more

dismal. Mr. Minnig's daughter Ruth (1932-2006) was not able to hold an entire family of her own for a long time. When she was young she married and had a child, but unfortunately she would not enjoy the pleasure of motherhood or be a spouse for her entire life. Her child passed away almost immediately, and her husband, Dale "William" Garfoot, passed away at the young age of 56. They were married for 18 years. Mr. Garfoot is the one who donated the model of the Swiss farmhouse. She would later lose her mother and father, before she herself passed away. The painting was donated to the Historical Society by neighbor Merel Black. Hilda Bigler, another neighbor, donated the lawn windmill or "whirly gig".

Karl Minnig is the embodiment of an immigrant adapting to a new setting while embracing their past. He frequently revisited his home country, and brought back more advancements on his folk art. His artwork exhibit pride and fondness for how he arrived to America, and how he chose to respect his native culture.



## 33. Costume (Bunad)

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**Costume (Bunad)**  
Norwegian-American  
Irene Gilbertson,  
1969  
Wool, cotton, brass  
Gift of Irene  
Gilbertson  
MHAHS  
2015.011.0001



Irene  
Gilbertson  
poses  
in her  
bunad  
with  
husband  
Otto,  
1969.  
MHAHS  
5×7.0129  
4.

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This decorated dress is a costume known as a *bunad*, a Norwegian rural folk garment. Irene Gilbertson created this particular outfit to wear when she took tickets and was a host at Mount Horeb's annual performance of *The Song of Norway*, a play based on the life of Edvard Grieg. Begun in 1969, the popular production became an outlet for local talent and a way for the community to attract visitors to the area. Irene Gilbertson's paternal grandparents emigrated from Norway. She was a pillar of the community and involved in many different groups, including being a long-time participant of *The Song of Norway*.

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This beautifully decorated dress is a costume called a Bunad. This particular bunad—Norwegian rural folk garment—is decorated in the Gudbrandsdahlen style. It was handcrafted and sewn by Irene Gilbertson and consists of seven pieces. This particular outfit includes: a bodice, a blouse,

a small hat, a purse, 2 pins of silver metal filigree (necklaces), and cufflinks. The dress, purse, and hat are blue with intricately ornate multi-color flowers.

Bunad's are a specific movement of style of dress in Norwegian communities. They come in many forms as they are related to their specific regions. This particular garment is styled in the Gudbrandsahlen style (Gudbrandalsbunad) that originates from the Lillehammer region. This specific style could mean that it is double woven, which is usually the easiest way to distinguish it from other bunad styles. These costumes hold rich traditions within Norwegian communities, both literally and metaphorically. They were sometimes used to display wealth as they could be richly decorated with gold and silvers, but are now more commonly used as religious confirmation presents or as costumes in performances.

Irene Gilbertson, and the memory of all her accomplishments, remains a prominent member of Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin. She was born and raised in Madison where she met her husband Otto. They then owned and operated Gilbertson Hardware in Mt. Horeb for 43 years. She was a pillar of the community and was heavily involved in many different groups. Her impressive resume includes: long-term membership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Matron of the Mt. Horeb Eastern Star, organized the Rainbow for Girls, a charter member for Mound View Garden Club, but most importantly she was a charter member and curator for Mt. Horeb's Historical Society and participated in the Song of Norway for 14 years. She clearly loved being active and engaging with her community, and participated and created groups that continue to last in Mt. Horeb today.

In 1969 Irene Gilbertson began her participation in the Song of Norway, a small stage production. This play was originated in 1944 as an operetta on Broadway and portrays the life of Edvard Grieg—a composer who struggled to create an authentic Norwegian national music. The play was popular among these Norwegian communities and was performed throughout the state. It was often used in festivities and celebrations that focused on the towns' Norwegian heritage. The play was so popular that Hollywood attempted to 'perfect it' in a film adaptation, that ultimately flopped. This bunad is what Irene Gilbertson created and wore for Song of Norway, and follows the Gudbrandsahled style—however, this dress was typically black, but Irene Gilbertson preferred blue. It is through the generous donation of her family that Irene Gilbertson's bunad has a home at the Mt. Horeb Historical Society.

## 34. Shoes

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### **Shoes**

Norwegian-American  
Decorated by Olga Edseth, 1998  
Recycled shoes, paint  
Gift of Olga Edseth  
MHAHS 2003.056.0001

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Clothing often expresses ethnic identity, and these hot pink pumps with two-inch heels make a size eight cultural fashion statement. In 1998, Olga Edseth purchased this pair of leather shoes at a Dodgeville garage sale for fifty cents. Norwegian folk painting has a rich tradition of rosemaling a variety of surfaces. The decoration of these particular functional objects not only draws on this practice, but gains new life and symbolic meaning through Norwegian folk painting. These shoes become heritage “on the go.” In addition to signing and dating her work on the shoes’ soles, Olga lists the price she paid and notes that these are, “The first pair of shoes I ever rosemaled.”



Olga Edseth poses  
in bunad. MHAHS  
8×10.00320.

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Regardless of where we come from, clothing functions as a highly visible marker of individual and ethnic identity in both the celebratory and everyday realms of life. Articles of clothing worn for special occasions, whether festive or somber, annual or as rites of passage, are commonly referred to as “folk costumes.” In Wisconsin and Dane County, examples that may come to mind range from the Norwegian *bunad*, German *lederhosen*, to Hmong *paj ntaub*. While each folk costume may carry different symbolic significance stretching across generations and sometimes oceans, the wearer becomes, even temporarily, a bearer of traditions and a performer of heritage.

By 1998, Olga Edseth was an active rosemaler in the Mount Horeb community and took this notion of wearing one's ethnicity to a street-level understanding. That year, while at a garage sale in Dodgeville, Mount Horeb, Wisconsin she came across a hot pink pair of size eight leather pumps. She bought them for fifty cents. Having practiced rosemaling since 1946, Olga was self-taught and practiced for over sixty years, applying her craft not only to her home, where she collected and displayed a massive assortment rosemalled object, but around Mount Horeb. Whether it was a street light or a banner, Olga was happy to apply her craft. Although featuring vibrant floral motifs, such as roses, geometric shapes, and tendrils, rosemaling is characterized by its two-dimensionality. Originally this painting style was applied to wooden surfaces which had been carved or on the interior walls of churches. Over time it came to represent art in the home and was easily expanded to be applied to any wood surface, regardless of various size and purpose. It is utilized in print form for various commercial or decorative usage. These heels must have struck Olga as a new challenge towards which she could apply her craft.

Through applying classic rosemaling features, these pumps became a form of heritage "on the go." The toe of each shoe becomes the central area of focus through its use of a blue and turquoise Rocco C stem motif with a golden center. The sides feature lively acanthus leaves of gold, green, blue and turquoise, with black outlines and accents which meet at the heel. No section is left untouched as the two inch heels are similarly painted with turquoise tendrils. On the sole of the right shoe not only did Olga sign her artwork, but left two notes. The first, at the bridge, reads, "from a garage sale 50 ¢," and, as if in celebratory laughter, she wrote, "The first pair of shoes I ever rosemaled" along the right edge.

Wherever we go, we carry with us the stories of countless generations, and how we perform our ethnic identity speaks volumes to the continuation of the traditions of not only our ancestors, but our community and the role we play in their narrative. For Olga Edseth, her artwork demonstrates that rosemaling and Norwegian-American ethnicity are far from static traditions, but dynamic expressions of identity one can wear with pride.

## References

Gilmore, Janet. "Mount Horeb's Oljanna Venden Cunneen. A Norwegian-American Rosemaler 'on the Edge.'" *ARV Nordic Year of Folklore*, 2009(65): 25-48.

## 35. Rosemaled Chair

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**Chair**

Norwegian-American  
Decorated by Oljanna Cunneen, c.1970  
Wood, paint  
Gift of Ella Mavis  
MHAHS 1989.054.0001

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Rosemaling not only makes it possible to give new life to old objects, but, in this instance, brings joy where once there was pain. This spindle-backed chair was built c. 1910 and used in the Mount Horeb hospital on Main Street. Although the bentwood handles look inviting, this seat was occupied by those having their tonsils removed. Ella Mavis of Mount Horeb acquired the chair after the hospital closed, and in 1970 she requested it to be rosemaled by local artist Oljanna Cunneen. Through ethnic art the chair became an instrument of warmth and hospitality.

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When looking at everyday objects it may be easy to forget that they have the capacity to tell a colorful history reflecting changes in ownership, function and intentionality across time and

place. One of the ways through which these changes can be expressed is through the application of decoration. Decorated objects possess sensorial qualities and reflect the identity of both the artist and the owner of object. It can also work to re-write, or even challenge, the previous chapters of an object's biography. Ella Mavis's (1901-1991) chair is just such an example which, through the transformative potential of craft, in this case rosemaling, an object from once associated with pain becomes one of comfort, as well as from an institutional item to one of private and deeply personal value.

During the first part of the 20th century, Mount Horeb's hospital was located on Main Street and served as the initial home of this chair. This spindle backed chair was constructed in 1910, and the bentwood armrests with a tall back creates a sense of welcome and a sturdy support for long hours of sitting. Perhaps due to the inviting design one may expect to have seen it in the waiting room, but this would be a dramatically inaccurate assumption. This practical looking chair was utilized by doctors to remove tonsils. The use of household furniture to facilitate medical procedures was not an uncommon practice, particularly among rural hospitals. When the hospital closed, the next stage of this chair's "life" would begin when it was purchased by Ella Mavis of Mount Horeb around the time she was married.

Very little is known about Ella. The degree to which she claimed Norwegian decent is unknown, as is whether she was employed outside the household, or if she and her husband (whom she married at age forty) had children. Little is also known as to her reasons for bringing this chair, whose history may make many a visitor's experience in that seat turn from relaxation to uncomfortable squirming, into her home. Perhaps she purchased the chair for this very reason – an object with a story, a story which may have involved a younger version of herself. It may have functioned as a conversation piece. The chair, too, is a highly functional piece of furniture, and this may be another factor which encouraged this purchase as she began to create a home and sense of domesticity.

In 1970, a seventy-year old Ella commissioned local artist Oljanna Cunneen to apply rosemaling to the chair. The chair, now painted in vibrant orange, has blue and orange rosemaling motifs "draped" across the backrest with a complimentary repeat of the pattern near the front of the wooden seat. According to Pauline Garvey (2003), this chair, as a result of its low-key design, aligns with Norwegian notions of creating a "good" home. Here, a "good home" stresses the significance of comfort through the practical and functionality of objects. Through Oljanna's rosemaling, this chair is elevated to a sense of what Norwegians refer to as *koselig*, which marries aesthetic qualities of home furnishings with their functionality to create a sense of comfort in the home.

When we take into consideration the often complicated biography of everyday objects, we may reveal contradictory chapters within these stories. These chapters reflect not only the use of said objects, but the identity of those who owned, used, and in some cases modified their purpose and character. Through ethnic art of Oljanna Cunneen, Ella Mavis's chair became an instrument of warmth and hospitality.

## References

Garvey, Pauline. "How to Have a 'Good Home': The Practical Aesthetic and Normativity in Norway." *Journal of Design History* 16, no. 3 (2003): 241-51.

Ibid, 243.

## 36. Sending Basket

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### **Sending Basket**

Norwegian-American  
Maker, Olav H. Dokka; decorated by  
Olga Edseth, 1991  
Wood, paint  
Gift of Olga Edseth  
MHAHS 2003.020.0002

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This white basket tells the story of two artists separated by an ocean and generations of immigration, yet united in passion for Norwegian ethnic art. In 1988, Olga Edseth visited a folk museum in Boi i Telemark in southeast Norway. While there, she bought this wooden, “weaved” basket from ninety-five year old carver Olav H. Dokka. Three years later, Edseth rosemaled the basket in Mount Horeb. “19 O.M.E. 91” indicate her initials and the date. This basket symbolically joins two artists through their craft, and rosemaling transformed it from a Norwegian souvenir to a hybrid of Norwegian-American folkart.

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Ethnic artwork does not exist in a vacuum. It is subject to the movements of time, people, taste and variations in tradition. Each piece is imbued with a narrative, and sometimes these intertwine multiple artists divided by ocean and diaspora who are held together by their passion for art. There is a journey to be discovered, and that is where the story of this basket (Item 45), begins.

Olga Edseth of Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, was incredibly proud of her Norwegian descent, traveling frequently to Norway to visit relatives. In 1988, she made a trip to the Telemark region of southern Norway, a culturally significant area for Norwegian-American ethnic identity. Telemark, and the Hallingdal region of eastern Norway, experienced a vast population drainage to the United



States through the 19th c. diaspora. These immigrants brought with them both material culture and skillsets representing their variations of ethnic art and folk identity to regions like the Driftless Area. In particular, they transported their style of rosemaling. Rosemaling has distinct stylistic variations bearing the name of the regional origin. Among these, Telemark and Hallingdal are the most prominent. Historian Nils Ellingsgard refers to them as “the core areas of the art [and where] the most distinctive local styles came into being and here we find the greatest number of painters.”

While in Telemark, Olga visited a folk museum in Bø, Telemark near the Halver and Ragnhild’s farm. There at a bazar she purchased the four-sided flaired wooden basket featured here. Framed by interlocking wooden edging at a bazar, the side panels of the pine box are single pieces accented with a “basket weave” carved into the center of the boards. The skill required to achieve this visual and technical manipulation speaks to the talent of the craftsman, Olav H. Dokka. He must have made quite the impression because after Olga received the basket in the mail from Halver-Ragnhild Haugland, she wrote in pencil on the bottom not only where and from whom she bought it, but Dokka’s age, *twice!* She further includes his birthday, February 6, 1892, and observes that in 1987 he had celebrated his ninety-fifth birthday.

In 1991, Olga applied her own particular craft to the basket, transforming it from a Norwegian souvenir to a hybrid of Norwegian-American folklore. Rosemaling also allowed Olga the opportunity to give older items a new sense of purpose and identity and adding a personal flair to her purchases (see Item 46). By painting the body of the basket white, and the edgings and pegs red, the focus is redirected to the rosemaling which pops out from the flat surfaces in oranges, reds, yellows and blues. Olga has also applied a similar color scheme and motif to the base of the bentwood handle. The red frame, rosemaling and wooden weave creates a rural immigrant aesthetic. Significantly, she painted in black, “19 O.M.E. 91,” across the top of the handle, O.M.E. being her initials. This wooden, now rosemalled, basket symbolically joins the craft of Bø, Telemark and Mount Horeb, bearing not only the craftsmanship of two artists from these respective areas, but their names, linked by wood and paint by their passion for performing Norwegian folk culture.

### **References**

Gilmore, Janet. “Mount Horeb’s Oljanna Venden Cunneen. A Norwegian-American Rosemaler ‘On the Edge.’” *ARV Nordic Year of Folklore*, 2009(65): 25-48.

Ellingsgard, Nils. “Rosemaling: A Folk Art in Migration.” In *Norwegian Folk Art: The Migration of a Tradition*, edited by Marion Nelson, 190-237, (New York: Abbeville Press), 1995.

## 37. Bucket or Firkin

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**Bucket or Firkin**  
Norwegian-American  
Decorated by Patricia Edmundson, c.1977  
Wood (pine), paint  
Little Norway Collection, Gift of Scott &  
Jennifer Winner  
MHAHS 2014.050.0042

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Created by Edmundson as a gift for Little Norway in the late 1970s, this wooden stave bucket, or sugar firkin, demonstrates the range of rosemaling application and the artistic infusion of ethnic identity into everyday items. Firkins store dry, nonperishable cooking materials. The fitted lid creates a tight seal, bent wooden bands provide structure and a bentwood handle offers ease for domestic transport. The rosemaling, set against a red-brown base, covers the flat lid and curved side. These elegant designs demonstrate the incorporation and significance of identity, both the celebratory and the mundane.

To learn more about Patricia Edmundson, [click here](#).

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Local artists contributed greatly not only to the display of ethnicity at Little Norway but the tourist economy by producing artwork for sale. For eighty-five years tourists were welcomed to experience the sights and sounds of Norwegian-American heritage tucked in the picturesque “Valley of the Elves.” By drawing on an “Old World” aesthetic through the reconstruction and repurposing of buildings constructed by Norwegian immigrants, visitors were able to glimpse an idealized version of Norwegian pioneer life and folklore. Housed in the striking replica of the 12th c. *Stavkirke*, a Christian Norwegian church (*stave*), originally constructed in Trondheim, Norway, and sent to Chicago for display at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, where over 7,000

individual artifacts, some of which were created by local artists like Patricia “Pat” Edmundson (1929-1993).

Tourists, whether they visit places foreign or domestic, often seek to bring home with them pieces of their travels, as gifts or keep-sakes, to commemorate their journey and imbue them with special memories created in that place. Little Norway, whether through its appearance of foreignness or sense of familiarity driven by nostalgia, had the same impact on visitors – the urge to take a piece of Norway and the Driftless Area home. Artists assisted with these abstract desires by producing material goods. Item 48 was created by Pat during the late 1970s for this very purpose. The rosemalled board is beautiful in its simplicity and the sense of years long gone past, of a piece of art which has quietly hung in a family’s kitchen for generations. This is achieved firstly by the frame, constructed from an egg and dart trim circa 1900. Set against a creamy yellow background, the painting is centered on a single, elegant Telemark style design with a vibrant color palette, from the multiple shades of green in the acanthus leaves, to accents of blue peddles and burned orange flowers. Edmundson’s signature is visible near the center on a green acanthus leaf. This piece, however, was never sold – the site’s owners removed it from sale in 1980 to become part of Little Norway’s collection.

Ethnic art was also created by artists as gifts to Little Norway for display, demonstrating a relationship based not solely on economics. Item 50 was created by Edmundson for this express purpose in the late 1970s. This wooden stave bucket, or sugar firkin, also shows the use of ethnic art like rosemaling through its incorporation into the everyday items of life like food storage. Firkins such as this one are used to store everyday nonperishable cooking materials, such as butter and sugar. As such, functionality is key. The fitted lid creates a tight seal, bent wooden bands provide structure, and a bentwood handle offers ease for domestic transport. The rosemaling, set against a red-brown base, covers the flat lid and curved side. These designs demonstrate the incorporation and significance of identity not only in the celebratory, but the mundane.

Little Norway served as site not only for visitors to encounter Norwegian immigrant history and settlement, but for artists to perform their ethnic identity through their craft. Artists like Edmundson fostered a mutually beneficial relationship with this popular attraction, contributing greatly to a rich history of art that continues to travel and transform across time and space in a diverse Wisconsin and United States.

## 38. Chair

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### **Chair**

Norwegian-American

Maker unknown; decoration attributed to Per Lysne, c.1930

Wood, paint

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Scott & Jennifer Winner

MHAHS 2014.050.0049

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The revival of rosemaling in the United States is credited to the painter of this small chair, Per Lysne. Born in Norway in 1880, Lysne was trained in Norwegian decoration by his father. After immigrating with his wife to Stoughton, Wisconsin in 1907, he was initially employed as a wagon painter. In search of work during the Great Depression, he returned to traditional Norwegian decoration. Having faded from popularity, rosemaling reached astounding new heights in Lysne's skilled hands. In addition to non-traditional items such as plates, Lysne also decorated traditional Norwegian objects including trunks, wooden boxes and three-legged chairs. The original owner of this chair was Agnes (Dahle) Green of Mount Horeb. It was later donated to Little Norway and exhibited for many years.

## 39. Painting on Plywood



### **Painting on Plywood**

Norwegian-American

Patricia Edmundson, c.1980

Plywood, paint

Gift of the Village of Mount Horeb

MHAHS 2014.017.0001

Few stories have captured the imagination of successive generations of American children as much as the whimsical nursery rhymes of Mother Goose. Nostalgia for characters like Humpty Dumpty, Little Bo Peep and that athletic cow who jumped over the moon are captured here by Patricia Edmundson. Painted for the Mount Horeb Public Library, this painting speaks to the ability of libraries to transport the imaginations of children into the fantastic, much like the goose ferrying gleeful youth. Plucky little trolls and a heavy robed Nisse greet the children, inviting them to learn the folklore of the town—quite possibly the same stories of their grandparents' youth.

To learn more about Patricia Edmundson, [click here](#).

Few stories have captured the imagination of American children across multiple generations as the whimsical nursery rhymes of Mother Goose. The nostalgia for characters like Humpty Dumpty, Little Bo Peep and that athletic cow who jumped over the moon are captured here by Patricia Edmundson. The six children carried by Mother Goose and her larger than life white goose are greeted not by these famous characters; rather, they are met by three trolls and a *nisse*, figures from Norwegian folklore. The scene painted on this 25¼”x37½” plywood board is one of playful potential on a warm day, note the smiling sun set in the sky. The children appear to be landing along a lake surrounded by hills as Mother Goose tightens the reins on her feathery ferry. The setting for this rendezvous is reminiscent of the geography of the Driftless Area, bringing together stories and scenery familiar to many of the children in and around Mount Horeb.

When Edmundson created this painting sometime between 1978 and 1991 for the Mount Horeb Library, the facility was located in the Village Office along East Main Street and North 2nd Street. Children entering the library, just like those in the painting, these comical folkloric creatures, similarly inviting them to learn the folklore of the town, and possibly the stories of their grandparents’ youth. While the library would later move, the painting remained in the basement of the Office, where it would later be found.

Children can still travel to fantastic lands at the Mount Horeb Public Library, located at 105 Perimeter Road on the east side of town near the Norsk Golf Club. While we recommend visiting in the company of friends and family, travel by magical, gigantic goose may be a difficult mode of transport to attain.

## 40. Bowl



### **Bowl**

Norwegian-American

Decorated by Patricia Edmundson, 1991

Wood (maple), paint

Gift of Patricia Edmundson

MHAHS 1991.047.0001

Created in 1991, this bowl commemorates and memorializes the life of Richard “Dick” Horn and was dedicated at the 25th season of Mount Horeb’s annual play, *The Song of Norway*. The play presented a fictional account of Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg and drew widely from local and professional actors and craftsmen. It also attracted visitors from throughout the region. Horn served as a board member for both *The Song of Norway* and the Mount Horeb Area Historical Society. The phrase “The Biggest Happiness One Can Have is To Make Another Happy” appears along the outer rim of this Telemark rosemald wooden bowl. Translated from Norwegian, the lettering is delicately painted in white, utilizing a stylized Gothic print.

To learn more about Patricia Edmundson, [click here](#).

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This rosemald wooden bowl represents both Mount Horeb, Wisconsin resident Patricia “Pat”

Edmundson's artistic talents and command of the Telemark technique and her dedication to the community's performance of Norwegian-American identity. Beginning in 1966, Mount Horeb hosted an annual outdoor pageant featuring local and professional actors presenting a fictionalized account of Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg. This play, titled *The Song of Norway*, operated as a cultural performance of Norwegian identity and heritage from which Norwegian-Americans could draw inspiration as professional actors and members of the community viewed on stage. The annual production provided a strength to what Norwegian-American identity in the community meant through the tradition of performance and connected residents to the larger story of Norway and the role many of their ancestors played in the narrative of immigration to America.

Critical to the story of any successful community event is the dedication of individuals, and when it came to *The Song of Norway*, Richard "Dick" Horn was among the most significant contributors. Horn (1941-1990) served as the pageant organization's president and vice president. Additionally, he was as a board member for the Mount Horeb Historical Society for fifteen years and operated as a curator for the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison for twenty-six years. In recognition of the play's 25th anniversary, Edmundson painted this intricately decorated wooden bowl in commemoration of and dedication to his memory.

This wooden bowl stands at 12" wide x13.5" long is arguably at the most intricately rosemalled piece currently held in the museum's collection of Edmundson's work. The rich blue Rococo C stems delicately interweaves with the rust and green floral motifs against a stark black background. This central design, with Edmundson's signature tucked into the center bottom, is bordered first by a blue circle, around which a continuous print echoes the focal point's design motifs in an embracing, concentric pattern. The acanthus leaves and yellow scrawls highlight Edmundson's skills with fine, sharp lines on the upwardly curved surface. In contrast, the inner lip of the bowl is painted with rectangles using shades of blue in the Rococo C stems.

Wrapped around the outer lip of the bowl in white paint, Edmundson wrote in Norwegian the phrase which, translated into English, reads, "The Biggest Happiness One Can Have is to Make Another Happy." The use of Norwegian both harkens to the mother tongue of many of Mount Horeb and the Driftless Area's Norwegian immigrant ancestors, but also to the language which would have been spoken by the characters featured in *Song of Norway*. The letters are written in a Gothic style, reminiscent of the work by Stoughton, Wisconsin artist, teacher and renowned rosemalar Per Lysne who utilized this font to write Norwegian messages on the walls of homes and on other pieces of art.



## 4I. Table

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**Table**

Norwegian-American  
Workmen at Little Norway, c.1930  
Wood (oak)  
Little Norway Collection, Gift of Scott  
& Jennifer Winner  
MHAHS 2015.021.0003

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Similar to the kubbestols in this exhibit, the pedestal of this table is made from a single oak tree trunk. The solid piece is finished into an octagonal shape and the top is formed from a large cross-cut section of a tree. Workmen at Little Norway made this table to represent their vision of an authentic Norwegian home. The sawed indentation along the table's edge and the line that runs to the core appear to have occurred during the manufacture of the piece, and probably fit a later generation's idealized image of a rustic homestead.

## 42. Chest and Wall Cabinet

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**Wall Cabinet**  
Norwegian-American  
Olin Ruste, 1965  
Wood (pine)  
Little Norway Collection, Gift of Scott &  
Jennifer Winner  
MHAHS 2015.021.0010



**Chest**

Norwegian-American

Olin Ruste, 1968

Wood (pine)

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Scott &

Jennifer Winner

MHAHS 2014.050.0082

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Retired farmer Olin Ruste used his woodworking skills to explore his Norwegian heritage. In the mid- to late-1960s, Ruste constructed and decorated in carved relief this wall cabinet and chest, both for his own personal use. The wall cabinet proudly displays his name carved in the lower front panel, while the chest incorporates not only the Norwegian Coat of Arms, but also the motif from the main building at Little Norway where he acted as a guide. After honing his skills, Ruste went on to successfully tackle the construction of a full-size Norwegian *stubur*, or storehouse, at Little Norway in 1969.

## 43. Ale Bowl



*Ale bowl shaped as a dragon*

### **Ale Bowl**

Norwegian-American

Trygve E. Thoresen, c.1960

Wood, paint

Gift of Forest & Doris Johnson

MHAHS 1998.087.0001

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Ale bowls come in many forms, but in the twentieth century those carved with dragon heads became especially popular on the souvenir market. Buyers were attracted to the form's resemblance to the famous dragon-prowed longships of the Vikings. Norwegian immigrant,

Trygve Thoreson, Sr., utilized Norwegian identity as a marketing tool when he named this bowl “Old Norse.” Decades before Mount Horeb branded itself “the Troll Capital of the World,” Thoreson decorated his home with rosemaling, named it “the Norway House,” and made it into a business providing food and lodging to tourists.

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This dragon-headed ale bowl is an example Norwegian crafts created as souvenirs by one of the first people in Mount Horeb to market Norwegian identity. Trygve Thoreson Sr. witnessed a revival of traditional crafts as a child in early 20th century Norway and was part of their renaissance among Norwegian Americans. In this piece, Thoreson brings together the more recent traditions of carved ale bowls and rosemaling with the evocation of the Viking past.

Norwegian bowls with handles carved in the shape of animal heads originated in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. These bowls, called *kjenge* in Norwegian, were used for serving ale during social events. At important events such as weddings and funerals, ale was served out of large bowls in which smaller bowls would float and bob in the intoxicating drink. Made in a variety of different forms, the bowls often varied depending on local traditions. The most common variety had two handles, both carved in the form of horse heads. In addition to the carved handles, these bowls are often decorated with chip carving and rosemaled patterns.

The dragon-headed form traces to the eighteenth century, however it experienced increased popularity with the rise of the souvenir industry in Norway at the end of the nineteenth century. This time period saw a surge in interest in Vikings and old Norse and Germanic cultures. The Vikings, long shunned, were now incorporated into the national heritages of Denmark, Sweden, and particularly Norway. Souvenir vendors and bowl-makers played up the similarity between the dragon bowls and Viking longships. With their already boat-shaped body, these bowls evoke the image of longships with dragon prows. In reaction, some craftsmen transformed their bowls into serving dishes, making the bowls look even more like Viking ships, including shields along the rim and sometimes even adding masts and sails. Thoreson also exploited the Viking connection when he named this particular bowl *Old Norse*.

Trygve Thoreson Sr, born in Norway in 1912, played a role in renewing interest in Norwegian art and heritage in the United States. As a child in Norway, Thoreson observed the revival of interest in rosemaling and other Norwegian traditions. When he was eleven, his family emigrated to the United States. As a young man, after getting married, Thoreson settled in Mount Horeb in the 1930s. To earn money during the Depression, Thoreson started offering food and lodging to motorists. As a way of marketing his hospitality venture, he decorated his Main Street home with rosemaling, turning it into the “Norway House”. Thoreson continued to serve food to the public until 1958. Even after closing the business, he continued to call the house by its name.

In many ways Thoreson’s “Norway House” served as a precursor to the way Mount Horeb would decide to brand itself as “The Troll Capital of the World” in the 1970s and 1980s. Thoreson, both in his hospitality business and in the objects he created, like the *Old Norse* bowl, introduced a new way of using Norwegian identity to Mount Horeb. Perhaps influenced by the Norwegian souvenir trade, Thoreson recognized the potential in commercializing cultural identity. While the “Norway

House” is gone, its legacy continues in the many Norwegian-themed businesses around Mount Horeb and the surrounding Blue Mounds area.

### **Sources**

[1] Mount Horeb Area Historical Society. *Mount Horeb: Presettlement to 1986: A History Celebrating Mount Horeb's Quasquicentennial*. Mount Horeb, WI: Mount Horeb Historical Society, 1986.

[2] Weborg, Johanna. *In Viking Land, Or, A Summer Tour in Norway*. Evanston, IL: Evanston Press Co., 1901. [https://books.google.co.in/books/about/In\\_Viking\\_Land\\_Or\\_A\\_Summer\\_Tour\\_in\\_Norwa.html?id=TvZiAAAAMAAJ](https://books.google.co.in/books/about/In_Viking_Land_Or_A_Summer_Tour_in_Norwa.html?id=TvZiAAAAMAAJ) (accessed May 30, 2017).

[3] Victoria & Albert Museum. “Ale Bowl.” <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O49624/ale-bowl-unknown/> (accessed May 30, 2017).

## 44. Painting on Masonite

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**Painting on Masonite**  
Norwegian-American  
Oljanna Cunneen, 1969  
Masonite, paint  
Little Norway Collection, Gift of Scott &  
Jennifer Winner  
MHAHS 2015.021.0008

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Mount Horeb knew Oljanna Cunneen for her rosemaling and trolls. Created for her private display, this piece unites these trademarks from her artistic repertoire. The large, brightly rosemaled pattern frames a snowcapped scene as a troll couple sits beside a small fire. Although surrounded by the cold, the scene evokes inviting warmth as a teapot is lovingly heated. Cunneen painted her signature on the woman's skirt beside the tankard and oranges. After her passing in 1988, Cunneen's family donated this piece in her memory to Little Norway where she served as a guide and entertained countless visitors.



*Oljanna Cunneen poses with her troll sign,*  
1987. MHAHS 8×10.00501.



## 45. Decorative Plate

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### **Decorative Plate**

Norwegian-American  
Maker, Earl Edseth; decorated by Olga  
Edseth, c.1946  
Wood (recycled fruit crate end), paint  
Gift of Olga Edseth  
MHAHS 1983.048.0001

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This piece was Olga Edseth's first venture into Norwegian folk painting, an interest deeply rooted in the traditions of her Norwegian immigrant mother and grandparents. Edseth's husband Earl turned this plate on a wood lathe from the end of an orange crate. Edseth then rosemailed the surface, drawing inspiration from a design on a postcard her mother acquired on a trip to Oslo, Norway. Edseth attained notoriety over her sixty years of rosemailing by applying self-taught painting talents throughout the Mount Horeb area. The Sons of Norway later presented Edseth with an International Heritage Award.

## 46. Mangle Board (Mangletre) - Barsness



### **Mangle Board (Mangletre)**

Norwegian-American

Edward Barsness, 1989

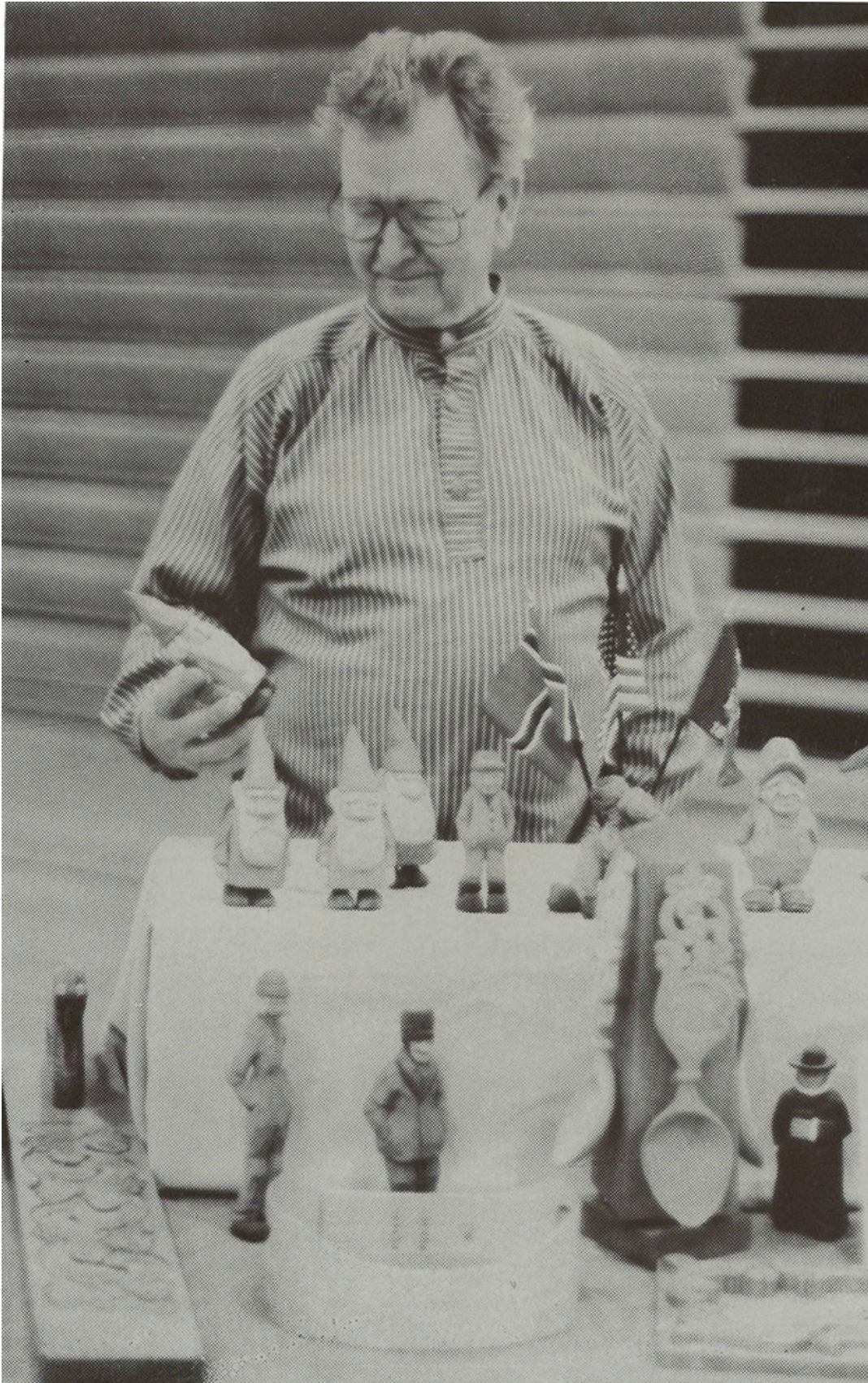
Wood (basswood)

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Raymond & Margaret Vicker Charitable Trust

MHAHS 2014.073.0027

While made for a woman's practical role of ironing her family's clothes, mangle boards were also deeply symbolic of love and marriage. In Norwegian tradition, a male suitor carved and placed a board on his love's doorstep. If she shared his ardor, she brought the board inside and their courtship began. If she rejected his proposal, he would have to move on and carve a new board.

This mangle board was created for Little Norway by pastor-turned-woodworker, Edward Barsness of Black Earth, Wisconsin. In semi-retirement, Barsness studied woodworking at Vesterheim's heritage center in Iowa and also in Norway. The elegant acanthus carvings seen on this piece are just one of the Norwegian motifs Barsness utilized in his creations.



Mangle boards are a useful work of art. They are not meant to tell a story, they are simply a decorative piece that can be used around the house. A mangle board is a carved, and sometimes painted piece of wood. Shapes, patterns, texture, line, composition, color, light, space, and so on are the components of the language, which the maker of the mangle board strived for. Thus, when looking at a mangle board one must pay attention to detail throughout the board. A broad quality is universal; it could be seen in any medium, material, or object, regardless if it was made by a human or nature. Specific qualities, like the surface and texture, are unique to that one specific board. Boards were carved for women to use as a household object, and not a decoration.

The action of the woman accepting a home tool as an acceptance of a courtship shows the role of the woman in the home in society during the 16th through 18th centuries. Up until about 1840, when the feminist movement began in Norway, women were considered incapable of the traditionally male roles in society. Single women lived under the authority of their fathers until they were married, and then the authority transferred to the husband. Therefore, a woman accepting a mangle board from a suitor was accepting her new authority. This was the courtship custom in Norway. These mangle boards were carved for practical purpose, to be used around the house, and certainly not to be put on display in the home as a decorative piece.

Raymond, Jay. *Mangle Boards of Northern Europe*. p. 9

*Ibid.*

## 47. Dress

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**Dress**  
Norwegian-American  
Oljanna Cunneen, late 1960s  
Wool  
Gift of Nancy Vogel  
MHAHS 1990.014.0003

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This mini dress made by Oljanna Cunneen for Nancy Vogel in 1970 merges ethnic folk tradition and contemporary fashion. The most distinct feature of the rust colored bonded wool dress is the multi-colored rosemaled design of crewel embroidery ornamenting the neck and hemlines. The A-line mini-dress style, with modish lines and raised hems, had rocked the fashion world and Vogel's choice to include Norwegian design demonstrates her personal identity and business savvy at her Mount Horeb store, Open House Imports. When compared to the *bunad* costume made by Irene Gilbertson, both women used tradition—but quite differently.

For a complete essay on this object, [click here](#).

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Oljanna Cunneen made a dress for Nancy Vogel in 1970. A-line in shape and hemmed above the knee, the rust bonded wool dress features multi-colored rosemal designs of crewel embroidery. A

close study of it suggests that while it held different meanings for Oljanna and Nancy, it represents both women—their sense of self and desires—as well as a time and place that looked to the past and the future. The rosemal dress then shows how an object can be both static and dynamic and help us understand individuals, society, and the ways they engage tradition.

For Oljanna, the dress was a form of both fashion and custom, a practice through which the Norwegian-American expressed her identity. Born in the rural Dane County community of Vermont, Wisconsin in 1923 to Henry Venden, the son of Norwegian-born parents, and Gerharda Forshaum, who emigrated from Norway in 1908, Oljanna was hence the daughter of a kind of “mixed marriage” of Old World and New, as was her art. Her talents ranged from sewing, embroidering and knitting to painting, creating miniature troll figures, and rosemaling. Considering her body of work, it is easy to see that creating such objects was a means through which Oljanna constructed and shared her heritage. Moreover, Oljanna joined a community of Norwegian-Americans who shared her interest in a common ethnicity. In this way, the dress makes known the ways in which Oljanna identified as a member of an ethnic group. At the same time, the dress reveals how Oljanna stood apart from other rosemalers. When Oljanna rosemaled the dress, she adapted folk art to fashion in a way that was uniquely her own. Viewed in this framework, the rosemal dress reveals how creative traditional expressions of heritage can be.

For Nancy Vogel—a non-Norwegian in a Norwegian community—this dress represents her desire to merge a traditional ethnic sensibility with 1960s fashion. Uncomplicated and thus ideal for mass production, the A-line mini dress was a staple of ready-to-wear. But since the rosemaled dress was made, rather than mass produced, it falls outside of the ready-to-wear category. Surely, Nancy could have asked Oljanna to embroider a bought dress, but the fact that Nancy commissioned Oljanna to construct *and* embroider the dress suggests that Nancy preferred the whole creation.

The popular A-line mini dress was also a symbol of style that signaled a new feminine ideal, which assumed a young and economically independent woman for whom fashion was pleasurable, but time was limited. This subject was active, employed, and desired male attention. For such a woman, the A-line mini dress represented a new feminine ideal defined apart from motherhood. By 1970, Nancy was a 38-year-old mother and wife, placing her outside this new ideal. But as a working woman, Nancy fit squarely within the model. Seeing the rosemaled dress and its wearer as neither wholly aligned nor entirely separate from the 1960s notion of femininity shows how flexible the category was. Finally, considering Nancy’s involvement in the community, marked by dedication to a Norwegian heritage that was not her own, it is easy to imagine that she valued Mount Horeb, the people of it, and her place in it. Within that context, the dress can be seen as one of many efforts Nancy made to belong.

## 48. Painting on Board

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### **Painting on Board**

Norwegian-American

Patricia Edmundson, c.1975

Wood, paint

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Scott &  
Jennifer Winner

MHAHS 2014.050.0041

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Local artists played a large role in the display of ethnicity at Little Norway. They also supported the tourist economy by producing artwork for sale. Patricia Edmundson created this piece to sell in the gift shop during the late 1970s, but the site's owners removed it from sale to become part of their permanent collection. This rosemaled board features the popular Telemark style with a vibrant color pallet, from the creamy background accented in blue to the burned orange flower petals. Edmundson's signature is visible near the center on a green acanthus leaf.



*Patricia Edmundson demonstrates rosemaling at a folk festival in Mount Horeb, 1989. MHAHS 5×7.00917.*

## PART IV

# TROLLTOWN, USA

Recent artists far removed from immigrant roots have served both commerce and community by playfully constructing and then marketing locally-endorsed ethnic symbols.

Inspired by the popularity of Little Norway and the Song of Norway and the success of such nearby culture-centered communities as New Glarus and Stoughton, a core group of local artists have successfully used Norwegian imagery and icons to crystallize Mount Horeb's already-simmering identity as a Scandinavian stronghold.



# Troll Doll

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## **Troll Doll**

Norwegian-American

Oljanna Cunneen, c.1960

Fabric, copper wire, polymer clay, wood, fur,  
other on hand materials

Little Norway Collection, Gift of Scott &  
Jennifer Winner

MHAHS 2015.021.0009

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Oljanna Cunneen was making trolls long before the creation of Mount Horeb's "Trollway." Already an avid painter, storyteller, seamstress, and rosemaler, Cunneen used doll-making as one of many art forms to celebrate her Norwegian heritage. Cunneen's figures were typically made using a copper wire armature that was padded to create the body and limbs; she then molded and painted the clay hands and faces. This doll is an example of her earliest work.

# Troll Diorama

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## **Troll Diorama**

Norwegian-American  
Oljanna Cunneen, 1982

Fabric, copper wire, polymer clay, wood, fur,  
other on hand materials

Gift of Richard & Mary Wells

MHAHS 2015.063.0002

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Echoing her community-minded and outgoing personality, Cunneen frequently made dolls inspired by friends and community members. This couple depicts Cunneen's friends who enjoyed working outdoors on their property. The couple also owned the electrical company from which she acquired her copper wire. Note the evolution of her trolls: the softer facial features and the playfulness evident in the diorama reflect the enjoyment she had making and presenting these characters.



*Oljanna Cunneen  
posing with two of  
her creations in  
1987. MHAHS  
8×10.00412.*

For more about Trolls, [click here](#).

# Troll Diorama

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## **Troll Diorama**

Norwegian-American  
Oljanna Cunneen, 1985  
Fabric, copper wire, polymer clay, wood, fur,  
other on hand materials  
Gift of Henry Eckle  
MHAHS 1996.014.0001

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For many years this large troll, known as “Knut, Guardian of the Girls,” watched over the tellers at the State Bank of Mount Horeb. This was one of the largest of Cunneen’s troll diorama’s and manifests the same playfulness and adherence to traditional troll legends so common in Cunneen’s work—note the bird’s nest in this guardian’s hair. When the highway was rerouted around Mount Horeb in the mid-1980s, a loss of tourist traffic through the community was expected. Village leaders began a deliberate attempt to attract visitors to the downtown area. The “Trollway” was born and Cunneen found a ready market for her three-dimensional creatures in the many individuals who sought out her work.

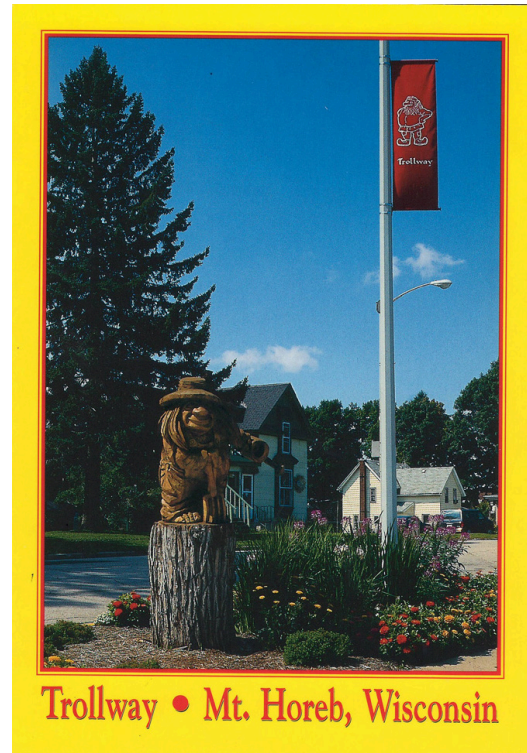
For more about Trolls, [click here](#).

# Trollway Banner

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**Trollway Banner**  
American  
Designed by Holly (Van  
Camp) Stoenner, c.  
1990s  
Printed on Canvas  
MHAHS 1997.007.0001



*Promotional  
postcard  
from the  
1990s.  
MHAHS  
Postcard  
Collection*

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This banner, designed by Holly Van Camp and printed on red canvas, was the first of its kind to specifically promote the troll theme in Mount Horeb. Hung from light poles along Main Street, the stylized trolls beckoned visitors to explore the “Trollway.” The last artifact of the exhibit, it is an eye-catching exemplification of the area’s distilled ethnicity. And current local marketing strategies indicate the troll is here to stay. In fact, in August 2016, the Mount Horeb Chamber of Commerce filed for a U.S. federal trademark for the moniker, “Troll Capital of the World.” Trunk to trolls—oh, what a long way we’ve come!

For more about Trolls, [click here](#).

## 49. Promotional Sign (Painting on Plywood)

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**Promotional Sign (Painting on Plywood)**  
Norwegian-American  
Oljanna Cunneen, c. 1984  
Plywood, paint  
Gift of Mount Horeb Area Chamber of Commerce  
MHAHS 2003.116.0003

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Who best to greet visitors to the “Troll Capital of the World” than a smiling, one-toothed, white haired troll? Painted on plywood by Oljanna Cunneen, this double sided, four toed troll served as a promotional piece along Main Street. With a crowned girl tucked into his hair and a bird perched on his hands, this dapper fellow reflects both Cunneen’s sense of humor and her tireless promotion of the area’s Norwegian-American identity. More than a dozen of these plywood cutouts once adorned Mount Horeb’s Main Street, dubbed the “Trollway” in the mid- to late-1980s.

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The stitching together of Scandinavian and American cultures to create a unique, authentic, and personal ethnic identity frames the story of Mount Horeb. The Trollway is a unique result of the influences. While the character of the troll emerges from Scandinavian folklore, troll sculptures and cutouts, and the brand of “Trolltown U.S.A.” incorporates elements of American highway culture as well. The relationship between the trolls and oddities such as the Forevertron in Sumpter, WI, the Tin Man Mailbox in Black Earth, WI, and a sculpture of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Ox in Bemidji, MN, as well as the commercial strip of downtown Las Vegas, reveal how Mount Horeb aligns itself with the American tradition of the roadside wonder.

Attractions such as Carhenge, Cadillac Ranch, or Wall Drug have long been used to draw motorists off of the highway and towards downtowns or Main Streets to foster local economies. The Trollway joins in this tradition of branding a place as unique and welcoming, and also seeks to draw motorists into town to see these works of art such as Michael Feeney’s troll sculptures or Oljanna Cunneen’s troll dolls. Another example of this, although at a much larger scale, is the Las Vegas strip, famous for its extensive signage and neon lights. Despite their many and obvious differences, the Las Vegas strip is a distant relative of the Trollway in how it aims to capture the attention and imagination of passers-by in order to draw them into the main commercial parts of town.



# 50. Carved Troll

## **Carved Troll**

American

Mike Feeney, c. 1990

Wood (log)

Loan, Mount Horeb Chamber of Commerce

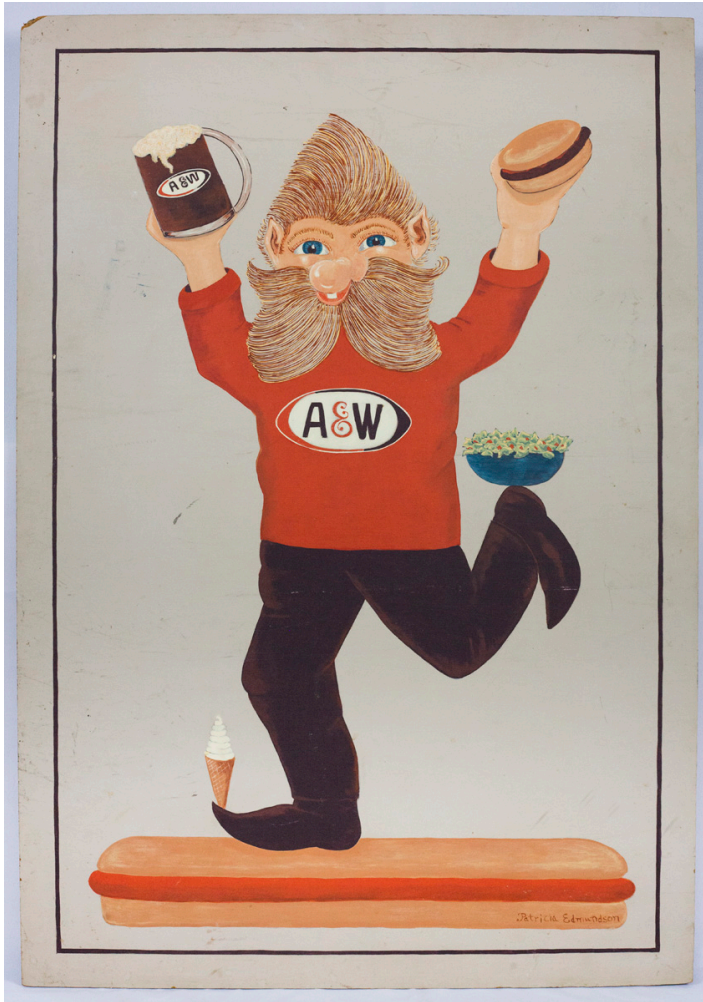
(IMAGE UNDER COPYRIGHT, CANNOT USE)

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Carved from a single tree stump, the “Treasure Chest Troll” created by sculptor Mike Feeney represents the evolution of Mount Horeb’s troll theme. Beginning with his first Main Street creation in 1988, Feeney captures the relationship between the uncharacteristically friendly trolls introduced by earlier Mount Horeb artists and this mythical creature’s traditional connection with the natural world. Feeney’s trolls, some of which are based on actual town residents, harbor distinct and unique personalities.

## 51. A&W Business Sign (Painting on Plywood)

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**A&W Business Sign (Painting on Plywood)**  
Norwegian-American  
Patricia Edmundson, c.1984  
Plywood, paint  
Gift of Ralph & Darlene Richardson  
MHAHS 1999.098.0014

Trolls in Pat Edmundson's signs, like this one for the local A&W Restaurant, were humorous reminders of the community's Norwegian identity. In this sign, a troll balances on a long horizontal hot dog with a vanilla ice cream cone precariously perched at the tip of his pointed shoe. A bowl of salad is poised on the other upturned foot and a burger and a glass of A&W Root Beer rest in his hands. The troll sports the iconic orange A&W sweater. Edmundson here links a national brand of fast food with her unique, magical, fun-loving figures.

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For more information click [here](#)

## 52. Optometry Business Sign (Painting on Wood)

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### **Optometry Business Sign (Painting on Wood)**

Norwegian-American  
Patricia Edmundson, c.1984  
Plywood, paint  
Gift of Duane Sutter  
MHAHS 2009.029.0001

This sign exemplifies many that were created to promote the Mt. Horeb “Trollway.” Patricia Edmundson decorated a simple piece of plywood to advertise the office of optometrists Guenveur & Sutter. A white, wispy-haired troll sits on the ground wearing wire-rimmed glasses. The tree growing out of his long nose is a common troll art motif. A girl sporting glasses reads a book on his outstretched left hand. Eyeglasses hang from a tree’s branches and a spectacled owl peeps out of its hollow. A whimsical way to sell vision improvement, the sign demonstrates the business community’s commitment to its Norwegian branding.

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These paintings are a few examples of many created to promote the Mount Horeb “Trollway.” During the 1980s, when construction of the bypass Highway 151 began, Mount Horeb residents and local artists like Patricia Edmundson, Lyle Johnson, and Oljanna Cunneen to name a few knew that they had to do something to make sure that their historic town would not be forgotten. These artists wanted to bring joy to Mount Horeb to keep local residents happy, while also bringing the joy of Mount Horeb to tourists. The Chamber of Commerce in Mount Horeb decided to bring out the town’s Norwegian-American legacy to bring tourism. Mount Horeb would now be called the “Troll Capital of the World,” with Main Street becoming the “Trollway.”

You can find trolls, and other Norwegian elements all throughout Mount Horeb as depicted on these signs. Trolls, rosemaling, and the Norwegian language itself often make appearances around Mount Horeb. The personalization of the trolls to each business is what makes these trolls special. You have a troll dressed in traditional A&W clothing, a troll wearing glasses, and many other trolls that make Mount Horeb an extraordinary example of the blending of Norwegian-American culture. There is traditional Norwegian imagery throughout the town as well, such as rosemaling and the Norwegian crest so there is some seriousness to being a Norwegian-American town. The trolls are adaptations of their environment and welcome visitors with a warm welcome that is sure to put a smile on your face that one just has to stop and see.

Roadside attractions are a never-ending tradition throughout the United States. Small towns, like Mount Horeb, have been able to remain big names because of roadside attractions. This is great for small towns as it is a way to gain publicity and even economic benefits, allowing them to sometimes build and expand as Mount Horeb has done. Roadside attractions tend to be humors to draw people into see the ridiculousness that they just cannot miss on their way from town to town. However, these very same humorous attractions are also commemorative pieces to the local history, and folklore. In this case, the Mount Horeb trolls commemorate the local history and folklore of its Norwegian history.

It would take talented artists like the ones mentioned earlier to make the Mount Horeb trolls and other Norwegian identities successful. These caricatures of everyday life of locals in Mount Horeb were captured for eternity in these signs and paintings. The creativity is evident in all of the signs, from eyeglasses to hot dogs to the sykehus, local Mount Horeb artists more than succeeded in painting a legacy of Mount Horeb.

## 53. Business Sign (Painting on Wood)

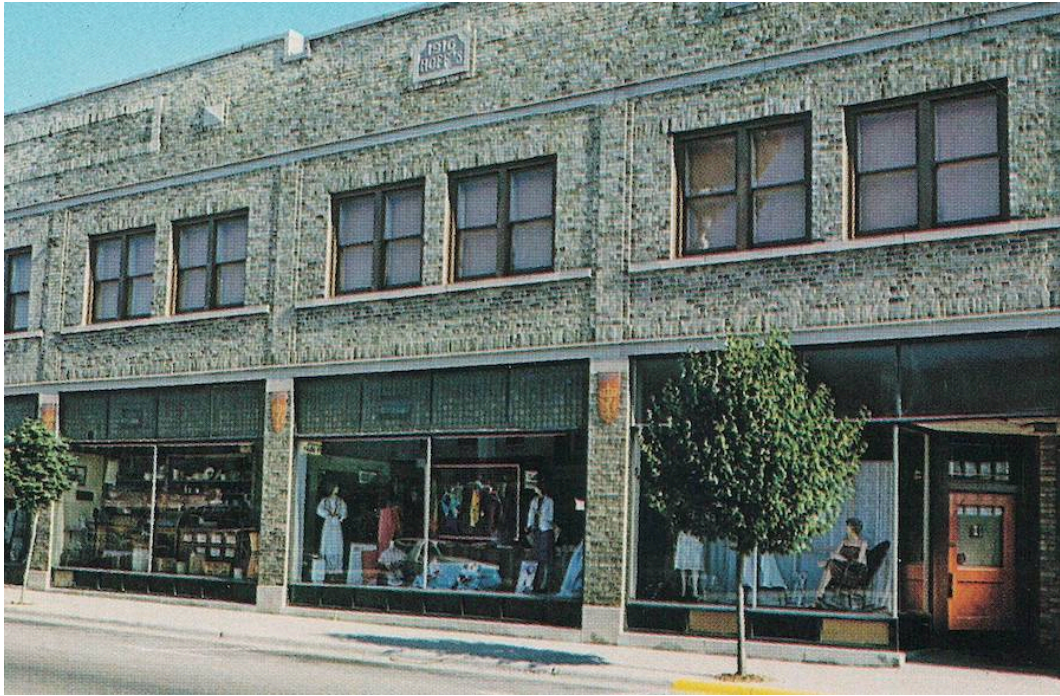
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**Business Sign (Painting on Wood)**  
Norwegian-American  
Attributed to Lyle Johnson, c.1970  
Wood, paint  
Gift of Hoff Mall Antiques  
MHAHS 1989.059.0001

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Lyle Johnson, the owner of Hoff's Store, painted this sign in about 1970. Along with three matching signs, it hung on the front of his business at 101 East Main Street from the 1960s to about 1985 when the building was remodeled. This coincides with the time period when Mount Horeb businesses began promoting a Norwegian theme in its outdoor décor. Similar to Ruste's chest presented earlier, Hoff's shield-shaped sign is inspired by the Norwegian Coat of Arms and is a popular motif used in traditional Norwegian art. The coat of arms motif can be found in Mount Horeb today, such as on the side of the Mount Horeb Telephone Company building at Main and Second streets.



*Hoff's General Store in the 1970s; note the shield-shaped signs on storefront. MHAHS Postcard Collection.*

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For more information [click here](#)

## 54. Business Sign (Painting on Masonite)

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**Business Sign (Painting on Masonite)**  
Norwegian-American  
Artist unknown, c.1965  
Masonite, paint  
Gift of Dr. & Mrs. Abner Kjerвик  
MHAHS 1988.012.0001

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This rosemaled sign was part of early efforts to promote Norwegian heritage in Mount Horeb. The unusually painted Gothic lettering on the sign reads, “Dr. Kjerвик Sykehus.” Dr. Abner Kjerвик, whose father emigrated from Norway in 1900, had offices in the Buckner Hospital building on East Main Street through the early 1970s. The Norwegian word “Sykehus” translates to “sick-house,” or hospital—an inside joke for those who knew the Norwegian language.

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For more information [click here](#)

## 55. Troll Truths

Today's vibrant and unique citizenry—and an equally vivacious artistic atmosphere and legacy—have emerged from an astounding conglomeration of cultures and ethnicities.

To those who know the area's diverse immigrant origins, the iconic trolls of Mount Horeb seem to tell just one of many cultural tales.

Yet this artistic examination through time illustrates that these grumpy figures are actually the end result of a complicated and rich multi-ethnic conversation.

In an era when fast-paced urban development dooms many small towns to mainstream, “cookie-cutter” suburban status, Mount Horeb's trolls stand as protective sentinels and tangible reminders of the persistent importance of ethnic identities to the people of Southwestern Dane County.

For more about Trolls, [click here](#).



PART V  
IN-DEPTH OBJECT STUDIES

# 56. Stugard Family Plant Stand: A Rustic Handicraft Tradition

BY CORTNEY ANDERSON

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**Plant Stand**  
American  
Neighbor of Stugard Family, 1899  
Wood (willow sapling)  
Gift of Lucille (Stugard) McKee  
MHAHS 2001.101.0121

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On November 9, 2001, the Mount Horeb Historical Society received a gift of late 19th and early 20th century farmhouse objects from Lucille McKee (Stugard), whose family has owned a homestead in the Springdale Township for over a century. On February 2, 1899, the donor's grandparents, Harold H. Stugard, whose surname was sometimes written Stugaarden, (b. June 9, 1871; Springdale, WI) married Miss Betsy Rue and the couple was given a black willow plant stand as

a wedding gift from an unidentified neighbor.<sup>1</sup> With his new wife, Mr. Stugard, the son of pioneers, settled down in Springdale and managed a farm. Twenty years later, the couple moved to Mount Horeb while their son, Banford Stugard took over the Springdale property. Harold Stugard died on June 9, 1871, but was survived by his wife, son Banford, and granddaughter Lucille.

Untouched over the decades, the farm house and its contents, from spice cabinets to vases and a Lefse stick to a quilt, were preserved, retaining the material essence of a former way of life. In many ways, the household has operated as a time capsule; undisturbed since the Great Depression and uninfluenced by technology; it has never even had running water. The stand, thereby, introduces the opportunity for viewers to contemplate rural handicrafts and the household economy in the Midwest circa 1900. Furthermore, it speaks to a sort of 19th century do-it-yourself or D.I.Y. culture, not entirely different from our own in 2016, as well as contemporary style preferences. This essay will examine the practice and ideology of rural handicrafts, such as the production of twig furniture like the plant stand, as contributing to a sense of connectedness to a place and to a prosperous community as suggested by writer Helen Albee and countless others who advocated for the transformative power of crafts for the well-being of the rural community.<sup>2</sup>

The plant stand, dated to 1899, is composed of rustic blackened nails, barely visible against the aged bent creek willow. Standing 31” in height and 16” by 16” around, the stand is a complex interweaving of short twigs around which long curving branches wrap and add decorative appeal. The stand possesses evidence for frontality as one side of the stand is striated with the subtle remnants of gold paint. Sturdily propped by three crossing legs, the stand is topped with a basket-like container designed to support a potted plant.

Twig furniture, occasionally referenced in home fashion magazines, is typically associated with anonymous craftsmen and rustic styles, appealing to consumers’ desire for local and natural materials. In the case of the Stugard plant stand, the craftsman is unidentified; even the craftsman’s sex is unknown. In this sense, the works have a humble yet mysterious quality, unclaimed and unnamed, they nonetheless speak of a long craft tradition and the cooperative efforts of rural community members.

A short article in *House Beautiful* titled “Origins of Style: Rustic Style: Rural Twig Furniture” identified 4 primary movements or trends in free-form twig style furnishings, which reference 18th c. English garden furniture made from tree roots. Beginning from the 1840’s, the trends

1. The Mt Horeb Historical Society’s accession report provides four family names without identifying their relation to one another. First, it indicates that the estate was once farmed by Kathryn and Banford Stugard. Per the U.S. Social Security Death Index, Banford Stugard died in Dane Co. in the year 1996, while Kathryn Stugard died in 1976. According to Heritage.com, which bases data on the United States Federal Census, Howard Banford Stugard was born in 1900 to Harald Stugaarden and Betsy Ann Stugaarden. The census also indicates that Howard Banford Stugard had two siblings. Based on this preliminary search, it seems that the plant stand originally belonged to the donor’s grandparents, Betsy Ann and Harold Stugard, and has remained in the family’s care, passing on to Banford and Kathryn Stugard and finally to Lucille McKee Stugard before entering the Historical Society’s care.
2. Albee, Helen R. “What Women in Your Town Can Do: How to Organize and Conduct a Home Industry.” *Ladies Home Journal* (June 1916): 30.

developed from the East Coast fashionable rustic designs possessing rural and urban appeal: 1. Gothic Revival primarily laurel or rhododendron, 2. Civil War period ladder-back chairs, 3. 1870s Basket Work made from willow, 4. Adaptations of 18th c. colonial chairs.<sup>3</sup> Despite changing style preferences, retaining the original identity of the material has remained central to twig furniture.

In her book, *Rustic Furniture*, Sue Honacker Stephenson argues that twig furniture possesses a “decorative symbolism” that functions as a rebellion against commercial and industrial excess. She goes on to interpret the furniture as a statement against modern consumption though the objects denial of industrial facture and its embrace of unfinished material. “As a decorative symbol, a rustic seat is astonishingly literal, being constructed of the bare roots of trees.”<sup>4</sup> However, her argument weakens when it is tested against class and the differing experiences of urban and rural consumers and makers. For the urban consumer fighting dirty and increasingly crowded cities, bringing natural elements into the home, in a sense, constructed a contrasting refuge from the noise and hurry of the city whereas the rural consumer seems more connected to their local resources and community support.

According to early 20th century writers on the rural craftsman, the twig tradition likely stemmed from the desire for a productive household economy and a prosperous community achieved by the practice and perfecting of handicraft skills as well as a deep personal connection to the land and materials, in this case, the willow. In his essay “The Scope and Drift of the American Arts and Crafts Movement,” Alvan Sanborn describes the contrast between machinery’s artificiality and the movement against it toward naturalism and authenticity. He quotes William Morris before criticizing him for “crudities, exaggerations, extravagances, affectations and absurdities which offer incomparable material to the humorist or social satirist, but which it is quite unnecessary to enlarge upon.”<sup>5</sup> The writer argues for the beginning of a new epoch of applied arts in America in which even elite households are decorated in a way that is simple and devoid of pretention and avoids magnificence, but upon closer inspection, what appears to be simple is in fact extraordinarily well crafted and possesses incredible value.<sup>6</sup> Such finely crafted yet simple works are described as art, rather than craft throughout this essay, advocating for the creative agency and practiced skill of the craftsman, less interested in reacting against industrialization and more interested in applying his or her skill to the benefit of the community.

Woven into the twists and folds of willow furniture is a craft tradition that is still performed today, whether by practicing as a craftsman in the creation of a plant stand or as a consumer drawn by the rustic charm of a simple yet elegant unrefined accessory. Such craftsman share in the 19th century experience of gathering resources from the land and using it in aesthetic and utilitarian ways. Today, a web search for willow or twig furniture returns dozens of do-it-yourself samples from popular craft sites such as Etsy, Pinterest, and HGTV announcing nostalgic descriptors such as “homemade” and “rustic.” Similarly, antique and vintage goods stores, advertise vintage willow plant stands as Folk Americana.

3. Garey, Carol Cooper. “Origins of Style: Rustic Style: Rural Twig Furniture.” *House Beautiful* 125 (1983): 93.

4. Stephenson, Sue Honacker. *Rustic Furniture*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1979.

5. Sanborn, Alvan P. “The Scope and Drift of the American Arts and Crafts Movement.” *Forum* (September 1908): 254.

6. *Ibid.* (September 1908): 254.

One manufacturer titled *Twig Factory* produces a variety of twig furnishings from chairs, to arbors, bed frames and plant stands. Its web home page describes its product as possessing a sense of tranquility that mimics the feeling of being in nature. The works transform the domestic space into an experience that feels more like a retreat, simultaneously disconnecting the consumer from the rush of industry and reconnecting them to nature: “there is something immediately familiar about willow twig and birch bark, that embraces you and connects your spirit to nature. Rustic willow furniture allows you to bring the spirit of nature into your home, into your hearts, so you can enjoy it year-round.”<sup>7</sup> By retaining the original texture of the outdoors, twig furniture is particularly disposed to attract consumers seeking domestic objects that, by purposely retaining all of the texture of the original plant, connect the user to nature and recall their fond memories of exploring and experiencing nature.

Upon first sight, the *Twig Factory*’s plant stands<sup>8</sup> are nearly indistinguishable in design from the Stugard family plant stand; however, extended looking begins to establish some important differences, which suggest changes in stylistic references. Unlike the Stugard stand, the *Twig Factory* stand is primarily made from straight branches from an unidentified plant source and they are not painted. In his video introducing consumers to his practice and product, Gary, the self-identified twigologist<sup>9</sup>, introduces himself as a master builder and then discusses his experience in upholstery, which helped him think about how best to construct works that support the human body comfortably and contribute to good posture. He also prioritizes the durability of his product and the combined strength of twigs producing a slightly different aesthetic than the Stugard plant stand’s style.<sup>10</sup> However, similar to the stand, Gary emphasizes his individuality, describing each work as being uniquely crafted and incorporating excellent quality materials that are mindful of sustainability. Though he calls himself a builder, he subtly hints at the artistic or creative quality of his work, particularly when he uses his materials and craft to build non-functional pieces such as frames and other sculptural twig decorations.

Far more elaborate in his designs, Bill Perkins, builder and owner of *Sleeping Bear Twig Furniture* based out of Leelanau, Michigan, describes his first encounter with twig furniture and what inspired him to take up building:

I was first introduced as a child to the idea of making furniture from branches, twigs and bark in their natural state. This happened when some neighbors took me along on one of their visits to a friend’s grandmother’s “Up North” cottage, which was furnished in the rustic style. I was really

7. “Home.” *Twig Factory*. Accessed online at [www.twigfactory.com](http://www.twigfactory.com) on December 10, 2016.

8. *Twig Factory* plant stands are located within their “Garden Décor” category: “Garden Decor.” *Twig Factory*. Accessed online at [www.twigfactory.com](http://www.twigfactory.com) on December 10, 2016.

9. Twigology is defined as the study of twigs and is used in the occasional non-professional gardening book such as Calvo, Janit. *Gardening in Miniature: Create Your Own Tiny Living World*. Portland, OR: Timber Press Inc., 2013: 212. And Fox, Ann Ramp. *Rustic Accents for Your Home: 45 Projects from Vines, Twigs and Branches (Rustic Home Series)*. In *Rustic Accents for Your Home* North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing LLC., 1999. Twigologist Ann Ramp Fox teaches readers how to make whimsical home decorations out of twigs and vines.

10. “Gary the Twigologist Explains How to Sit in a Twig Chair” *Twig Factory*. Accessed December 12, 2016 <http://twigfactory.com/twig-chairs-c-7.html>.

impressed by these twisting and gnarly chairs and tables. My previous experiences with this style had been building tree forts and hideouts as a kid.

Years later, when I moved to northern Michigan in my twenties, I remembered those willow pieces and began to make them myself. I liked the idea of bringing trees inside the house and shaping them into beautiful and functional objects, without losing the character and identity of the materials.<sup>11</sup>

He goes on to describe plant stands as his initial voyage into the art of twig furniture, contrasting the ricketiness of his first attempts to the elaborate and solid pieces his 25 years of experience has qualified him to produce. In describing his individual style, he identifies the Arts and Crafts movement and Art Nouveau as most influential on his designs, creating an artistic heritage for his functional works.

Perkins goes on to expound upon the centrality of material to his work ultimately tying the quickly renewable willow to the land and the land to his furniture. As willow furniture builder couple Rick and Denise Pratt describe the importance of material, they identify the work sprouting from the swampy landscape, ideal for cultivating willow. Furthermore, they suggest their preference for willow stems from it being an exceptionally renewable resource, making it difficult to exhaust and ideal for efficient furniture production and desirable to today's consumer interested in sustainability.<sup>12</sup> The couple need not travel far to avoid exhausting their local resources, because the willow on their property is enough to sustain their craft. Their experience with gathering materials directly from the land is shared by each twig furniture builder mentioned; each shares a deep connection to their nearby environment, suggesting the same from the anonymous Stugard family plant stand maker who likewise must have engaged his or her local resources and skill to produce artistic and utilitarian goods.

A 1987 issue of *Metropolitan Home* features an article on twig furniture builder's Michael and Ronna Emmons of Partington Ridge, CA, titled "Laughing Willows' Whimsical Willow Craft, a Mix of Memory and Modernity, Has Sent Twig Furniture Branching out on a New Path." The author describes the duo as builder and upholsterer; Michael builds the willow furniture, chairs, headboards, love-seats, tables, and stands, with both the tradition of rustic twig furniture associated to resourceful interaction with their local environment and a reference to contemporary geometric designs, while Ronna uses her fine art experience to design and paint upholstered parts including chair seats. Similar to Bill Perkin's nostalgic experience, they identify the important role of memory or recalling the objects from one's past as both inspiring their work and their customer's interest noting that customers frequently share stories with them about how they recognize twig furniture in relation to their grandparents or other earlier generations. It reminds them of their childhood and their loved ones past, loved ones that also shared an affinity for the natural.<sup>13</sup>

11. Perkins, Bill. "About." *Sleeping Bear Twig Furniture*. accessed December 10, 2016 at <http://www.sleepingbeartwigfurniture.com/about>.

12. Pratt, Rick and Denise. "About Us." *Around the Bent Willow Furniture*. Accessed December 12, 2016 at [http://www.aroundthebendwillowfurniture.com/category/about\\_us/7.html](http://www.aroundthebendwillowfurniture.com/category/about_us/7.html)

13. Freiman, Ziva. "Laughing Willows' Whimsical Willow Craft, a Mix of Memory and Modernity, Has Sent Twig Furniture Branching out on a New Path." *Metropolitan Home* 19 (1987): 27.

In the essay “A Toolkit of Dreams: Conversations with American Craft Artists,” woodworker Jere Osgood describes the centrality of nature in his performance of woodworking. Osgood explains,

that sense of being with the things that are going on with the things outside, is very important to me. I don't have that in the city. The city, of course, would have all sorts of wonderful things, particularly New York City or Boston, the buildings, the things in the museums are priceless. They're the result of other persons' profound understanding of things. And it's important to me just to get out, maybe where the basic things are, and to be out in nature where things are in a formative stage, whereas we see the complete collections at the Museum of Fine Arts. They're completed of finished, whereas it's an ongoing, living process being with the trees and the plants.<sup>14</sup>

Osgood's affinity for local rootedness and the land, drawing both inspiration and material from things that grow from the ground and continue to grow into his work, are clearly evident in the work of the twig or willow furniture builder in his or her choice to utilize a material that retains all of its original character, as though their works continue to grow up from the floor, incorporating the outdoor experience and closeness to nature within the domestic space.

This awareness of nature and industry is also recognized in the 1897 essay “Rural Prosperity” by Edmund Verney in which he describes the territory of Württemberg<sup>15</sup>, a once impoverished and overpopulated German territory that was transformed into a production center for blankets, carpets, paper, wood-carving, furniture, and clocks. He attributes this transformation to Dr. Von Steinbeis, the President of the Board of Trade in Württemberg, who was inspired by the handicraft presence of rural communities showcased in the 1851 London Exhibition. Steinbeis saw the same potential to create within his own national population. After instituting various schools and centers for trades and handicrafts, the industrious people of Württemberg worked hand-in-hand with both industry and agriculture to produce all manner of goods for both domestic and international consumers. “The secret of...prosperity is the association of industrial with agricultural life, as in Württemberg. The Swiss farmer is very often also a wood-carver or a maker of watch-springs; at times, too, he will act as a guide for tourists.”<sup>16</sup> Verney describes Württemberg's prosperous union of industry and craft as a model for rural communities. He emphasizes the moral nature of “honest” work tracing the area's handicraft tradition alongside the communities' prioritization of hand labor as opposed to mechanical labor:

“The readiness with which the people will adapt themselves to any honest means of

14. Kirwin, Liza and Joan Lord. “A Toolkit of Dreams: Conversations with American Craft Artists.” *Archives of American Art Journal* 43 (2003): 13.

15. Württemberg was an independent German kingdom responsible for internal administration of its education, industry, and religious affairs until approximately 1919. It was absorbed into German state administration during World War I, losing many privileges under the new republican constitution. In 1952, Württemberg was merged with Baden, to form the territory Baden-Württemberg as it remains today.

16. Verney, Edmund. “Rural Prosperity.” *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature* (1844-1898). 65 (June 1897): 747.

livelihood is shown in the case of wood carving. It is recorded that in the year 1819 the first wood carver arrived in Berne, one Christian Fischer, who taught this art to the young men for the employment of their winter's evenings, and now it is the constant occupation of 6,000 persons."<sup>17</sup>

For Verney, a prosperous community is both agricultural and industrial; it is productive and educated in trades and arts in order to produce goods that activate the full range of the community's resources and skills. In the same way, the plant stand tradition utilizes local renewable resources in a craft simple enough to be taken up as a productive evening activity, but specialized enough to require practice and skill like Bill Perkins developing his trade from his first rickety plant stands to solid, substantial works of furniture.

While arguing for the pivotal importance education has on rural prosperity, Verney also advocated for the moral impact of handiwork on the individual. He asserted that "first, it makes work real; secondly, it teaches accuracy; and, thirdly, the pupil learns that moral qualities like patience and determination are essential to progress."<sup>18</sup> He continues by listing the virtues of handicraft: "diligence, perseverance, love of order, neatness, dexterity, caution, a love of construction, a respect for the work of men's hands, and a contempt for wanton destruction."<sup>19</sup> Similar to the ways in which 19th c. middle-class women were encouraged to perform various forms of fancy work for its moralizing quality, Verney exhorts his reader to learn and master handicrafts, which instill in the student certain moral virtues necessary for learning and thoughtfully executing quality works. He identified characteristics such as diligence as likely associated with the education and perfection of a craft, neatness necessary to produce works with both efficiency and simplicity, and respect developed from understanding and appreciating the time and skill required of a craftsman. All such qualities are carefully constructive to producing effective members of a fruitful rural society.

A similar essay published in 1902 identifies an Arts and Crafts Movement in rural Deerfield, MA as exemplar for rural prosperity. Titled "May Solve a Rural Problem: How the Art Handicraft Movement at Deerfield Mass., May Spread to Other Towns – Success Meets the Associated Workers in Beaten Brass, Colonial Furniture and 'Grandmother' Rugs," the article posits a solution to the decaying rural village, suggesting that the handicraft movement in Deerfield may envisage similar movements westward. The author contrasts the resident's former "hap-hazard sort of fashion" from when they were a decaying town to the new serious, livelihood sustaining pursuit of craft. The author describes how Deerfield's female embroiderers began to "realize the dignity of a craft" and male woodworkers, though a minority of the Deerfield Arts and Craft Society, as competent producers of Colonial furniture.<sup>20</sup> For the embroiderer, the work was no longer merely

17. Verney, Edmunc. "Rural Prosperity." *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature* (1844-1898). 65 (June 1897): 747.

18. *Ibid.* (June 1897): 747.

19. *Ibid.* (June 1897): 747.

20. McL, M.D. "May Solve a Rural Problem: How the Art Handicraft Movement at Deerfield Mass., May Spread to Other Towns – Success Meets the Associated Workers in Beaten Brass, Colonial Furniture and 'Grandmother' Rugs," *The New York Times* (Sept 7, 1902): 29.



craft, it was artistic. Instead it was transformed in their minds and level of dedication to a serious trade to the degree that it might be said, “in Deerfield...everything is artistic.”<sup>21</sup> Further advocating for the self-sufficiency and economy of the rural town, the author writes, “everything that is making the fame of the village was found, in embryo at least, within it. Nothing has been imported,” which echoes the concern of even twig furniture builders today who emphasize the importance of producing work from the local environment.

Describing the Arts and Crafts Movement in America, Rho Fisk Zueblin highlights the importance of association and inheritance in his essay “The Arts and Crafts Movement: The Production of Industrial Art in America II”: “Home industries always have the alluring claims of association and inheritance, and bear the ‘tool-marks’ of personality.”<sup>22</sup> The 19th century craftsman felt connected to rich cultural pasts by practicing folk traditions or looking to great artworks of the past for inspiration. Most art historical texts define the Arts and Crafts movement as a direct response against industry and the romanticizing of nature a response against overcrowded, dirty cities.<sup>23</sup> Zueblin writes, “art work that is springing up on the mountains and in the sleepy hollows...may represent some eager soul who is finding it helpful and happy to work out art problems alone and in close touch with nature.”<sup>24</sup> For him, the pursuit of nature is equated with happy isolation that leads to creative clarity. In other words, the craftsman removes him or herself from the bustling and distracting cities in order to find artistic inspiration. He continues: “Thus are fashioned objects to be cherished and valued on account of their personal feeling and character, and such are the fireside arts done by talented individuals.”<sup>25</sup> Zueblin finishes this section of his essay by emphasizing the individual’s talent and character as requisite to produce cherished works. His highly sentimental writing on the Arts and Crafts movement shows how romantically people thought of handicrafts toward the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Though the plant stand’s anonymous maker leaves viewers with little assurance as to his professional skill, experience, and intention, the plant stand, preserved for over 100 years, likely possessed the sense of “cherished and valued” personal character that this 1903 author describes. Furthermore, the author connects rural handicraft with ties to both nature and personal feeling along with the satisfaction of working out technical problems and developing their skill. Viewers might perceive the plant stand as both representing the Springdale community’s natural resources as well as its resident’s esteem for handicrafts, particularly given that the craft was appropriate

21. *Ibid.* (Sept 7, 1902): 29.

22. Zueblin, Rho Fisk. “The Arts and Crafts Movement: The Production of Industrial Art in America II.” *The Chautauquan; A Weekly Newsmagazine (1880-1914)* 37 (April 1903): 59.

23. See Roche, John F. 1995. “The culture of pre-modernism: Whitman, Morris, & the American arts and crafts movement.” *Atq* 9, no. 2: 103.: “Broadly speaking, this movement began in opposition to the nineteenth-century factory system, under which the worker was subservient to the machine process, the consumer dependent on machine-made items of questionable quality.”

24. Zueblin, Rho Fisk. “The Arts and Crafts Movement: The Production of Industrial Art in America II.” *The Chautauquan; A Weekly Newsmagazine (1880-1914)* 37 (April 1903): 59.

25. Zueblin, Rho Fisk. “The Arts and Crafts Movement: The Production of Industrial Art in America II.” *The Chautauquan; A Weekly Newsmagazine (1880-1914)* 37 (April 1903): 59.

gift for a wedding. However, as Zueblin writes, “the interest in home industries has a broader outlook and deeper social significance than is found in the work of individual artists,” proceeding to reiterate the same conclusion as the previous two sources writing, “The revival of cottage crafts in most cases has meant either the renewal of traditional arts or the introduction of a handicraft for community betterment.”<sup>26</sup> In this case, the community betterment is exercised in the support and well-wishes of a young couple embarking on their journey as neighbor Springdale farmers.

Quoted in Zueblin’s text, Oscar Lovell Trigg rejects the notion of the Arts and Crafts movement as simply an aversion to machinery as quoted in “Chapters in the Arts and Crafts Movement.” Contrary to much art historical literature, Trigg writes, “[the Arts and Crafts Movement is not] a fanatical protest against machinery or a revival of the domestic system of the middle ages.” In scholarship, 19th century medievalism is closely tied to the Arts and Crafts movement. But this writer suggests that the Arts and Crafts movement is not about looking back to medieval systems, but looking forward to “the first stages of a new industrialism answering to the demand of the works for more individual expression and of consumers for the satisfaction of their individual and higher wants.”<sup>27</sup> Instead of placing the greatest weight on a medieval inheritance, he pivots toward individual expression, aligning with the growing middle class eager to incorporate artistic objects in their homes.

Twig willow furniture clearly fits into this philosophy as the sense of place and self-sufficiency are primary themes to each of these author’s arguments. Each has a clear concern for community betterment by activating and ennobling the local resources through artistic means. The twig plant stand achieves this mission by both acting as the embodiment of a learned skill requiring moral diligence and appreciation for handiwork. It also embodies the place in which the craftsmen live, a place in which they cultivate and develop deep meaningful connections to one another and to the land.

In addition to speaking to the 19th and early 20th century philosophies on the qualities of a prosperous rural town and the participation and skill specialization of its population, the plant stand is an interesting impression of a much larger 19th and early-20th century interest in wicker or rattan furnishings often made from willow twigs, reeds, and other pliant twig plants. In his book *The Collector’s Guide to American Wicker Furniture*, Richard Saunders claims that wicker furniture “captured the mood of the times to a ‘T,’ reveling in the adoration of the home as an island of refuge that celebrated any handmade or eclectic decoration.”<sup>28</sup> Likewise, countless primary sources, from advertisements to articles on home decoration, emphasize the appeal of willow furnishings. Between 1911 and 1915, the periodical *Art & Decoration* published articles by various authors titled “The Informal Note in Summer Furniture,” “The Use and Beauty of Willow Furniture,” and “The Adaptable Willow: Its Appeal of Structure Line and Form.”<sup>29</sup> At the same time, advertisements

26. *Ibid.* (April 1903): 59.

27. *Ibid.* (April 1903): 59.

28. Saunders, Richard. *The Collector’s Guide to American Wicker Furniture*. New York: Hearst Books, 1983.

29. Price, Matlock. “The Adaptable Willow: Its Appeal of Structural Line and Form.” *Arts & Decoration* (1910-1911) 1 (October 1911): 482-483.; McCall, D. D. “The Use and Beauty of Willow Furniture.” *Arts & Decoration* (1910-1911) 1 (March 1911): 221-222.; Marke, Mortimer. “The Informal Note in Summer Furniture.” *Arts & Decoration* (1910-1918) 10 (April 1915): 232-233.

use language such as “The Final Note of Comfort,” “Hand – Wrought Willow Furniture commands a place in even the most lavish home,” “no other investment insures artistic results at such a low cost,” (Figure 6.)<sup>30</sup> and “see these unique pieces to realize the home-like atmosphere they impart.”<sup>31</sup> Advertisements highlight desirable qualities inherent in willow furnishings including being handmade, artistic, and low cost.

Many authors have discussed the far-reaching trends of wicker and Adirondack styles. Jeremy Adamson’s *American Wicker: Woven Furniture from 1850 to 1930* published in 1993 and accompanied by an exhibition hosted by the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art and Craig Gilborn’s 1987 book *Adirondack Furniture and the Rustic Tradition*, which features a large selection of twig furniture, both set the atmosphere for willow furnishing’s design.<sup>3233</sup> However, they fail to answer questions about the tradition of crafting home-made furniture as addressed by the ideologies of the rural community economy. Perceiving both the class implications of curating an aesthetic domestic environment by incorporating popular wicker trends along with the rural community’s emphasis on resourcefulness suggest that the plant stand might at once be the product of contemporary home décor styles as well as the preservation of the rural economy.

In conclusion, the plant stand speaks to the resourcefulness and skill of the 19th century rural community and the anonymous individuals that contributed to binding and supportive relationships that created a prosperous community unit. Aesthetically appealing wicker furnishings introduced nature to the home through its rustic, natural finish and simple, plantlike structure, resonating with both ideals of natural beauty and tranquility as well as contemporary home fashions with their class implications. In developing and exercising their skill, the rural craftsman supported both the utilitarian as well as aesthetically moralizing needs of his or her community.

30. “Back Matter.” *Arts & Decoration*. (September 1911): 456.

31. Advertisement by Joseph P. McHugh & Son of New York.

32. Adamson, Jeremy. *American Wicker: Woven Furniture from 1850 to 1930*. New York: Rizolli

33. International Publication, 1993.; Gilborn, Craig A. *Adirondack Furniture and the Rustic Tradition*. 1987.

# 57. Cunneen's Mini Dress

BY BREE ANN ROMERO



**Dress**  
Norwegian-American  
Oljanna Cunneen,  
late 1960s  
Wool  
Gift of Nancy Vogel  
MHAHS  
1990.014.0003

Oljanna Cunneen made a dress for Nancy Vogel in 1970. Catalogue records maintained by the Mount Horeb Area Historical Society describe the dress as a “Rust bonded wool A-line mini with wool crewel embroidery at the hemline and neckline. Multi colored rosemaled design and is piped in green velvet.” While accurate, that brief description fails to capture the significance of the rosemaled dress. That significance is the focus and aim of this paper. Through a study of the dress’s maker, Oljanna, and wearer, Nancy, this paper analyzes the dress in the context of 1960s Mount Horeb to reveal the forces and dynamics that gave meaning to the dress.

Before studying its maker and wearer, it is useful to examine the object itself. The dress is A-line in shape. It is close-fitting on top, narrow at the waist, and widest at the hemline. Hemmed above the knee, the dress is “mini” in length. Long and loose sleeves that widen gradually from the shoulder to the cuff reach the middle of the skirt. Several sets of darts make for a fitted top. On the front of the dress, darts run from the side seam of the waist to the fullest part of the bust. A shorter set of darts start at the side seam under the arm, extend toward the center of the waistline, and intersect with the waist-bust dart just below the fullest part of the bust. On the back of the dress, a zipper runs from the neckline to the middle of the skirt. Darts on either side of the zipper move several inches up from the waistline. Together, the front and back darts form a tailored top that tapers from the bust to the waist. Starting at the narrowest part of the garment, the dress flares from waistline to the hem, creating a full skirt that resembles the letter “A.” Proportionally, the top (neckline to waistline) and skirt (waistline to hemline) are nearly equal in length.

There is a visible texture to the rust colored bonded wool of which the dress is made. Although comprised of two layers of fabric, the soft looking textile is lighter and more free moving than expected. Green piping decorates the neck and hemlines as well as the sleeve cuffs. The most distinct feature of the dress is the multi-colored rosemaul design of crewel embroidery ornamenting the neck and hemlines. A five-petal flower situated above the fullest part of the bust is the focal point of the neckline crewelwork—a form of surface stitching using wool. From the blue, light blue, and yellow flower, a pattern of C-scroll stems, leaves, and smaller flowers extend along the neckline. The asymmetrical design creates a “V” as it reaches the shoulders. A similar but linear pattern parallels the hemline of the skirt. Again, the five-petal flower is central. From it, green and dark green stems spread out over the front of the skirt, reach across the side seams, and stretch several inches onto the back. Pairs of small light blue flowers add to the design. Slightly larger yellow and red flowers complete the rosemaul design.

As previously mentioned, Oljanna made the dress in the 1960s, likely in the second half of the decade. Oljanna was a prominent member of the Blue Mounds and Mount Horeb area. Many have taken interest in her story over the years, both during her life and after her sudden death in 1988 at the age of 64. As early as 1962, *Capitol Times* ran an article on the hobbies and projects that kept the “farm wife” busy, such as rosemaling and embroidering. Subsequent articles in local papers chronicled her community involvement while scholars focused on her life as a storytelling and ethnic folk artist. Although many have documented various aspects of Oljanna’s life, none have studied the rosemaled dress she made for Nancy in depth. By exploring Oljanna’s life, this section examines the rosemaled dress from the perspective of its maker to show how it was a part of Oljanna’s mission to share her Norwegian heritage. In addition, this section considers the dress in relation to her large body of work to demonstrate that the dress is a creative expression of folk art.

In 1983, Oljanna told a local reporter “it’s ‘terribly important’ for all cultures to keep in touch with their heritages. ‘What you are is where you come from.’” If Oljanna lived by a motto, it was that. She

was where she came from. Oljanna was Norwegian, one the one hand. Her father, Henry Venden, was the son of Norwegian-born parents. Her mother, Gerharda Forshaum, emigrated from Norway in 1908. Like the other members of the large cohort of Norwegian-Americans in south central Wisconsin, Oljanna was also a Midwesterner, on the other hand. Born in Vermont, Wisconsin in 1923, she seldom strayed far from Dane County. Oljanna was where she came from. She was Old World and New. Her art reflects that.

Oljanna had many talents. She “pulled from her parents’ combined repertoires of verbal and handwork traditions to become extraordinarily skilled in a spectrum of artistic expressions, from Norwegian-American joke and storytelling to sewing, embroidering, knitting, painting, and the creation of miniature troll figures that integrated all of these skills.” Oljanna constructed and expressed her Norwegian-American identity through the practice of those skills. She also drew on them to support herself and her family. After the failure of her first marriage, Oljanna wed Vernon “Jiggs” Cunneen. The couple lived on a 123-acre dairy farm near Blue Mounds where they started a family. By the 1960s, both Oljanna and Jiggs sought seasonal work to supplement their income. Oljanna sold tickets at Norway Basin Ski Area in the winter. Beginning in 1961, she worked as a tour guide at Little Norway during the summers. In addition, she “began painting and rosemaling for pay,” according to Janet Gilmore. Early jobs found her decorating farm signs and personal objects such as skis. Sometime in the mid-1960s, the Vogels commissioned Oljanna to decorate the exterior of their Norwegian gift store, Open House Imports. After that, she began selling “embroidery kits for tablecloths and small rosemaled pieces including Velkommen signs, plates, and children’s furniture” in Open House.

Besides using her skills to earn money, Oljanna drew on her manifold abilities as she “engaged in self-promotion to her own benefit, which in turn benefited the community.” In 1966, Oljanna and her husband, along with Nancy’s husband, Lee Vogel, initiated a campaign to commemorate the area’s Norwegian heritage. These efforts yielded the Song of Norway Festival the following summer. During the month-long community celebration of Norwegian culture known as ‘Song Days,’ locals and tourists alike could explore rosemaling exhibits, purchase authentic goods from Norway, and sample Norwegian dishes. Weekend performances of the “Song of Norway”— an outdoor musical of the life of Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg —were the highlight of the festival. In addition to serving on its board of directors, Oljanna sewed costumes for all ninety “Song of Norway” cast members in the first years of production. At the same time, she became well known for her trolls, which she continues to be remembered for today.

While Oljanna is less well known for her rosemaling, she was productive in that arena of folk art, as well. Rosemaling began as a form of peasant art in the 1700s. In “Rosemaling: The Art of Painting Roses,” George Bushnell describes rosemaling in Norway as a “rural, untutored art” initially practiced by men who relied on their imaginations to conceive of the “fanciful flowers, leaves, vines, scrolls, and embellishments.” Although the practice grew in popularity throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it fell out of favor due to the rise of portrait and landscape painting in the mid-1800s. By the 1870s, rosemaling “had all but died out in the country of its origin.” As the practice declined in Norway, it took root elsewhere. Marion Nelson explains that, “During the forty-year period from 1836 to 1876, almost two hundred thousand Norwegians, most of them from isolated rural communities, left Norway and came to the United States where they settled primarily in the undeveloped prairie lands of Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota.” With the Norwegian immigrants came the practice of rosemaling to south central Wisconsin.

Rosemaling was not widely practiced in the Midwest until the 1930s when increased interest in folk art facilitated its rise. In the wake of World War II, rosemaling declined in popularity until it experienced a revival in the 1960s due to growing interest in ethnicity. During that decade, rosemaling was practiced widely among Norwegian-Americans. As Nelson characterizes the 1960s upsurge in rosemaling, it was a “folk movement” because it retained “strains of earlier folk art activity” but gained “new impetus and breadth.” Oljanna belonged to that movement. She learned as a child how to rosemal from her mother. As an adult, she experimented with the practice. Instead of rosemaling in traditional colors, she often painted in shades of grey. She generally did, however, use more customary colors and maintain the traditional practice of rosemaling household items, as evidenced by her decorated cabinets and chairs. At the same time, she seemed willing to adorn anything if commissioned. Whatever her motivations or feelings about rosemaling, it is easy to see that this practice, as well as other forms of folk art, were a means through which Oljanna expressed and shared her heritage, whether it was for profit or not. Moreover, by expressing herself through folk art, Oljanna joined a community of Norwegian-Americans who shared her interest in a common ethnicity. In this way, the dress makes known the ways in which Oljanna identified as a member of an ethnic group.

At the same time, this dress reveals how Oljanna stood apart from other rosemalers. When Oljanna rosemaled the dress, she adapted folk art to fashion in a way that was uniquely her own. Viewed in this framework, the dress reveals how creative traditional expressions of heritage can be. Distinct as she was, she was hardly the only creative person to rosemal. Images of objects held at the Wisconsin Historical Society included rosemaled non-traditional items such as a duck decoy and a bowling pin. Like the rosemaled mini dress, these material goods demonstrate how people merged tradition with modernity. While some practiced folk art creatively, few experimented with fashion in the way Oljanna did. The dress thus marks Oljanna as an original Norwegian-American ethnic folk artist.

The dress’s maker and wearer had many things in common. Both Oljanna and Nancy were born and raised in south central Wisconsin. The women were both wives and mothers. They were each dedicated to and invested in sharing and promoting Mount Horeb’s Norwegian heritage. But unlike Oljanna, neither of Nancy Vogel’s parents emigrated from Norway. Moreover, neither Nancy’s mother nor father were born to Norwegian immigrants. In fact, it is not apparent that any part of Nancy’s family tree had roots in Norway. Unlike Oljanna, for whom the dress can be seen as expression of her Norwegian heritage, the object represents something different for its wearer. This section examines the rosemaled dress from Nancy’s perspective to understand what it might have signified for her. While this framework generates much speculation, assessing the dress in the context of 1960s women’s fashion provides a basis for the claim that Nancy used the dress to merge folk art with fashion. By comparing the dress to popular styles of the decade, the following shows how Nancy used the dress to identify as a member of the community and express her own sense of style.

Nancy was born in Arena, Wisconsin in 1932. Her parents, Robert and Ethel (Allen) Hodgson had both been born in Wisconsin, as had their parents, Ralph and Elizabeth (Hamilton) Hodgson and Francis and Wilhelmina (Schuldt) Allen, respectively. Nancy married John Sievers in 1953. The couple had two sons together. By the age of 26, Nancy was a widow and single mother after John and the couple’s eldest son died in 1958. After several years of raising her younger son, George, on her own, Nancy met Lee Vogel. The couple wed in 1962 and took up residence in Mount Horeb

soon after. In 1966, Nancy and Lee opened “a traditional Norwegian gift shop” in a Victorian-era house along Main Street. They named their store Open House Imports and dedicated themselves to its success.

Open House, which developed into a family business, offered a wide range of goods. The store attracted passersby with “the blaze orange gingerbread out front.” Originally painted purple, the repainting of the gingerbread initiated “a long tenure [of] promoting tourism and Norwegian heritage.” That tenure included Nancy’s involvement in the establishment of the Mount Horeb Trollway. Viewed in this context, the dress can be seen as an extension of Nancy’s efforts to promote Open House. Without knowing more about what sparked Nancy’s interest in Norwegian culture, however, this is a shallow assessment.

Beside her work at Open House, Nancy was active in the community. She was a charter member of the Sons of Norway Vennelag 513, she served as treasurer and chair of the advertising committee board of the Mount Horeb Area Chamber of Commerce, and performed in the “Song of Norway.” Regardless of the reason Nancy felt inclined to direct such a great deal of her time and energy toward a Norwegian heritage that was not her own, she clearly desired to be a part of the community. Considering her involvement, it is easy to imagine that she valued the community of Mount Horeb, the people of it, and her place within it. Within that context, the dress can be seen as one effort among many Nancy made to belong. As a non-Norwegian among people of Norwegian descent, the dress might have marked Nancy as a member of the community.

At the very least, the dress represents Nancy’s desire to merge traditional folk art with 1960s fashion. It is reflective of certain aspects of 1960s women’s fashion. First, its shape was common of the period. As Hilary Radner explains, mass-produced ‘ready-to-wear’ came to dominate the market after World War II. By the 1960s, the rise of ready-to-wear had shifted the notion of ‘style,’ reinterpreting it “in terms of the new economy of non-durable consumer good. The ‘new’ rather than the ‘well-made,’ innovation rather than quality, became increasingly the signifiers of ‘style.’”

Uncomplicated and thus ideal for mass production, the A-line mini dress became not only a staple of ready-to-wear, it developed into a symbol of style in the 1960s, as well. As a ready-made garment, the A-line mini dress and 1960s women’s fashion signaled the triumph of mass production and also expressed a new feminine ideal. Ready-to-wear assumed a young and economically independent woman for whom fashion was pleasurable but time was limited. This subject, “formulated through the publication of such popular works as Helen Gurley Brown’s *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1962,” was active, employed, and desired male attention. For her, the A-line mini dress was perfect. Thus, through the *Single Girl*, the A-line mini dress signified a new ideal that, according to Radner, “define[d] femininity outside a traditional patriarchal construction” and “establishe[d] consumerism as the mechanism that replace[d] maternity in the construction of the feminine.”

While the rosemaled mini dress is clearly A-line in shape, it is important to consider the extent to which it mirrored patterns of production as well as dominant notions of gender in the 1960s. Since the dress was made, rather than mass produced, it falls outside of the ready-to-wear category. But the fact that people replicated the A-line shape shows the extent to which the simple design became synonymous with style. Conversely, the made aspect of the rosemaled dress might also be interpreted as a rejection of non-durable consumer goods. Nancy surly could have asked Oljanna to embroider a bought dress. The fact that Nancy commissioned Oljanna to make and embroidered the dress suggests that Nancy preferred it that way, maybe because she



trusted Oljanna's dress would be well-made. In relation to the new feminine ideal embodied by the 1960s A-line mini, the rosemaled dress is split. By 1962, Nancy was a 30-year-old mother and wife. In those ways, she and her A-line dress were counter to the Single Girl ideal. As a working woman, however, Nancy fit squarely within the model. Seeing the rosemaled dress and its wearer as neither wholly aligned nor entirely separate from the 1960s notion of femininity shows how pliable the category can be.

A close study of the rosemaled mini dress suggests what it might have represented for its maker and wearer. For Oljanna, the dress was a form of folk art, a practice through which the Norwegian-American expressed her identity. For Nancy, the dress was a path to belonging in Mount Horeb. While the meaning of the dress differed among maker and wearer, it represents not only a part of Oljanna and Nancy—their sense of self and desires—but also a time and place. The rosemaled dress thus shows how an object can help us understand individuals as well as society as both navigate the ways in which they engage tradition over time.

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# 58. Goli Music Cabinet

BY LARISSA CANGUSSA

*“To the memory of the pioneers who braved the dangers of a long voyage...the hardships of a life in the wilderness...and still found time and means to organize and maintain churches and congregations for themselves and their posterity this little volume is respectfully dedicated”*

*Sixty years of Perry Congregation –A souvenir of the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Perry, Dane Co., Wisconsin*

## **Introduction**

The focus of this research is to investigate the history of the Goli Family Music Cabinet, making use of the music cabinet’s own biography to tell its story. The object is a piece of furniture associated not only with music but also strongly connected with religious manifestations, highlighting these components as vital cultural expressions of the community identity. This analysis will consider aspects of local traditions and immigrant activities, social life and material culture of the Norwegian-American people established in Dane County, Wisconsin in the late Nineteenth century. placing the object into context through the biography of its makers and owner. This investigation contemplates aspects of local traditions and immigrant activities, with the purpose of placing the object into context.

Some aspects of this research comprehend information that were assumed about the decorative techniques applied to the music cabinet.

Later, searching for more information and resources, it is now known that one decorative technique explored here is not present in the object in study. The research will maintain this section due to it’s relevance in Norwegian decorative arts.

### **Object description:**

According to the Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database the Goli Family music cabinet is constructed of bird's-eye maple <sup>1</sup>, has a curved backboard and sides and an arched apron.

The object's exterior is painted in yellow-mustard color that could be milk paint <sup>2</sup>, particular to early paint technologies.

This rather plain surface ornamented with traditional pigments created a simple backdrop to a later striking painted design, the oval vignette that depicts a tropical landscape with a couple of swans, birds that represent love, on a lake with mountains and palm trees .

The upper front corners, backboard and sides are ornamented with finely incised dragons and flowers using a traditional Norwegian decorative technique known as *kolrosing*.

The wooden interior of the cabinet is unfinished and there are three internal shelves that fit with standard music sheets. An original pull to open the cabinet door and a lock to secure the music inside are now missing.

Many interpretations are possible since few records of the object exist. Another important question that can be raised about this object is why the door is divided in two parts, where there is a decentralized slot. Investigating reasons for this execution detail, came across the possibility that the music cabinet construction wood was the same used to make the cheese molds from the Goli-Berg cheese factory, or scrap or reclaimed wood.

### **Music Cabinet Decorative Details and interpretations**

Analyzing the decorative elements that make this piece so unique it is possible to identify different aspects of the Norwegian culture and other universal iconography and influences associated.

The joyful and vivid hue of yellow of the music cabinet was very popular in this period <sup>3</sup>[3] but this striking surface color obscured earlier shallow wood carving\* details.

Kolrosing is a decorative technique that is constantly used on objects made of wood, bone or horn. The pattern is scribed into the object with a knife tip, and then the artist rubs on a dye that adheres to the etched lines so that the lines are clearly visible. The name *Kolrosing* (pronounced "coal-rose-ing") reflects the fact that previously used coal mixed with animal fat as a dye. Kolrosing has been used broadly in Norwegian folk art as decoration on spoons, caskets and other utilitarian objects. Basswood and birch are the two most common woods for *kolrosing*. Unlike woodcarving, this technique does not remove wood; rather, a tiny groove is made by making a single shallow cut just deep enough to score the wood. *Kolrosing* is a Scandinavian tradition, dating back to Viking times when the designs were more geometric or "Celtic" in origin.

Spoon with Kolrosing details

*Spoon with Kolrosing details*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

## Kolrosing Detail in Spoon

### *Kolrosing Detail in Spoon*

In the Telemark<sup>4</sup>[4] area of Norway, *kolrosing* designs show the influence of rococo design translated into flower, leaf, and vine forms.

*\*At the beginning of this research these shallow wood carving details were identified as Kolrosing that received a layer of paint, but after looking for more information and resources it is now accepted that the lines were merely incised in wood, not being a representation of the technique known as Kolrosing, that was deeply analyzed in this paper.*



*Goli Family Music Cabinet*



*Acanthus Flower incising*



*Dragon Detail*

The kolrosing of the music cabinet ornaments are compound by dragons and floral motifs and also an oval boundary line in the center of the music cabinet's door. Since the cabinet received a coat color paint over the incised details, the contrast between the lines filled with coal and oil and the color of the wood are no longer visible. This overpainting of earlier kolrosing could mean an attempt to update and make the cabinet more fashionable or modern, and, considering the aesthetics of the shape of the curves of the arched back of the music cabinet we can also perceive an attempt to recreate the Victorian furniture artistic features.

### **Dragons, flowers, and symbolism**

The combination of all the decorative elements of this object make it a unique piece with the

compilation of eclectic decorative approaches. The techniques used and details applied seem to mismatch, but since this music cabinet is a collaborative piece, these singular elements appear to be more independent and spontaneously generated between the three makers. Each maker worked in a different stage of the process and it doesn't seem like the cabinet had a design planning or an agreement among the people involved. It is possible that Erick Goli, the man responsible for the construction just focused in the functional part and the household women decorated the surface, as a resource of improvement of the rudimental appearance of the piece. This structure was a quite gendered of aspect of home craft.

Analyzing the aesthetics as a whole, the Music Cabinet is not exactly what you expect from a Norwegian inspired piece of furniture. The Goli family music cabinet is not very appealing as a form of aesthetics but it has a naïve charm and individual expressiveness. Nonetheless this traditional Norwegian decorative technique is not the focal point of the music cabinet The object's dramatic centerpiece is the oval landscape vignette depicting two swans on a lake surrounded by mountains and palm trees. This element surprises as it is nothing like either Norwegian or Wisconsin landscapes. Such a depiction is surprising (why?) This could be interpreted as an attempt to express Escapism, maybe associated with homesickness or seasonal affective disorder.

Four dragon figures surround this medallion painting, in the four corners of the music cabinet's door. These dragons with long and sharp serpent tails are incised in the wood using the kolrosing technique. These intriguing elements make contrast with the delicate look of the landscape painting that it surrounds.

The word dragon itself can be traced to a Greek word, *drakon*. It means "sharp-sighted one", "serpent", "one with a deadly glance", "to see", "look at". In Latin, the Greek word was converted to *draco*, and it came to mean "giant snake" and the Romans shared this belief as well. This dragon-serpent-like with wings match the figures incised in the wood of the Goli family music cabinet.

Dragons are important to multiple ancient peoples. The Celts, for example, showed great reverence for dragons and serpents, depicting them by the side of their gods. They came to represent wisdom and nobility, sovereignty. In Celtic and Teutonic societies dragons and serpents are often viewed as guardians of sacred places, treasures and precious sepulchral items as in Greek mythology.

The Norwegian dragon-snake called *the lindwurm* is a dreadful creature and knowing the significance of this symbol, its presence on the music cabinet's door is coherent: music sheets can be considered precious goods.

The floral elements in this piece (added with the same kolrosing technique) are stylized therefore no specific plant is clearly identifiable but, if compared to Rosemaling floral styles it could be representing acanthus leaves and flowers<sup>5</sup> [5].

### **Architecture, Furniture Making and traditional aesthetics of Norwegian-American homes**

The farm houses decorations were done in the same style as they did across the sea. Buildings followed traditional architectural designs, some of them with dragons at the peaks of the gables and shingles were shaped to resemble fish scales. The decorations in cupboards were elaborate and rosemaling was typical and colorful. The three-leg chair (*bandestool*) fit well in the corners and

balanced in uneven floors. All woodwork, including furniture was elaborately carved or turned and the mythical motifs were also employed.

Family stands in front of the house

*Goli Family in front of their house*

Norwegian traditional furniture is highly decorative. The Norwegian immigrants brought their native costumes to the new land, perpetrating the craft of the old country. A blend of carving and flamboyant painted decorations was attractive and practical and the works of the Wisconsin settlers was distinct comparing the Minnesota area, one of the reasons is that Per Lysne, born in, Norway, immigrated to Stoughton, Wisconsin with his wife in 1907. He had been trained in rosemaling by Anders Olsen, an artist whose work was recognized at the Exposition Universelle at Paris in 1893. Lysne had specialized in redecorating antique chests and painting large platters. He developed a thriving rosemaling enterprise and taught the art to a select few.

Comparing the music cabinet to similar objects, is possible to distinguish by the level of craftsmanship some elements that reinforce the status of folk art of the Goli Family music cabinet. The object below, documented by the Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database, is a music cabinet attributed to Helge Alfred Borreson <sup>6</sup>[6] from La Crosse, Wisconsin, dated 1872-1880,. From the pictures, it's possible to identify the a much higher level of craftsmanship concerning wood carving and fine decorative elements with impressive professionalism.

another Music  
Cabinet from  
Vesterheim Museum

*Music Cabinet from  
Vesterheim Museum*

Vesterheim Music Cabinet Detail

*Vesterheim Music Cabinet Detail*

The Goli music cabinet was created more than twenty years later by amateur people. Perhaps, the time worked as a factor of change, resulting in an adaptation to the American taste and aesthetics



keeping its Norwegian roots. Overall, Norwegian-American furniture is, cheerful, inventive, and picturesque and that is a word that describes very well the Goli Music cabinet .

### **Folk art and craft: Material Culture production**

Among the more than 900.000 Norwegian immigrants, ???artists came to the United States bringing with them tools, art supplies and the art of Rosemaling to the United States. They came with beautiful decorated and painted chests, very distinct and rich in detail. With this early establishment, the artists were able to keep producing good work. Some adaptations surely were made, but many objects from that period kept the authenticity of Norwegian folk art. It was common to maintain the tradition alive by passing knowledge to relatives and apprentices, both to keep the heritage present in their daily life and to have a source of income .

Rosemaling experienced its revival in America in the 20th century. Norwegian-Americans became interested in the Rosemaling decorated possessions of their ancestors and then American Rosemaling began to develop and flourish. The revival of Rosemaling in the United States is often credited to Per Lysne who was born in Norway and trained in the craft. He came to America in the early 20th Century and was employed as a wagon painter in Stoughton, Wisconsin. When business slowed during the Great Depression, he began Rosemaling again. Today Norwegian Rosemaling is taught in many areas of the USA. Rosemaling associations sponsor classes and competitions.

Beyond the professional artistic practice, there was a group formed especially by women that were taught since childhood to practice needlework and other feminine associated handwork. This was a habit embedded in the traditional familiar structure where the woman is the mother, the wife, the housekeeper and eventually an artist. Magazines with crafts and “how to do” sections inspired many women in artistic ways, improving the household, the domestic life and making good use of their time. These magazines were available, but not financially accessible to all.

Ethnicity, nationalism and heritage were clearly perceived in the artistic production, craft and folk art. The respect with the past and the attempt to connect to their ancestors brings emotional attachment and sentimentality. The sense of preservation had profound meaning and showed respect to their culture.

### **Object origins and Family History**

The original maker of the music cabinet was Erick Goli <sup>7</sup>[9] The 1900 federal census for the Town of Perry, Dane County , born in 1841. In 1866 he married Ragnhild Skartum (1846-1926) and they started a business in a farm and Cheese Factory called Goli-Berg Cheese Factory. The factory belonged to the family for seventy years and then was sold. Later, it was called Drammen Valley, the name of the road where the farm was located.

( Goli Berg Cheese Factory)

*Drammen Valley Cheese Factory, former Goli Berg  
Cheese Factory*

According to the records of the Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society, this music cabinet was constructed by Erick Goli between 1900 and 1920 for his daughter Kristine Goli (1886-1985), by that time, a piano apprentice. His other daughter Margrethe Goli (1883-1971), the second maker of the object, was a pianist at the Perry Lutheran Church. She was the one responsible for adding more adornments and details to the piece, using traditional wood decorations techniques. . The third maker of the music cabinet was also a member of the family. Amanda Goli, sister in law of Kristine was married to Martin Goli, Kristine's older brother. She painted the central element of the cabinet inside the oval *korolsing* shape done by Margrethe.



*Goli Family members*

The way the music cabinet was made suggests that the object evolved, taking a few months (or years) to be completed. There is not known chronology of the process of making steps, but that was a representative example of Norwegian families' tradition of producing arts and crafts: men were makers and the women decorators .

The Goli family women were dedicated to needlework (such as quilting and stitching), and music as MHHS records indicate. There are examples of needlework and quilts done by the Goli women including Kristine Goli, the music cabinet owner.

### Goli Family Tree

*Goli Family Tree - Genealogy of the object*

Kristine Olava Goli born in Daleyville in July 26,1886, was an important member of the Mount Horeb area community. She was a piano teacher, church organist for 69 years and the director of the Perry Lutheran Church choir.

### Perry Church view

*Perry Church*

Kristine learned piano since she was young. Her father Erick always encouraged his daughters

to study music, indicating a family passion. He took the girls, weekly, in a 16-mile round trip to Blanchardville to take lessons from Mattie Holland. Kristine also came to Madison to study more music .

### *Kristine Goli Portrait*

### Kristine Goli playing organ

#### *Kristine Goli playing organ*

The music cabinet stored her music sheets and it was placed next to her piano <sup>8</sup>[10] in her own house in Dayleyville.

In 1911 she started taking pipe organ lessons in Milwaukee because the church acquired a pipe organ and no one else knew how to play it. She became the organist and choir leader from 1906 until 1973. She also worked at the organization Ladies Aid and Dorcas' office.

For her personal life, Kristine never married. She used to say she never had the time for it and one of the possible reasons for that was because she had a brother, Karl Adolph with very fragile health, suffering from physical disabilities and partial blindness. She devoted her life to taking care of him (they shared a house ) and serving the church .

She resigned her work in the ministry of music at Perry Lutheran Church at the age of 88, in 1974. Nonetheless, she continued to play piano as a volunteer in nursing homes. and quilting. At this point, she was living on a Nursing Home.

In the 29th of July of 1959 the Church held the “Kristine Goli Day” at Perry’s with a special dinner, in honor of her many years of service.

She died in February 21 in 1985, at 98 years’ old. Her long life encapsulated a series of circumstances such as happiness, faith, fulfillment and good health.

Music was always important in her life, but when she was no longer serving at the church her devotion transitioned to serving the elderly bringing the joy of her presence and her music to nursing homes. This new path possibly changed the mode of the music she played.

At young age, Kristine lived at her parents’ house, at the farmstead in a beautiful and distinct example of the local Norwegian American Architecture. In 1945 she moved to Daleyville.

The architecture expression at the rural area of Mount Horeb was very dynamic and many

different styles were noticeable. Ethnic background, type of products produced by the farms and wealth were among the factors that explain that diversity.

This house has distinct ornaments typical of Norwegian patterns and by the fashionable style of the house it's possible to assume that at this point the Goli family was wealthy.

Eileen Hanneman, one of the living relatives of the Goli Family, in a in person conversation, said that unfortunately she was too young to remember her great aunt Kristine Goli in details. Her mother Selma was Kristine's younger sister and they were close friends. Eileen doesn't have any visual remembrance of the music cabinet but she shared some memories in common with Rachel Faldet, a little girl that Kristine used to baby sit. She was a daughter of one of Perry Lutheran Church's preacher, Paul Andersen. They both remember the presence of Kristine's brother Adolph in the house. They described him as a shadowy figure, always wearing sunglasses and a cane .

Rachel was one of Kristine's best friends and was always visiting her, brought by her mother Sarah whom was working at the church. Rachel has no recollection of Kristine's music cabinet either. She said that the room where the piano was placed was dark. Kristine kept the rooms in a semi-darkness lighting, to not disturb her brother's eyes. This ambiance probably affected the visual recognition of the music cabinet by the living witnesses of the object's life.

### **Relevance of music and religion in community life**

The upper Midwest was at this point a European cultural melting pot. Geographically, the resemblance to the topography and the climate of Norway made them feel almost like home but religion and music were two fundamental elements to gather people. This helped them reinforce bonds between folks sharing the radical change of embracing a new beginning a new life experience.

Immigrant transition into broader American culture was quite difficult . Music worked as an element of integration associated with joy and nostalgia. In the beginning, at Perry church the services were held in Norwegian, and the people only spoke in their mother language. Mount Horeb was an isolated town and this geographic particularity sustained the community to grow with a strong connection to their customs. To create this sense of unity was a pathway to keep alive habits from their home, minimizing the effects of the cultural shock of immigration.

Erick Goli, the music cabinet first maker was a Trustee of Perry Lutheran Church for five years and a Deacon for fifteen. All the family was engaged with the Congregation and following in her sister Margrethe's footsteps, Kristine started playing piano at Perry's Lutheran Church in 1906, she was 15 years old.

There is a cassette tape <sup>9</sup>[11] with some music played by Kristine found at the archives of Mount Horeb Historical Society. She played the Hymns at Perry, she played in almost all wedding ceremonies in town. At her free time, she played classical music but it is not possible to say that she was also a composer. Rachel Faldet, in a phone interview, also said that Kristine taught her simple notes, sitting side by side with her at the piano at home and even at the church. There is no record of what happened with her personal piano and music sheets after her death.[12]

### **Community Life – the importance of the woman in Norwegian American women in the society**

Despite all her busy schedule serving the Perry Lutheran Congregation, Kristine was an enthusiastic and energetic lady. She used to ride her car and was very proud of her freedom to come and go. She was a very independent woman, considering the time. According to several local newspaper articles, Kristine was joyful, energetic and appeared to be younger than she was. She considered herself healthy and blessed.

In her free time, she loved to cook and bake and she was famous for her beautiful quilts. She was very dedicated with her needlework. As a quilter, Kristine was proud of her needle work and frequently was celebrated by her talented production, according to local newspapers. For her, quilting was more than a hobby, it was a passion.

### Kristine Goli Quilting

#### *Kristine Goli Quilting*

Her position in the community reflects how women's role in the society was an element of union and strength.

The images below are newspaper clips where Kristine is shown as a very active representative of the society. She used to volunteer playing and quilting in nursing homes and other organizations.

#### **Conclusion:**

The music cabinet can be considered a good example of Norwegian-American folk art due to its unique characteristics and collaborative process of making. Despite the simplicity of the final product, the piece has a great background story and a very rich biography. The Goli Family represents well the typical Norwegian-American family in community life and their traditions, such as the significance of cultural and religious manifestations. This peculiar object carries a lot of history and tells us how the immigrant and their descendants lived in the Mount Horeb area. The Goli music cabinet was made by non-professional craftsman and represent a specific "era" in the regional folk art category, validating amateur work as a way to preserve the identity of a community by the mechanisms and context of the production of folk art.

*Thanks to The Mount Horeb Area Historical Society and their passionate curators and volunteers Destinee Udelhoven, Johnna L. Buysse, and Brian Bigler. Thanks to Eileen Hanneman, Rachel Faldet and Kristin Brue for the wonderful histories shared. To Ann Smart Martin for the precious time and consideration contributing to the success of this research.*

[1] Object's visual characteristics suggest that the object is made from cheap lumber and not Bird's eye maple, which is a noble wood. Deep analysis of the material is recommended to help identify wood and paint types and approximate dates.

[2] External paint is not mentioned on the Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database .

[3] The experimental watercolor Indian Yellow—a fluorescent paint derived from the urine of

mango-fed cows was very popular in the nineteenth century, especially among artists like William Turner, Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh that thought the color brought warmth to the soul.

[4] The Telemark county is located in southeastern Norway, extending from Hardangervidda to the Skagerrak coast and it has a very broken and heterogeneous landscape, including many hills and valleys.

[5] The acanthus is one of the most common plants to make foliage ornament and decoration 23 , especially in Norwegian folk art, found in Rosemaling Paintings and wood carving.

[6] Music cabinet owned by the Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa.

[9] According to the 1900 federal census for the Town of Perry, Dane County . Eric Goli, born in 1841, emigrated from Norway with his parents Frederick (1811-1901) and Margrethe (1801-1875) to Wisconsin, at the age of ten.

[10] The Mount Horeb Historical Society has records of her piano cover, quilted by to a third party.

[11] The content of the tape is available on this ebook.

[12] The music cabinet was donated by Frederick and Lorraine Hanneman They were responsible for Kristine's belongings. The piano cover, quilted by another woman is available at MHHS. Other needlework attributed to Kristine's mother is part of the MHHS registry.

# 59. Aslak Lie Cupboard

BY PETER THURLOW



**Cupboard**  
Norwegian-American  
Aslak Olsen Lie,  
c.1860  
Wood (pine), glass,  
metal  
Gift of Ella Mavis  
MHAHS  
1984.011.0001

In the collection held by the Mount Horeb Historical Society in Wisconsin there is an old stepback cupboard. Made of pine and painted red, the item dates to the late 1860s or early 1870s. Its straight lines and glazed upper doors related to the style of cupboards typical in America at that time. However, the curved wings that flank the step on each side point toward Norwegian stylistic influence. The raised diamond panels of the lower casement doors indicate the cabinet to be the work of local craftsman Aslak Lie.

The work of Aslak Lie, a 19th century Norwegian cabinetmaker who immigrated to Wisconsin, can be assessed both in light of style and construction. Spanning six decades, Lie's career straddled the Atlantic Ocean, offering a case study in the influences of immigration on the creative output of an individual artisan. A 50-year old man when he emigrated, Lie came to Wisconsin an already mature craftsman. Tracing the corpus of his work through Norway and Wisconsin reveals the complex interplay of personal artistic style and changing expression.

### **Aslak Olsen Lie: Early Life In Norway and Immigration**

Aslak Lie was born in 1798 to *husmenn*, tenant farmer, parents in Reinli, Valdres, Norway. Reinli is a village within the municipality of Sør-Aurdal. Valdres is a mountainous, inland region in south-central Norway, situated halfway between Oslo and Bergen and oriented along the Begna River valley.<sup>1</sup> Even as the Coalition Wars brought tough economic conditions to Norway, Lie's family was particularly poor.<sup>2</sup> The plot of land they farmed was situated on a northwestward-facing slope, which received less sun and retained snow for a month longer than southeastward-facing farms across the valley.<sup>3</sup> The fifth child and fatherless at the age of twelve, perhaps Aslak Lie's only advantage was that he possessed some schooling. With no public schools in Norway at that time, Lie received only a modest education from itinerant schoolteachers and confirmation classes. Still, he learned well enough to read and write.

Aslak Lie enrolled in the Aurdal Company of the Valdres Musketeer Corps on November first, 1819.<sup>4</sup> Twenty-one years old, Lie was given the rank of corporal, a non-commissioned officer whose duty included keeping the company's records and maintaining equipment. The job required service for only a few days of the year and paid just a small stipend, but the post conferred upon Lie some degree of respectability and provided him with a rare means of upward social mobility. Moreover, with nearly no evidence as to how Lie acquired his skills as a craftsman, military training, or connections he made through his service, are possible avenues through which he learned. An inscription he made on the stock of a hand plane places Lie in Christiana on August

1. Andrew A Veblen, *The Valdres Book: A Manual of the Valdres Samband* (Minneapolis: Andrew A. Veblen, 1920), 15. The city of Oslo was called Christiana until the early twentieth century. As the events discussed in this paper took place prior to that change, it will be otherwise be referred to by its old name.
2. Reidar Bakken, *Snikkaren Aslak Olsen Lie: Bygdekunstnar i Valdres og Wisconsin 1798-1886, Craftsman on two Continents* (Oslo: Novus forlag, 2000), 135.
3. John O. Holzhueter, "Aslak Lie and the Challenge of the Artifact," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Autumn, 1986): 6-7, JSTOR (4636013).
4. Discharge Certificate of Aslak Lie, December 31, 1847, box 1, biographical folder, John Holzhueter Papers, translated by Alice Alderman.



fifth of the following year.<sup>5</sup> When signing his name on the plane, Lie included his rank in the military. The plane suggests that he was in the city learning the cabinetry trade and assembling his own set of tools, but there are no records indicating how long he was in the city. The quality of the decorative floral carving on the plane indicates that he had at least become practiced by the time he made it in August. The impact that Christiana's urban fashions had on his work for the rest of his life also suggests that Lie spent a considerable amount of time there, absorbing the principles of what was considered to be good design. It was also perhaps here that he started to develop his ideas of artistry and artistic identity.

However long Aslak Lie spent in Christiana, he was back in Sør-Aurdal by 1824 and beginning his career as an artisan. Beginning in that year he aided in the construction of a belltower for the village church in Bagn, on which project he also demonstrated that he knew ironworking.<sup>6</sup> That year Lie was also hired to build four drop-front desks, each of which he signed on the bottom side of a drawer. Signing his work made Lie unique as a furniture-maker in Valdres at this time. By signing the pieces he made, often accompanied by the date, his title as corporal, and, in some instances, a note, Lie seems to have been trying to advertise his skills and gain notoriety. Over the course of his career, Lie's use of his signature changed. Early on, he signed most pieces he worked on, but as he matured and innovating with his own designs, his signature appeared only on those works that he seems to have felt he exercised his creativity.<sup>7</sup> Lie's self-conscious use of his signature appears to belie an aspiration to be recognized as an artist and achieve a higher social standing.

In 1826, Lie took two major steps in his life. The first was signing a contract to become a *husmann*.<sup>8</sup> On January fourth, Lie entered into a lease for a small tract of uncultivated land adjoining the Sondre Lie farm. In exchange for use of the land, Aslak Olsen Lie was required to work for the owner of the property, Ole Olsen Brenden, for several weeks a year and pay him a number of bushels of produce. Lie built a cottage on the sight, put the land to plow, and called the site "Nerli."<sup>9</sup> Then on June 16th, he got married to Marit Knutsdatter Døven. Eight years his junior, Marit was the daughter of one of the wealthiest farm owners in Valdres. However, the Døven family had nearly twenty children and Marit was one of the youngest of them. Consequently the dowry she brought to the marriage was relatively modest compared to the size of her family's farm, but her status brought with her connections to future clients of Aslak's furniture.

The family spent ten years at Nerli, during which time Aslak Lie continued to receive a variety of commissions. He was employed by the Bagn church and its parishioners several more times, improving its balcony and adding decorative carvings to the organ and interior.<sup>10</sup> He also continued to innovate, coming up with new ways to use and modify traditional Norwegian folk motifs. He made frequent use of elaborate acanthus and floral carvings, which, while out of style in the urban areas, were still popular among rural communities in Norway. His secretaries

5. Bakken, 23.

6. Holzhueter, 8.

7. Bakken, 136.

8. Holzhueter, 10.

9. Bakken, 135.

10. Bakken, 39-43.

usually bear a signature design on the front of the drop-leaf. Comprising of two, highly stylized, carved rosettes, Lie seems to have taken inspiration from a rococo, 8-shaped pattern common on cupboards in the Valdres region.<sup>11</sup> Lie's design proved popular and he made a number of secretaries with variations on this design during his career in Norway. However, by the middle of the 1830s, he seems to have started feeling confined by the demand for the pattern. This is evidenced by the decline in frequency with which he signed these pieces.<sup>12</sup> In works he made for himself, Lie's work exhibits experimentation with different designs and motifs and particularly a growing interest in diamonds, or lozenges.

In 1836, the Lie family saved up enough money that they bought their own piece of land on the more affluent side of the Begna valley. The property, called "Motet," was situated near the main road between Bergen and Christiania and had a site for a mill.<sup>13</sup> Three children were born to Aslak and Merit while they lived at Nerli, two of whom survived. At Motet, they welcomed four more children, all of whom lived into adulthood. In 1837, Aslak built a large, new house on his new property. This house was a major departure from the typical homes in Valdres at the time. Rather than building it according to a rectangular floor-plan, Aslak Lie added an ell to the footprint. The exterior gallery, rather than extending to cover the whole façade of the house, only spanned a part of it. Lie's interest in diamonds is pervasive in the building; he rotated the square, gable windows onto their points, installed a diamond-shaped plaque with a blessing above the door, and added a diamond and rectangle wooden pattern to the ceiling of the parlor. In the large, center diamond of this pattern, Lie put up an iron plate with a hook, from which to hang a lamp. However, magnificent as this house and property was, the family seems to have faced difficulties. According to tradition, the Lie family faced such a shortage of food at one point that Aslak dismantled and sold the lock to the house for food.<sup>14</sup>

Emigration of people from Valdres to the United States started in the early 1840s. Norway's growing population, coupled with a weak domestic economy, fueled the mass migration of people out of Norway.<sup>15</sup> Letters, articles, and other testimonies from Norwegians who had gone to the United States circulated back within Norway, tempting others with the allure of economic prosperity and social advancement. Two men, Gul Guttormsen Ildjernstadhaugen and Stephen Olsen Kubakke immigrated from Valdres to Wisconsin in 1843 and 1846, respectively. Kubakke returned to Valdres two years later and set up a party for settlement. At the same time, an article by Thore Spaanem, published in the Norwegian newspaper *Nordlyset*, convinced Aslak Olsen Lie to emigrate himself.<sup>16</sup> Lie set out with forty other members of the Valdres community to establish a new settlement in Wisconsin. The party set out from Bergen aboard the barque *Augusta*, arriving in New York Harbor on June 29th, 1848. Lie turned fifty while aboard the *Augusta*, accompanied

11. Ibid, 25.

12. Ibid, 137.

13. Holzhueter, 12.

14. Bakken, 140.

15. Ibid, 140.

16. Terje Mikael Haste Joranger, *The Migration of Tradition? A Study on the Transfer of Traditions Tied to Intergenerational Land Transfers among Emigrants from the Valdres region, Norway to the Upper Midwest and their Descendants for Three Generations, 1850-1980* (Oslo: University of Oslo, 2008), 188.

by his wife, Marit, and all six of their children: Ingrid (21), Marit Oline (17), Ole (13), Knut (11), Halvor (6), and Ole (3).<sup>17</sup> Also in the group were Aslak's childless brother and sister-in-law, Ole Olsen Lie and Anne Olsdatter, as well as both Ingrid and Marit Oline's future husbands.

From New York, the party proceeded to Milwaukee, and finally to the Blue Mounds region of southern Wisconsin. Here the group settled in the township of Springdale, within Dane County. This original group, with Lie at its center, established the foundation upon which a successive chain of immigration of Norwegians from the Valdres region to the Blue Mounds was based. Here, as in Norway, Lie pursued his cabinetry with the goal of achieving greater artistic expression and economic security.

### **The Thompson Family Furniture**

The stepback cupboard in the Mount Horeb Historical Society's collection was passed down through the Skindrud-Thompson family.<sup>18</sup> The cupboard is one of a number of Lie pieces that the family owned. Many of these other pieces are also in the Historical Society's possession and include a secretary, drop-leaf table, another cupboard, and an Empire-style sofa.<sup>19</sup> Lie originally made the secretary for his eldest son, Ole.<sup>20</sup> Lie often gave pieces like this as wedding presents, as he did with his other sons, Halvor, for whom he made a parquet secretary, and Knut, whom he gave a corner cupboard with a rounded front.<sup>21</sup> Based on this, it is probable that Aslak Lie made this secretary as a wedding gift to Ole and his bride, Dordei Guttenborg, which would place the date of the object to 1855.<sup>22</sup> Less than a year into their marriage, however, Ole died of disease, though not before the couple conceived a son. Dordei remarried in 1858 to Eric Skinrud. Lie likely produced the other aforementioned pieces for Dordei and Eric.<sup>23</sup> From them, the furniture passed to a daughter, who married into the Thompson family, which is how the pieces ended up in the Thompson farmhouse, where they were when the Mount Horeb Historical Society acquired them.

According to the descendants who owned the pieces, the stepback cupboard was jointly built by Aslak Olsen Lie and Eric Skinrud.<sup>24</sup> However, there are no other works attributed to Skinrud, nor is there any indication that he was otherwise engaged in cabinetmaking. Without other known works to compare the cupboard to, it is very difficult to say for certain whether he did have a hand in making it. The only induction that two people may have been involved in making the piece is

17. Bakken, 140.

18. Cupboard, Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database, last modified March 19, 2008, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/wda/id/546/rec/5>.

19. Desk and bookcase, Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database, last modified March 19, 2008, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/wda/id/542/rec/14>. Table, Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database, last modified July 22, 2007, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/wda/id/249/rec/7>. Cupboard, Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database, last modified March 19, 2008, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/wda/id/223/rec/6>. Bakken, 100.

20. Bakken, 109. John Holzhueter, interview with the author, December 2, 2016.

21. Halvor A. Lee family negatives, circa 1865-1935, folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives. Bakken, 111.

22. Amelia I. J. Pope, *Dentennial History Township of Springdale, Dane County, Wisconsin* (Madison: 1948), 14.

23. John Holzhueter, interview with the author, December 2, 2016.

24. *Ibid.*

that the back boards are joined using two different methods. One of the joints fits together in a tongue and groove. The other joint is a half lap. The existence of two types of joints like this does not prove that two people worked on the piece, but it implies it suggests that there may be something to the family's story.

There is an alternative explanation for the story as well, which is that Eric Skinrud repaired the cupboard and this was misremembered in his family as him having been involved with building it originally. Support for this possibility is that the back does show signs suggestive of repair. There are three boards that are awkwardly placed, extending only part way up the cupboard and cutting across part of another board. These pieces are narrower, lighter, and have a smoother surface than the other boards that make up the back. These traits generally imply that a piece of wood is not as old as the rest of the piece. Of course, it is also possible that Skinrud both helped Lie make the cupboard and later repaired it. In any case, however, all aspects of the cupboard point to Aslak Lie having been primarily responsible for its form and construction.

### **The Mount Horeb Stepbak Cupboard and Immigrant Form**

With a career that lasted roughly sixty years, Aslak Olsen Lie produced a sizable body of works over the course of his lifetime. Because he spent roughly thirty years of that career on either side of the Atlantic, comparing Lie's works from Norway and Wisconsin illustrates how his style was changed and transformed as part of the process of acculturating to American society. Looking at a selection of the furniture Lie made in America reveals that his works fall on a spectrum of Norwegian and American styles. Rather than progressing according to a linear timeline on which his output becomes more and more American, Lie moved between styles regularly depending upon what the circumstances called for.

A cupboard Aslak Lie made for John and Birthe Engesæthe in 1870 is a prime example of one of his Norwegian pieces.<sup>25</sup> The cupboard is a typical form found in Norway with angled corners on the base, similar to a trapezoid, and a deep hutch and a rectangular top. Though formalistically similar to the cupboards he made earlier while in Valdres, Lie brought the form into a more updated style with a flat top and decoration with dominant use of straight lines. The drawers are red with painted versions of his signature diamond pattern. Still, within the rectangular fields in the cupboard doors, Lie has decorated the piece with rose painting. Lie's dominant red and blue paint also speak to traditional Norwegian norms.

In contrast, a chest of drawers Lie made sometime after 1878 illustrates his ability to work in an American mode. The turned feet and corner posts, double drawers on the top row, as well as the proportions, speak to the Sheraton influence on the piece. Meanwhile, the alternating bands of reeding on the corner pillars, saw-tooth frieze, and curved handles are all elements Lie has drawn from the Egyptian Revival. Made primarily of walnut, the color of the wood itself is meant to serve as decoration. This is something Lie rarely did with his Norwegian pieces, but is common in American furniture. Within this piece, Lie's personal voice remains present, demonstrated by the large raised diamonds on either side of the piece as well as his use of secret compartments.

Living within a mixed Norwegian and American community, Lie cultivated the ability to alternate between styles as a means of appealing to consumers' tastes. In an advertisement Lie put out in a local newspaper in 1870, he promoted himself on his ability to make furniture in both American

25. Bakken, 117.

and European fashions.<sup>26</sup> In this flexibility, Aslak Lie displayed what might be termed artistic code switching wherein he was able to shift from one vocabulary to another depending on his situation. Just as rural tastes limited him in Valdres, the commercial considerations of what the Springdale community wanted shaped Lie's work in America. Beyond the constraints of his customers' ethnicity and tastes, Lie also found himself constrained economically by what his customers could afford.<sup>27</sup> Where Lie had hoped his customers in America would have allowed him to innovate on luxury pieces, he more often found himself making simple, unadorned furniture.

Another process was happening in Lie's work between these two styles – the synthesizing of the two influences to create a distinctly Norwegian-American style of furniture. The majority of Lie's work in Wisconsin shows some degree of this hybridization. Here, too, Lie may have been responding to the gradual acculturation of Springdale's Norwegian immigrants into American society. However, the presence of this hybridization in pieces Lie made for his own family, as well as other evidence of Lie's sense of American identity, suggest a personal transformation was taking place. The stepback cupboard that Lie made for the Skindrud family is one example of this both societal and personal transformation.

The overall form of the Mount Horeb stepback cupboard is American in character. At 75 inches tall, the stepback at the waist is thirty-seven inches off the ground. The lower portion of the case is nineteen and a half inches deep, while the upper portion is eleven and three-eighths inches deep. The entire cupboard is forty-five and three-fourths inches wide. The bottom of the cupboard opens with two frame and panel doors. The twin doors of the upper casement, on the other hand, are glazed, each one comprised of six square panes divided into two columns and three rows. Simple bands of moulding with both edges rounded run around the top and waist of the piece. A wider compound moulding runs about the base. The doors of the bottom panels include Lie's signature diamond pattern, an ornamentation that bridges American and Norwegian styles.

The stepback cupboard is a common American form. They appear in America in the 17th century and remained common up into the 20th century. The glazed upper doors originated in the 18th century as a way for the well-to-do to display their china. The proportions of the Mount Horeb stepback cupboard reflect common American conventions with the waist at or below half the total height of the cupboard. The rectangular base is also American and counterpoised with both the angular bases of the Engesæthe cupboard as well as other cupboards Lie made in Norway.

While cupboards with deeper lower casements and shallower upper casements are found in Norwegian design, those examples differ from the Mount Horeb stepback. On the Engesæthe and Valdres cupboards Lie made, the base juts out by virtue of the angled sides.<sup>28</sup> Likewise in examples in that style, a hutch separating the lower and upper cabinets is ubiquitous. Because of the inward angle of the base, frequently the lower cabinet has a single, panel door. Norwegian cupboard also often have drawers between the lower cabinet and hutch.

Though the casework conforms to American sensibilities, Lie ornamented the cupboard with

26. Letter, Brian J. Bigler to Marion Nelson, January 25, 1999, Aslak Olsen Lie Folder, Mount Horeb Historical Society Archives.

27. Bakken, 142.

28. Bakken, 57, 117.

a number of Norwegian elements. The curved wings on either side of the stepped shelf harken to elements found in traditional Norwegian cupboards. The S-shaped slope and bump-shape of the wings of the stepback cupboard is nearly the same progression of curves that frame the sides of the hutch on the Engesæthe cupboard. To accommodate the wings, Lie diverged from the construction of an American stepback where the sides are composed of two boards; one the width of the top cupboard extending the entire height of the piece, and the other running from the base to the step only as wide as the base comes forward. Lie widened the taller side piece so he could cut out the wing and enclose part of the step. That is to say, the shorter board is narrower and emerges above the step to form the bump in the wing.

Lie also eschews the use of feet as is common on American stepback cupboards. Instead the base rests wholly on the floor, as is the norm for Norwegian cupboards. Likewise, the original color scheme for the Mount Horeb cupboard was red outside while the interiors and top of the step are painted blue. This, again, appeals more to Norwegian tastes than to American.

While Wisconsin afforded Lie fewer opportunities for extravagant artisanship than he had hoped, he was nevertheless able to experiment and push boundaries in new ways. The process of stylistic hybridization was itself a creative action. Lie created new designs out of elements he knew from both Norway and America. He was still able to show creative self-expression through his cabinetry. While not as elaborate or fine as the secretaries Lie made in Valdres, the Mount Horeb stepback cupboard is an example of individual artistic growth. Lie took joy in interpreting his customers' and his relations' tastes and ethnic identities to determine what balance of influence he should use in specific pieces.

### **Technique and Tradition**

In form and style, Aslak Olsen Lie's post-immigration works display a great variation as he actively interpreted his neighbors' and his own ethnic identity. At a more structured level, however, Lie's furniture retained a more consistently Norwegian character. The techniques and habits that Aslak Lie pick up as a young man in Norway stayed with him for his entire life and were present in his pieces regardless of style.

Lie's dovetails are illustrative of both the Norwegian tradition he worked in as well as his own unique idiosyncrasies. Lie made his pins and tails to be roughly equal in size. He tended to cut the two at a roughly twenty degree angle. However, on smaller drawers, such as those that made up the insides of drop-leaf desks, Lie would cut one side of a tail at an angle, while the other he cut straight. What distinguished his dovetails was his use of wedges. After fitting pins and tails, Lie would take a chisel and knock two notches in the end grain of the pins. He made each of these notches at an angle parallel to the side of the pin it was nearest to. Then he hammered a small wedge into the notches, firming the faces of the pins up to the tails and making the joint fast. Incredibly, Lie used this technique even on half-blind dovetails.

The technique of using wedges to fasten dovetails instead of glue is found in cabinetry traditions of Germany and Norway, and thus shows up in some American furniture from Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.<sup>29</sup> However, it is alien to the Anglo-American craftsman. Most craftsmen using this method only use a single wedge in each pin. Lie's double wedges at angle were an artistic flair

29. "Wedged Dovetails," *millcreek woodworking*, August 9, 2012, <https://millcreek.wordpress.com/2012/08/09/wedged-dovetails/>.

all his own. Lie used this technique regularly; it can be found on the carcass of the Mount Horeb stepback cupboard and drawers of the secretary he made for his son, Ole. Significantly, it even shows up on the late-career, Egyptian Revival chest of drawers.

Through training and practice, the techniques that an artisan such as Lie used became habit.<sup>30</sup> As they worked, they would follow the steps that come naturally to them through muscle memory. Thus, even while the immigrant Lie used his head to innovate and alternate styles, his body followed the same, distinctly Norwegian, patterns of work that he had done for decades. This, too, then was an expression of ethnic identity and one that remained largely unchanged even as other parts of Lie's work became Americanized.

### **Conclusion**

Consideration of the life and work of Aslak Lie shows that on an aesthetic level he actively shapes his identity as a Norwegian-American craftsman, but in his techniques he retains his Norwegian identity. As a case study, Aslak Lie demonstrates how the process of acculturation and hybridization among first generation immigrants is an active process. Lie's consciously shaped and used ethnic character to navigate his new market. By so doing, he pushed his own artistic boundaries, as well as both Norwegian and American furniture to new forms. Simultaneously, Lie's retention of his native construction traditions shows ethnicity to work on many levels, not all of which are equally subject to change in a new environment. Habitualized practices, such as those that make up the individual actions involved in making, are deeply in-grained within the individual.

Lie is one example of the immigrant experience. Immigration is ripe for analysis with a Material Culture approach because it reflects ethnic identity of the maker. Considering the work of someone like Lie is a way of understanding how he navigated the immigrant experience in 19th century rural America.

Going forward, the example of Lie's retention of culturally-bound techniques raises questions about the ability of such practices to be transmitted and continued by successive generations within immigrant communities. Whether they survive, mutate, or disappear is a question about the long-term durability of distinct ethnic identity. Their study also can inform how new practices are introduced, disseminated, and assimilated by the dominant culture. Ultimately, work identifying and tracking individual Norwegian artisans such as Aslak Lie is only in its infancy. Further investigation is required to determine whether the example of Aslak Lie is typical of the immigrant artisan or whether his own artistic attitudes and circumstances make him unique. In any case, the quality and character of Lie's production warrant study and analysis in their own right.

30. Robert Tarule, *The Artisan of Ipswich: Craftsmanship and Community in Colonial New England* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 142.

# 60. Unraveling the Past: The Resonance of Ellen Donald Sweet's Mid-Nineteenth Century Quilt

BY ERIN GREEN

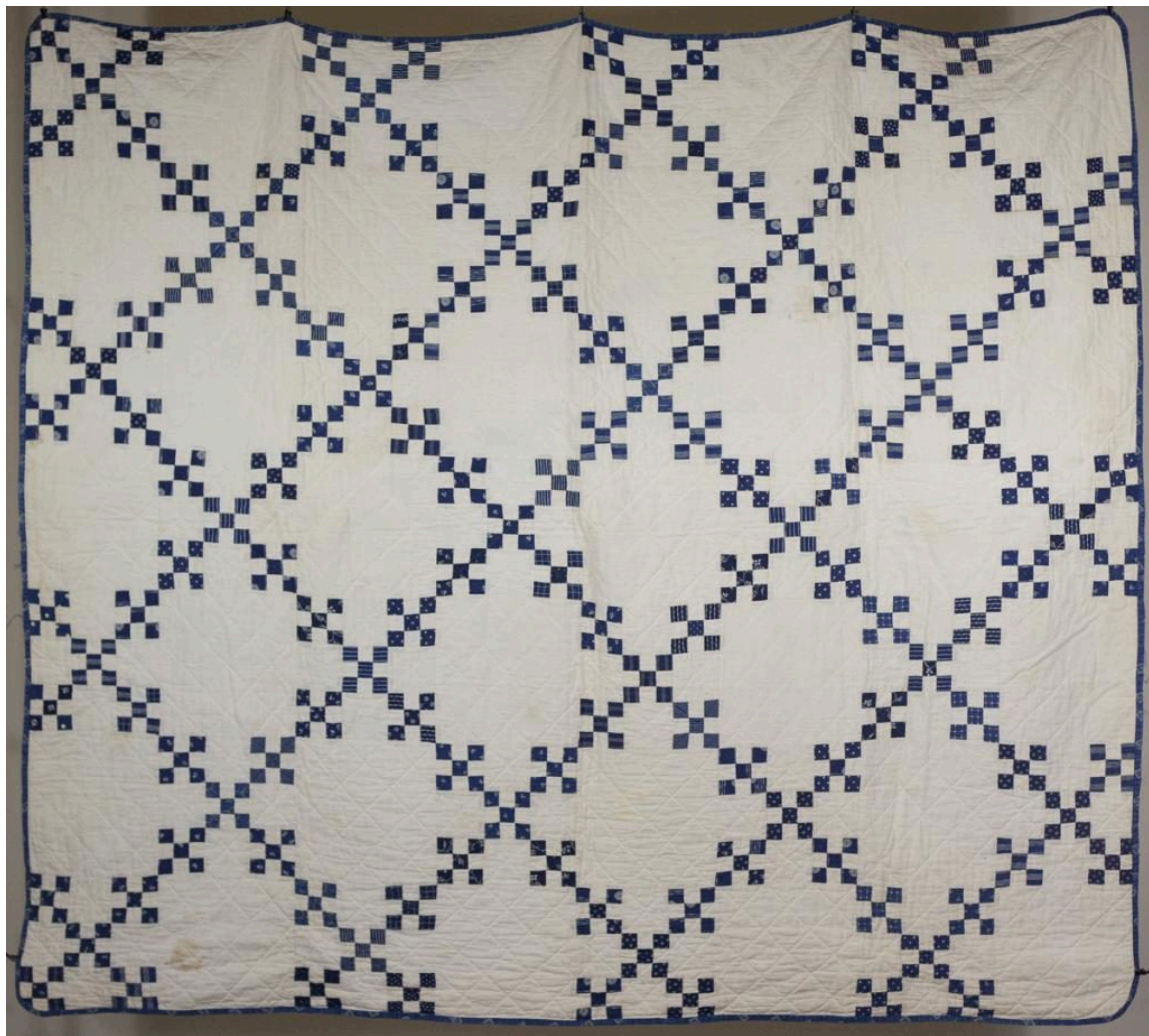


Figure 2.  
Ellen  
Donald  
Sweet  
Irish Chain  
Quilt  
1875

A beautifully preserved antique American quilt, completed in 1875, is kept in the Milwaukee Art Museum's decorative arts collection (figure 1). Simply titled the "Star of Bethlehem" Quilt, it displays an abundance of color, pattern and texture. Upon viewing it, one cannot help but admire the precision, technique and time that clearly went into its making; the star, itself, may evoke a spiritual response. It is antique quilts such as this one that tend to be kept in present-day museum collections. Sometimes referred to as "fabric paintings," quilts are often idealized as



crafts of the past. Quilts made throughout the nineteenth century displayed wild patterns, marked important events or showed political support, particularly during the Civil War, but what is to be done with the quilts that were not intended to be artworks or symbolic mediums? What can purely functional antique quilts offer contemporary viewers if not awe-inspiring aesthetics?

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Figure 1.  
Milwaukee Art Museum  
Star of Bethlehem Quilt  
ca. 1875

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At the Mt. Horeb Historical Society, an “Irish Chain” quilt (figure 2) lays folded in a cardboard box, hidden from visitors of the museum unless purposefully sought out. The quilt was completed in 1865 by then sixteen-year-old Ellen Sweet in Springdale, Wisconsin. It is very clear that Ellen was not trying to create a unique “fabric painting” in her stitches, but rather produced a quilt that was simply meant to keep one warm and be used practically by her own family. As will be discovered, Ellen was quite limited when it came to her individual creativity due to her geographic location, skill level, social roles and the larger trends and technological innovations available to her in the pioneer days of America. However, though certainly not to be valued for its “wonder,” Ellen’s quilt can and should be valued for its cultural “resonance.” The material details of this quilt speak to Ellen’s specific cultural situation and mark a pivotal point of transition, for Ellen herself and for America at large.

The foundation of this argument builds upon pre-existing theories put forth by literary critic Stephen Greenblatt and anthropologist Tim Ingold. It is Greenblatt who initially proposed the terms “wonder” and “resonance” to describe the effects of museum objects on contemporary viewers. Wondrous objects are those like the quilt at the Milwaukee Art Museum; they draw viewers by their beauty or distinctive features.<sup>1</sup> Objects of resonance, in contrast, have the power to extend beyond pure aesthetics and speak to larger cultural patterns. Similarly, Tim Ingold emphasizes a connection between specifically handcrafted items and culture; he explains that such items are not created as individually conceived ideas, but rather “grow from a mutual involvement of people and materials in an environment.”<sup>2</sup> Although Ingold uses the example of weaving a basket, his ideas can easily be applied to a number of handcrafts. Ellen’s quilt serves as a perfect example for these theories; in its own time, the quilt was molded entirely by its culture, but now it serves as a reflection of that culture.

1. Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 1.
2. Tim Ingold, “On Weaving a Basket,” in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 89.

Little beyond major life events and familial relations are recorded about Ellen Sweet (figure 3). In 1855, when Ellen was six years old, her family of nine moved to Springdale, Wisconsin from Chautauqua County, New York; they had obtained their land prior to the move in 1854.<sup>3</sup> Wisconsin had become an official territory in 1836, increasingly drawing immigrants and settlers to its growing communities for decades after. From 1836 to 1850, Wisconsin's population grew from 11,000 people to over 300,000. Many were interested in the potential industrial and commercial use of Lake Michigan's harbors, in addition to the availability of land. In the early 1850s, the Wisconsin Commission of Emigration distributed pamphlets and published newspaper advertisements in Europe, as well as in cities along America's east coast, to encourage settlement in Wisconsin.<sup>4</sup> Although aimed at Europeans then arriving in America, perhaps Ellen's family saw one such advertisement and sought the better life that Wisconsin promised. Taking a boat from Buffalo to Milwaukee, and then traveling to Springdale by wagon, the Sweet family began their life in Wisconsin, which would continue for generations.<sup>5</sup>

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Figure 3.  
Photograph of Ellen Donald Sweet  
ca. 1867-1871

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The Sweet family property in Springdale was known as “the Ashmore place.”<sup>6</sup> As pioneers, they were largely self-sufficient; they made their own clothes and raised their own food. It was in Springdale that Ellen pieced her quilt, almost certainly to be used by her family in their own home. Judging by the size of the quilt, about 75 inches long by 65 inches wide, it was likely made to rest atop a bed of the period; perhaps this would have been similar to the nineteenth century “rope beds” that the Mt. Horeb Historical Society now houses. Rope beds were made by constructing a frame, then using a lattice of thick rope across the central space to support a mattress, which was often made of straw (figure 4).<sup>7</sup> In a letter from the mid-1850s, a Norwegian Pastor living in Wisconsin wrote, “A quilt on a straw mattress to lie on and a similar quilt for covering—usually a sheet, but sometimes not – are what the host offers to keep you warm.”<sup>8</sup>

3. James D. Woodburn Sr., "Intro," Mt. Horeb Historical Society, 9.

4. "19th Century Immigration," Wisconsin Historical Society, accessed April 11, 2016, [http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-018/?action=more\\_essay](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-018/?action=more_essay).

5. "The Sweet Family," Donald Park Website, accessed March 28, 2016, <http://donaldpark.org/pdf/historyDonaldPark2.pdf>.

6. Woodburn Sr., 9.

7. "Bed," Object Description, Old World Wisconsin (Wisconsin Historical Society), 2009, Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database (OW1976.130).

8. "Dane County Historic Quilts: Passing Through..." Exhibit, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, June–August 1983.

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Figure 4.  
Rope Bed  
Nineteenth Century

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The “host,” mentioned in the quote by the Norwegian pastor, was undoubtedly the woman of the household. As Helen Sheumaker points out in her book, *Love Entwined*, it was men who built and supported a house, but women who made that house a home; a beautiful and comfortable place to live.<sup>9</sup> Making this quilt at sixteen years old, Ellen would have been preparing herself for womanhood; just three years after completing her quilt, she married John Donald, a local farmer, and started her own family.<sup>10</sup> The role of wife and eventual mother required Ellen to learn basic domestic tasks in this time period. As a grown woman, she would be expected to cook, keep the home clean and take care of her own children someday. Domestic craftwork, including quilt-making, was also under the woman’s jurisdiction. Ellen would have learned these tasks from her mother in a process that Rozsika Parker, in her book *The Subversive Stitch*, describes as “transmitting feminine behaviour.”<sup>11</sup> Domestic work defined women’s identities and societal roles; it was a matter of social obligation and expectation. Delma Sweet, Ellen’s granddaughter who eventually received the quilt, notes this role for women in the quote that she left the Historical Society (see cover page): “...every girl had to piece a quilt.” Ellen’s mother, Sally Clark Sweet, left behind evidence of her own quilting activities from around this same time; her “Rose Wreath” appliqué quilt from 1855 (figure 5) displays her superior skill that came with years of practice. Because Ellen was still learning, her quilt does not display the same level of aesthetic quality and technical aptitude as her mother’s, but both certainly attest to this tradition of female domestic education and women’s roles in the home.

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Figure 5.  
Sally Clark Sweet  
Quilt  
1855

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#### Details in the Fabric: Purchase, Materiality and Color

As already discussed, Ellen’s quilt can certainly be seen as a direct result of her nineteenth century feminine education, but its purchase and materiality reflect its chosen function as a utility quilt. Further, the popularity and availability of the specific fabrics and dyes were essentially determined by larger trends and developments in America’s textile industry at the time.

It would perhaps be more pleasant to think of Ellen choosing the fabric for her quilt because special meanings were fixed into the particular colors and textiles. In reality, Ellen would have

9. Helen Sheumaker, “Fancies of the Heart,” in *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 110-111.

10. Woodburn Sr., 14.

11. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 6-7.

been limited in her choice of fabric and color, making her decision actually quite simple. No general stores appear to have been established in Springdale when Ellen was working on her quilt, but nearby Mt. Vernon had a general store opened as early as 1848.<sup>12</sup> Ellen's family likely purchased the fabric she used from this store, having been offered a narrow selection to choose from. A lack of textile mills in the area meant that textiles had to be brought in from larger cities. The store merchant dictated what fabrics would be ordered and sold in the store, but what was being made by the textile mills elsewhere was controlled by popular trends and the available technology.<sup>13</sup>

Ellen's use of cotton speaks to newer developments in American fabric production at the time. Since Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793, cotton had become a widely available and inexpensive fabric in America. Before 1800, it was uncommon to make quilts entirely out of cotton simply because the fabric was hard to come by and more expensive. Not only favored for its reasonable price, cotton, to this day, is loved for its comfortable texture, ease of washing and overall versatility.<sup>14</sup> Ellen's family could have used their purchased cotton for not only quilt-making, but to craft sheets, coverlets, tablecloths, clothing and other items, as well.

Calico, which Ellen used for the quilt's binding or narrow outer edge, as well as various pieces within the quilt, is made from cotton that is not bleached or fully processed. As a plain-woven fabric, one can visibly see the criss-cross pattern of the threads. More generally, "calico" has come to identify fabrics that display a consistently repeated pattern across its surface.<sup>15</sup> On Ellen's quilt, one can see tiny white motifs that decorate the indigo pieces, varying from florals to stripes and polka dots. In the mid-1800s, Calico was very inexpensive; by 1872, it is recorded to have been only four cents per yard.<sup>16</sup> The use of cheaper fabric may have been due to the Sweet family's choice to be more economically conservative, but the eventual use of the quilt was also a likely factor. Quilt scholar Barbara Brackman explains that "Calicoes with a low thread count, a limited range of colors and fewer details in the prints were the staple prints bought for everyday clothing and everyday quilts."<sup>17</sup>

To give the calico pieces their deep blue color, the fabric had been dyed in a factory prior to being sold. The likelihood of Ellen, her mother, or her sisters dying the fabric themselves is very slim as "printing fabric was never a widely practiced home craft in this country."<sup>18</sup> Aniline dyes, or synthetic dyes, which would greatly expand the range of colors that could be created, were just starting to be developed around this time. Because those had not yet become widely available to

12. Mt. Horeb Historical Society Staff, March 28, 2016.

13. J. Giannetta, "The General Store in a Pioneer Community," last modified in 2011, <http://www.aitc.sk.ca/saskschools/genstore.html>.

14. Barbara Brackman, *Clues in the Calico: A Guide to Identifying and Dating Antique Quilts* (Virginia: EPM, 1989), 48-49.

15. Elizabeth Wells Robertson, *American Quilts* (New York: Studio, 1948), 32.

16. Brackman, 50.

17. *Ibid.*, 50.

18. *Ibid.*, 57.

the American market, fabrics were restricted to using dyes produced from insects, vegetables and minerals.<sup>19</sup> As a vegetable dye, Indigo dates back to early civilization, but has remained popular throughout time. Described as “colorfast,” Indigo dye is known for its ability to withstand fading, even when washed multiple times.<sup>20</sup> The choice in color and fabric indicate that this quilt was meant to last a long time under continual use.

#### Making: The Pattern and Process

In its overall simplicity, Ellen’s pattern for her quilt further displays its practical purpose, while concurrently demonstrating a popular style for its time. However, its ease of construction, along with the smallest of imperfections in measurements and straight sewing, attest to the fact that Ellen was still in a state of learning. As mentioned previously, Ellen’s mother, with her years of practice and experience, would have been instructing Ellen on increasingly difficult techniques as she moved towards womanhood.

The pattern Ellen followed to design her quilt is commonly called the “Single Irish Chain.” The identifying feature of this pattern is the connection of smaller squares to create diagonal lines across the quilt, forming a large checkered pattern. Interestingly, recent scholarship has found no connection between Ireland and this particular pattern, despite its name.<sup>21</sup> Stella Rubin, an antique quilt expert, theorizes that the Irish Chain might have been one of the earliest quilt patterns used in the United States due to “the dynamism of its simple geometry and relative ease of assembly.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Barbara Brackman has dated the naming of this pattern to the early nineteenth century, explaining the possibility of it stemming from a previously established weaving pattern.<sup>23</sup> Patterns, in general, were not formally published until the late nineteenth century, so dating and proper attribution are difficult. Ellen had likely learned this pattern from her mother, who had also learned it from her own mother or from a friend.<sup>24</sup> With many examples surviving today, it is clear that this pattern was used often throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but most seem to have made double or triple Irish Chains; this simply involved adding rows along the initial diagonals.

As Rubin noted, the construction of Ellen’s quilt was not extremely difficult, compared to other patterns of the time period, and consisted of a relatively simple process. The entire quilt is made up of larger squares that were sewn together by machine; each of those squares is called a block. To create the Single Irish Chain pattern, Ellen alternated between pieced blocks and plain white

19. *Ibid.*, 55.

20. *Ibid.*, 67.

21. Stella Rubin, *Treasure or Not? How to Compare & Value American Quilts* (London: Octopus, 2001), 114.

22. *Ibid.*, 114.

23. Brackman, 168.

24. Rubin, 23.

ones.<sup>25</sup> Piecing involves joining fabric together by a single seam;<sup>26</sup> though a machine was used for the joining of the larger blocks, Ellen pieced the smaller squares by hand, evident in the wider distance between stitches. Each pieced block, in this particular case, is made up of nine smaller squares, set in rows of three, and alternates between indigo and white squares. The use of nine-square blocks is more formally called the “Nine Patch.” Children who were just learning to make quilts often used the Nine Patch across entire quilts to learn how to piece. Its simplicity also made it a favorite pattern for quilts that were wholly utilitarian in function.<sup>27</sup> As a young woman, with probably years of quilt-making lessons, Ellen’s design goes beyond the basic Nine Patch to show her increased skill level. In addition to the formation of the Irish Chain pattern, her design includes a framing edge of calico binding and an “allover diamond pattern,” stitched by hand, to join the top, middle, or batting, and bottom layers.<sup>28</sup>

### The Sewing Machine: A Vehicle of Change

Ellen’s partial use of a sewing machine is significant because its recent invention not only changed the way women were sewing; it caused changes in women’s social lives, as well. Sewing machines, in general, have a complicated history due to the fact that many past figures around the world invented similar models, but most early designs did not peak public interest or were never patented. It is difficult to firmly declare a single inventor of the modern sewing machine. In America, a man named Walter Hunt created a sewing machine in the early 1830s that produced a “lock stitch,” clearly differentiating its work from hand-stitching. Never patenting his design, Hunt left Elias Howe able to patent his slightly “more sophisticated model”<sup>29</sup> in the 1840s, but he had trouble marketing to the public. To really get the American public interested in purchasing sewing machines, it took improvements by Isaac Singer in both design and marketing. Adding a foot pedal and a vertical needle, Singer’s first machines were listed at a costly five hundred dollars each. To reach middle class audiences, Singer devised a payment plan, and soon demand itself was enough to lower the prices. By 1860, each Singer sewing machine could be bought for seventy-five dollars, and by 1871, they were sold for as low as twenty-five dollars. In a mere twenty year span, the sewing machine became a common household item.

The invention of the sewing machine stands at a pivotal point in American society. After 1865, urbanization and industrialization expanded rapidly across the country. In Ellen’s case, factory-produced and dyed fabric was already common, but more factories and new developments in technology brought upon even cheaper prices and the availability of a variety of colors and patterns. Quilts that continued to be made at home with a sewing machine became more creative

25. “Quilt,” Object Description, Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society, 2007, Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database (MH043a).

26. Robertson, 51.

27. Brackman, 171.

28. “Quilt,” (MH043a).

29. Brackman, 100.

and experimental in design, leading to what is now called the “design revolution” in American quilt-making in the nineteenth century and the publishing of patterns in women’s books and magazines.<sup>30</sup> However, near the end of the century, widespread industrialization, the ability to purchase ready-made goods or simply use home technology to make items more quickly, gave women more free time and allowed them to pursue activities outside of the domestic sphere. Many women got jobs, whether in factories, schools or offices, and began to earn their own income.<sup>31</sup> Eventually, women would no longer be solely defined by their domestic roles and handcrafts. Ellen, herself, is known to have become involved in a number of community groups as she grew older, including the Summit Chapter of the Eastern Star, the Baptist Aid Society in Mt. Vernon and the Methodist Aid Society in Mt. Horeb.<sup>32</sup> The recording of Ellen’s participation in these groups testifies to this shift in culture. Not only is Ellen remembered as a loving wife and mother, but as an active member in her community.

### The Beauty of “Between”

Too frequently donated to and exhibited in museums are only the quilts that were made to mark important events: a marriage, a birth, a community fundraiser or the onset of a war. Other quilts exhibited tend to be those with very difficult and visually impressive patterns; they display the height of design from each era. While those quilts are beautiful to look at and perhaps come with an emotionally touching story, they limit one’s contemporary understanding of the tradition of quilt-making. Quilt-making history is not about jumping from one perfect design to the next, but rather it is marked by a number of transitions, or “between” periods. Many quilts, like Ellen’s, were made specifically to be used on the ordinary days lived between special events. Young girls who progressively learned new techniques and patterns were slowly transitioning to womanhood. The continued invention of new patterns, dyes, fabrics and ways of making demonstrated a transition in American culture from handmade to industrial, and even the eventual transition from female domesticity to roles outside of the home. Quilt-making, itself, is about a process or transition, a piecing together of separate blocks to create a larger, connected entity. Why, then, are quilts of “transition,” those created by less experienced makers or for everyday use, so easily ignored by contemporary viewers? Perhaps value is more evident in pieces of “wonder,” but it can be argued that there is still great value in quilts like Ellen’s; they remind one of the significance in transitional periods. The slight imperfections of her quilt and its simplicity of design, mixed with a clear sense of precision and accuracy, exhibit Ellen’s learning process in tangible form. Its status as beyond beginner level, but not yet perfectly executed quilt, clearly attests to the long tradition of passing on domestic education from mother to daughter. Also, Ellen’s use of both hand-piecing and sewing machine reflects America’s cultural situation at that time; the handmade, pioneer present was being tightly held onto, but one could feel the push of a more industrial

30. Ellen Kort, *Wisconsin Quilts: Stories in the Stitches* (Virginia: Howell, 2001), 59.

31. *Ibid.*, 59.

32. Woodburn Sr., 15.

society inching closer. Ellen's quilt may not mark a special event or display fantastic designs, but it holds a deep resonance for the Wisconsin pioneer culture that it sprung out of.

Returning to the theoretical basis of this analysis, one can now see what Ingold meant when he described crafts as being created through the intermingling of people and materials in specific environments. Certainly, Ellen's quilt is a direct product of Ellen, her family, her geographic location and nineteenth century American society, in general. It is because of this strong connection to its own culture that, according to Greenblatt, it has a resonant power within contemporary museum collections. Ellen's quilt forces one to think deeper, beyond formal aesthetics, about a specific cultural setting and that is what makes it so valuable for contemporary viewers.

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# 6I. The Sweet Family Dulcimer - Object Study

BY SARA SKINNER



**Hammered Dulcimer**  
American  
Orrin Sweet  
1857-1858  
Wood, metal  
Gift of Deln  
Donald  
Woodburn  
Estate  
MHAHS  
2002.001.01

## Identification

The object that we are looking at is a hammered dulcimer- a musical instrument with ties back to biblical times. There are two types of dulcimers prevalent in America, similar only in their names. They have extremely different body shapes and are thus played differently. The Appalachian dulcimer is played like a banjo by fretting the strings, while the hammered dulcimer is closely related to the piano and relies on strings tuned to different pitches and hit with mallets. For the purpose of this study, we shall only be referring to the hammered dulcimer, and thus “dulcimer” herein shall be equated with “hammered dulcimer.” This hammered dulcimer is crafted out of walnut wood from Wisconsin, handmade by a man named Orrin Sweet in 1857. The dimensions of the dulcimer are 4 inches in height, 39 inches in width, and 15 inches in depth. The body shape is a rectangle with two heart shaped holes cut into the soundboard. The way that the dulcimer was designed is in a popular style from the mid-19th century that was widely released by companies in Chautauqua County, New York. This dulcimer has 11 treble courses, each with 4 strings, and 7 bass courses with 2 strings a piece.

An American dulcimer usually has a rectangular or trapezoidal body, made out of various kinds of wood depending on the region. The instrument has a variety of strings which are

arranged in groups called “courses.” Courses are groups of strings that would be tuned to the same pitch. Dulcimers usually have both treble and bass sets of courses organized within the circle of fifths pattern. Average instruments have around 60 strings stretched over the bridges on the soundboard. The bridges are a strip of hardwood about an inch high that give the strings different heights- the shorter strings have higher pitches and lay on top of the treble bridge while the bass courses pass through holes carved in the treble bridge and bass bridge, having longer strings to create a deeper sound. To play the instrument, you strike the strings with hammers, usually made of leather, at different places on the strings to create different notes.

The modes in which the dulcimer was historically played would vary across America. Based on which region you lived in, styles from different countries would come into contact with each other. States like New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Minnesota experienced the greatest popularity in dulcimer playing initially, however, the dulcimer eventually spread to most parts of the United States. Due to the fact that dulcimer music was mostly played by ear and had no standardized style, regional playing styles emerged. Great Lakes players played in an improvisational style known as “chording” that was spread by word of mouth. Despite taking a back seat to the fiddle and other dance instruments, the dulcimer became the accompaniment of choice among the pioneers of Wisconsin in the 19th century.

#### Evaluation

The history of the dulcimer is seen as coming from Persia and brought to Europe by the Moors and returning Crusaders between 900 and 1200 BC. Instruments resembling the dulcimer have been recorded all the way back to Biblical times- much of the records prevalent in artworks of the time. The original version of the dulcimer was known as a psaltery, and was portrayed as a trapezoidal instrument held close to the body, often played by celestial beings. Historian Paul Gifford, however, argues that the dulcimer was developed independently in Europe, more specifically in Western European countries like Germany. The German “hackbrett” was a slightly altered version of the dulcimer that was commonly used in dances and was extremely popular with a group of Germans who had moved to Russia, known as the Volga Germans, many of which would later migrate to America.

After the establishment of the dulcimer in Europe, it became increasingly used by harpsicord players that were drawn to the more versatile sounds the dulcimer produced. It was the prevalent usage of the dulcimer in dances and gatherings of the time that brought about the creation of the pianoforte by Italian Bartolemeo Cristofori. By adding keys to the shape and design of the dulcimer, the pianoforte would emit similar sounds to the dulcimer and eventually come to replace the dulcimer in popular music.

The first dulcimer came to America in the 1700s and was used as a domestic instrument. The migratory patterns of many German, English, and Dutch immigrants brought people, as well as the dulcimer, to the early colonies of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New York. In its conception, the dulcimer was a handmade instrument that would be created for and by the person with the intent of using it. It would be crafted in homes or small shops, with an abundance of people making them, leading to the appearance of the American dulcimer varying by the maker. Very little is known about specific dulcimer makers, as many did not sign their work or keep detailed records. What

little we do know about early American dulcimers comes from the remaining artifacts themselves, speaking to larger trends more than anything else.

The dulcimer was increasingly popular in America during the late 18th and early to mid-19th centuries. As an instrument used commonly for large gatherings and dances, the dulcimer gained notoriety with people who could not read music and wanted to provide entertainment. The ready availability of dulcimers, as well as their light nature lead to their importance with American pioneers moving westward. Pianos had come into fashion with many people on the East Coast, but they did not travel well before the creation of the railroads. Due to their size and relative easy make, dulcimers also became extremely popular with lumberjacks of the Midwestern region, appearing in stag dances at lumber camps as “lumberjack pianos.”

Dulcimers appeared in advertisements as early as 1770 in the Boston Gazette being sold by auction. Later in the 18th century towards the early 19th century, dulcimers would begin to be produced en masse. C. Haight was the first to produce the dulcimer commercially in 1848. The diagram that remains of his model shows 11 treble courses of 4 strings and 7 bass courses of 2- the same design presented on the Sweet dulcimer. This design would influence mass producers in Chautauqua, New York, where many dulcimer manufactories popped up. Many factories that produced pianos would begin to produce dulcimers for the pioneers moving from the east and began to widely advertise them. Montgomery Ward sold American made dulcimers crafted of rosewood for \$16.00 in 1895. The Sears Roebuck catalog in 1903 had advertisements for “zithers” and “autoharps,” both which are early forms of dulcimers, as well as hammered dulcimers. The hammered dulcimer weighed 50 pounds, was crafted of European spruce, and had pearl-inlaid sides, all for \$13.85. The popularity of the dulcimer during this time is easily seen by the mass marketing of catalogs depicting numerous kinds of dulcimers, made to order.

The dulcimer fell into wide disuse after the Civil War. With the improvements in the shipping industry that came with the creation of trans-continental railroad systems, it was no longer necessary to travel with instruments. Thus owning a piano became much more feasible for people migrating, even those who were moving out to the west coast. Another cause for decline was the fact that very few dulcimer songs were written down. As the generation born after the Civil War did not pass on the skills or the songs, their children did not learn the dulcimer. Similarly, the World War I generation would learn the guitar, mandolin, and piano instead of taking up the dulcimer.

The dulcimer experienced a mild resurgence in the 1930s and 40s with the popularization of Henry Ford and His Early American Orchestra, a folk-type band that utilized the dulcimer in their music. The current popularity of the dulcimer began in the 1960s with the movement towards pop traditional and folk music. Nancy Groce states that “the hammered dulcimer occupies that musical no man’s land between “pure folk” and “popular” traditions,” meaning that the popularity of the dulcimer in historical times is tied to the current popularity of the dulcimer in folk music.

#### Family Ties

The dulcimer we are looking at belonged to the Sweet family of Mount Horeb, Wisconsin. Originally from Chautauqua County, New York, the patriarch, William Sweet, bought land in

Springdale, Wisconsin in 1854. Most of the early settlers to the Mount Horeb area travelled by the Military Road, established in 1832 for settlers moving westward. In 1855, William Sweet then moved his family, including his wife, Sally Clark Sweet, and their 7 young children to come live in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin was established as a state in 1848, after many of the Native populations were forcibly removed after the Black Hawk War of the 1830s. Early migrants to Wisconsin came from the East Coast, as well as countries like England and Scotland. Overcrowding in European cities, as well as favorable accounts of Dane County, published widely in European newspapers, brought immigrants from Norway, Germany, and Ireland to the region. Most popular history focuses on foreign immigrants and their influence on the Mount Horeb area, while the history of eastern US settlers is equally as intriguing. The early pioneers would settle in the southern regions of Wisconsin, contributing to the population growth seen between 1830 and 1850. Between these years, Wisconsin saw populations soaring from 11,000 to 305,000 inhabitants, many of them establishing farms in the southern regions.

The Sweet and Donald families were only some of the families that took advantage of the newly inhabitable Wisconsin farmland. The Sweets and the Donalds were both from New York State, and moved to Wisconsin around 1855 and established large farms next to each other. Their histories become intertwined with the marriage of William Sweet's daughter Ellen to John Strong Donald in 1868. The person of utmost interest in the case of the dulcimer is Ellen Sweet Donald, the original player of the dulcimer in her youth.

Ellen Sweet Donald was born in Chautauqua County, New York on September 29, 1849. She was the sixth of seven children born to William Sweet and his wife Sally. She was 6 years old when her family moved to Wisconsin in 1855 and 9 when the dulcimer was given to her family. The dulcimer was crafted by a young cabinet maker named Orrin Sweet (no relation to Ellen Sweet) in 1857. He had come from New York to make and sell dulcimers to the pioneers moving westward and stayed in a log house owned by Ellen Sweet's family. Orrin Sweet, like many dulcimer makers of the time, has very little known about him. He gave the Sweet family this dulcimer in payment for letting him use the house, and then very little is recorded of him after that. Crafted from Wisconsin wood, more specifically walnut, Orrin Sweet made the dulcimer personalized for the Sweet family and their new home in the Midwest.

The Mount Horeb area was known for being quite musical in the 19th century. Various bands and choral congregations performed at dances, annual parades, and town gatherings. The Sweet family children partook in this musical pastime and the dulcimer was an integral part of this. Her brother James Sweet played second fiddle, her sister Addie played the melodeon, and Ellen played the dulcimer in various public events. The first appearance that Ellen is on record recalling was at Arnold's Tavern in Blue Mounds for a Fourth of July party. They made other appearances after that, always having the dulcimer in tow. The Sweet family's ties to musical tradition would influence the early settlers of the Mount Horeb region, bringing their New York traditions to Wisconsin. After her brother James married, he took the family dulcimer with him and his new wife, removing the instrument from use, as he did not play. The dulcimer would remain in the Sweet family, eventually being owned by Ellen's son, John Sweet Donald, who she then taught to play.

## Interpretation

The dulcimer remained within the Sweet family until it was donated to the Mount Horeb Area Historical Society, where it now sits in the collections. Looking at the long history of the dulcimer in America, and this dulcimer specifically, we can see that this piece could play a crucial part in revitalizing the Mount Horeb Area Historical Society's new exhibition projects. Its ties to the popular New York style of dulcimer speaks to the stories of immigrants from the east coast that came to settle in Wisconsin; a history that is not commonly told in the migration record. It also tells us about the kinds of activities that the Sweet family, and the citizens of Mount Horeb participated in during its early days, which could be a crucial story.

The Sweet family were migrants from Chautauqua County, New York; home to the first factories to mass produce the dulcimer for the American pioneers. The maker of the dulcimer, Orrin Sweet, was also from that region, most likely influencing his format for dulcimer making in the popular 11 treble chord/ 7 bass chord style. Dulcimers were played by pioneers, which was integral to the use of the dulcimer in the Midwest region, especially in states like Wisconsin. By bringing these instruments with them, the pioneers would influence the formation of new regional music styles that would develop on the frontier. Thus the dulcimer became a symbol of westward migration, due to the relative ease in bringing it along on journeys, influencing its place in the historical record.

As an instrument that has largely fallen out of popularity in recent years, it is useful to think about the dulcimer in its particular historical contexts. The dulcimer is largely important to Mount Horeb, not just because of the important family it belonged to, but how it had larger ties to the community. In displaying this object, we can see its use to a family and a town, which would develop an early Wisconsin culture, deeply rooted in New York State traditions. The stories of immigrants to Wisconsin focus mainly on foreign immigrants, but what new things could we learn from stories of emigration? The dulcimer is a perfect example of an object that shares the history of early Wisconsinites and Americans simultaneously.

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## 62. Emigrant Trunks

# 63. The Little Kubbestol: A View of Norwegian-American Ethnic Identity through an Autobiography of an Object Biography

BY JOANNA WILSON





**Chair, child-sized  
(Kubbestol)**

Norwegian-American  
Maker unknown, c.  
mid-1800s; decoration  
attributed to Per Lysne,  
c.1927

Wood, paint

Little Norway Collection Gift  
of Raymond & Margaret  
Vicker Charitable Trust  
MHAHS 2014.073.0009

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This paper ostensibly began as a critical and objective examination of the history of a child-sized kubbestol in the Mount Horeb Historical Society's collection. But almost as soon as I embarked on this project, I found it difficult to maintain the analytic distance that has been fundamental to my training as an art historian. The kubbestol is a traditional Norwegian chair carved from a section of hollowed log. This particular kubbestol, though unremarkable in form and decoration, stands out for its diminutive size. At just over a foot high, and with roughly half as wide, the chair's evocative power is amplified by its shrunken stature, prompting allusions to family and the magical milieu of childhood.

My first knowledge of the *little kubbestol* was textual, described simply as “log chair” in an emailed list of potential objects of research compiled by the Mount Horeb Historical Society. I imagined it to be a sort of rustic-looking cabin chair; the kind made from young trees or branches with their bark left intact. Though I did not find this description particularly compelling, I volunteered to research the log chair in lieu of any other listed object that fit my research interests in landscape relationships and representations.

With fairly low expectations, I was surprised and delighted when the “log chair” was revealed to be a *kubbestol*. On a visit to Mount Horeb, the historical society’s exhibitions curator ushered us down a flight of stairs to the Society Museum basement where the furniture not on exhibit was stored. There was a literal unveiling, as the curator lifted the protective sheet that covered the furniture, and I saw this strange and precious chair nestled like a toddler between two protective, adult-sized *kubbestol*.

There is something uniquely evocative about a piece of furniture that has been shrunken to childish proportions. The dimensions of this object provided a kind of narrative fodder that I have rarely encountered in an object I knew so little about. This *little kubbestol* appeared to invite a child’s interaction with the rest of the household. It conjured a picture of a tiny Norwegian-American tyke taking her or his dignified place around the fire with the rest of the family, as mother or father told thrilling tales of the trolls that menaced the landscape back in Norway. In my imaginative flight, the small child listens enraptured from the same *kubbestol* that serves as an impish throne to the story’s woodland-sprite holding court from the forest-floor. The prospect of unearthing this tale of Nordic-American childhood, through an object that looked as if it were lifted from a fairytale, was so engrossing that I later found it interrupting the clarity and direction of my research when I could not reconcile a discovery with my fantasy.

I came away from that first visit to Mount Horeb with a copy of the curator’s work sheet for *little kubbestol*, providing its estimated age (1850–1870), the family name associated with it (Grimstad), and the name of the artist believed responsible for its painting (Per Lysne). As I researched this *little kubbestol*, I found it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the conclusions and investigative threads that could be properly sourced and cited, and those prompted by its uncanny evocative power over me.[1] In her book, *Evocative Objects*, Sherry Turkle argues for the considered acknowledgement of “objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought.”[2] Arming myself with Turkle’s supportive text, I have supplemented the following biographic research of the *little kubbestol* with an autobiography of my own investigative process. My hope is that this unorthodox format accomplishes two things. First, that by being forthright in first person, I may mitigate some of the damage that might otherwise be caused by the bias of my imagination. Second, I hope that this narrative supports and illustrates my thesis, which posits that the historic significance and cultural resonance of the *little kubbestol* are not confined to a specific community or era, but are embedded in its physical form: accessible to anyone with the desire to reach for them.

I determined to realize my ambition by pursuing two veins of research. First I endeavored to flesh out the familial narrative surrounding the *kubbestol* by mining the resources and archives available through the Mount Horeb and Wisconsin Historical Societies. Second, I conducted broader research on Norwegian culture and customs, focusing most closely on decorative arts, folk-craft, mythology, and folklore. By following these two investigative paths, I was able to tether the symbolic and cultural significance of the object to a real family and place.

Through tracing the physical biography of the little kubbestol, the life of this object parallels the evolution of ethnic heritage. It began as a material manifestation chosen by Norwegian immigrants to reflect a portion of their ethnic identity they wished to keep of the life they left behind. Later, the little kubbestol became an actor playing itself in a theatrical version of Norwegian-ness. Finally, for the moment at least, the little kubbestol resides at the Mount Horeb Historical Society, respectfully cloistered as remnant of regional heritage. The distance between the little kubbestol's cultural role and original function increased with time in each phase of the objects life. But I posit that this distance does not represent the relinquishment of ethnic identity or disregard for ethnic traditions, but rather signifies an utterly authentic transition from Norwegian to Norwegian American.

### **Introduction**

I began my investigative journey with the object itself. And because, before my fateful encounter with *little kubbestol*, I had never seen or heard of a kubbestol before, some grounding context is needed to facilitate a closer reading of the *little kubbestol*. In addition to a full physical description of my particular object of study, I will provide a brief history of the art form, and its cultural functions.

The kubbestol is a traditional Norwegian chair formed from a single section of log, or 'kubbe' that is first hollowed out and carved to shape the chairs back while still green.[3] Then, after allowing the kubbe to cure for several months, a piece of wood is cut and fitted into the hollow where the chair back begins to form the seat. The full circumference of the log is almost always left intact, with a trunk-like base rather than legs as the support for the chair seat. Traditionally, kubbestol made in Norway were primarily made from birch, which is abundantly available in the forested regions where the craft was popular.

The *little kubbestol* at Mount Horeb is a mere seventeen inches high, with an eleven-inch diameter and formed from rough-hewn pine. By looking closely you can see that exterior is subtly faceted by the organic rhythm of the hatchet that shaped the soft wood. The *kubbestol* is stained a rich, forest green that maintains its rustic respectability in the face of fading and discoloration, while the base and back of the chair are decorated with a simple rosemaled pattern of primarily red and pink flowers, with a yellow flower in the center of the base decoration.

Although there is a long history of kubbestol carving in Norway, the specific origins of the chair's design and purpose remain obscured. Kubbestol were most popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Norwegian peasant homes. However, there are extant examples that were elaborately carved for more conspicuous settings such as churches, and others from as early as the twelfth century. The peculiar form and custom of making kubbestol is one of many folk traditions that migrated to Wisconsin along with the thousands of Norwegian immigrants who made their way to the primarily south-eastern part of this state in the Nineteenth Century. In her definitive work on *Norwegian Folk Art*, Marion Nelson details how, for Norwegian-American immigrants, these creative traditions supplied a mode for materializing the community, culture, and values left behind.[4]

One of the most intriguing aspects of the kubbestol is its remarkably close relationship to the raw material it is made from. The kubbestol represents perhaps the least drastic example of a transformation from tree to furniture. Rooted by its wooden circumference, flush to the ground, the stools emerge from a floor almost exactly like the tree-stumps they were hewn from. The

former life of the material is further emphasized by the kubbestol's cross-section seat, which reveals the rings and grain of the tree it was cut from.

The kubbestol's form, and the process required for its realization, contrasts with many other examples of this class of object. As a utilitarian object that most frequently populated the rustic peasant cottages of Norway, the kubbestol is far too time-consuming a production, and too bulky a product, to represent a merely practical seating solution. On the other hand, the kubbestol's adamant tree-ness, its defiant resemblance to the raw material, contrasts noticeably with the decorative endeavors of many other folk furnishings, for which a high degree of transformation is desirable.

### **The Nature of Norwegians**

The little kubbestol is crudely formed. But I use "crude" here, not as a value judgment, but as a description of the very minimal aesthetic intervention that takes place between raw material and the finished product. The tree-ness of the kubbestol clearly played a large part in the material culture fantasy that prompted this investigation, and having since learned more of Norwegian folk art, I can assume that a community so invested in the symbolic functions of their domestic objects did not happen upon this distinctive seating design by accident. In this section I will explore the cultural history of how Norwegians and Norwegian-Americans have represented and interacted with nature. Looking at geography, fairytales, folklore, and material culture, I will attempt to elucidate the unique ways in which nature is embodied for this ethnic community.

Every culture and community is shaped in some ways by their relationship to the landscape. The cultures and communities of Norway have produced a particularly visible and distinctive relationship to nature, which I can only briefly explore here as a contextual background to the kubbestol's symbolic significance.

Norway's peculiar geography, climate, and vegetation, render the landscape both diverse and distinctive. The climate and altitude range in the Telemark region of Norway—from which the Grimstad family and much of the Norwegian population in Southern-Wisconsin emigrated—encompasses an astounding five different vegetation zones.[5] These zones range from the coniferous and deciduous woodlands of the boreo-nemoral zone, to the dwarf birch and scrub willows of the southern arctic zone, with three more varying woodland regions packed between them in an area less than a tenth the size of Wisconsin. Suffice it to say that Norwegians in general, and Telemark Norwegians in particular, encounter and interact with trees and forests in a more substantive way than much of the rest of the world.

The prominence of forestry to Norwegian landscape and life may explain at least part of the kubbestol's remarkably close relationship to the raw material it is made from. Resting on a wooden circumference, flush to the ground, the stools emerge from a floor almost exactly like the tree-stumps they were hewn from. The former life of the material is further emphasized by the kubbestol's cross-section seat, which reveals the rings and grain of the tree it was cut from.

As remarkably raw as the kubbestol was to my unfamiliar eyes, when placed in a broader picture of Norwegian folk and decorative arts, the stool appears less startling. Though the kubbestol is still unique in the way that it appears to have sprouted from the floor it rests on, much of traditional Norwegian interiors convey a similar impression of having grown out of some sort of uncanny forest. The standard for mastery of wood carving in the Norwegian folk-tradition is exemplified in furniture displaying intricately patterned carved surfaces. A majority of these examples, with their

organic, symmetric designs carved in high relief, more closely resemble the magically reordered bark of a tree than they do any aesthetic human endeavors.

Although I have previously stressed the importance and prominence of the forest to Norwegian geographic and economic identity, they are certainly not the only ethnic community to be shaped by their environment. But Norwegian folk are perhaps unique for such a community, in how this relationship to nature manifests in the domestic sphere. Whereas domestic space and furnishings for most of the world illustrate a desire for increasingly distinct boundaries between the domestic interior and the wild exterior, the height of Norwegian domestic crafts appear to blur that distinction.

The acceptance of an un-subdued version of nature into the Norwegian domestic sphere may be explained in part by the cultural influence of Norway's folk and fairytales. In much of Scandinavia, but Iceland and Norway in particular, the landscape is animated by a rich and vivid folklore tradition. This is a country where landscape features might be named for the magical events taking place in their history, where a large boulder could be a troll turned to stone by sunlight, and where any mountain, river, or tree, is potentially the jealously guarded home of a magical creature. It is unsurprising that in such a setting—where the line between human and nature or flora and fauna is so indistinct—that boundaries of a human-controlled interior would be lacerated. In a culture where the work of natural elements were attributed to the mischief of wily, sentient beings of varying powers, it may even be unwise to advertise your bald humanity by creating a home that appears inhospitable to the natural world.

The size of the *little kubbestol* is at enchanting odds with its fundamental physical character. Though there are many examples of kubbestols featuring intricate painted or carved decorations, their scrolled vines and flowers don't disguise the assertively solid mass that defines the chairs' form.

The use origins of the furniture make the existence of Mt. Horeb's diminutive *kubbestol* all the more piquant. Was it made for a real child to use? If so, what was the familial context and history of its creation? Could it have been the product of a craftsman practicing with a smaller trunk before graduating to a full-sized *kubbestol*? Or was it, from the beginning, a novelty intended to evoke a sweet and folksy image of Norse culture for ethnic tourists?

### **Physical Background and Provenance**

Armed with some knowledge of the history of the *kubbestol* as both a functional and symbolic form, I could now explore the biography of my object more specifically. I revisited Mount Horeb with the aim of piecing together the provenance of the chair and, I hoped, fleshing out the narrative of the family responsible for its existence. On the first return visit to Mount Horeb, I availed myself of the Historical Society's library in search of clues that might provide evidence for the family drama I had already mentally constructed around the *little kubbestol*.

The Mount Horeb Historical Society acquired the *little kubbestol*, along with another (adult-sized) *kubbestol* from Little Norway after the ethnic-themed folk-tourist site closed in 2012. Records from Little Norway show that a pair of chairs was purchased from one Aslak Grimstad on June 10th, 1929.[6] The date of purchase and transfer from Aslak to Little Norway is the last concrete record of the *kubbestol*'s physical biography.[i] However, with some genealogical sleuthing, and educated conjecture, we can at least construct a plausible narrative frame for how and why the chair came into existence.

Aslak Grimstad was the youngest child of two Norwegian immigrants, Knut and Mari Grimstad. The Grimstads arrived in the United States along with their six children in 1850 and settled in what is now the Wisconsin Perry Township where they had two more children, Carl in 1856 and Aslak 1858.[7] We can assume that the kubbestol came into the Grimstads' possession some time after 1850 because, as third class passengers on the boat from Europe to America, the list of personal items they traveled with would have been carefully considered and edited. The long, cramped journey across the Atlantic required travelers to pack only the most vital, valuable, or precious items, logically eliminating anything as superfluous and cumbersome as a child's kubbestol.[8]

It is also reasonable to assume that a member of the Grimstad family made the little kubbestol. As a family relocating from the rural timber region of Telemark, Norway to the rural timber region of Wisconsin, it is far more likely that one of the Grimstads created the kubbestol as a way to replicate some part of their ethnic home than that they acquired it by any other means.

Identifying the specific maker of the kubbestol within the Grimstad family has proven to be a more difficult task. Although it was Aslak who sold the items to Little Norway, his possession of the stool at that time doesn't necessarily prove his particular connection to the furniture. Aslak's brother Carl mentions in his memoir, written two years after the kubbestol sale in 1932, that of his parents and siblings, "Now only Aslak is left, he is on the old homestead yet..."[9] Aslak's residency on the "old homestead" suggests him as the default possessor of all the old family belongings. Knut, as the only adult male to have lived in Norway, presumably carried the practice and knowledge of the folk-craft from the old world. But it is as easily presumed that Knut passed this tradition down to his children, perhaps encouraging a young novice woodcarver to practice with the small tree that resulted in the tiny kubbestol.

The memoir of Aslak's brother Carl, *Pioneers in Dakota Territory, 1879-1889* provides the most illuminating insight into the heritage values of the Grimstads. In the period recounted in this document, Carl left Wisconsin to stake a tree-claim in the Dakota Territory. The fact that he chose trees—the most time consuming claim to ratify in Dakota Territory—rather than farm or pasture claim, indicates a familiarity and skill with forestry that represents a continuation of his Norwegian roots. Additionally, the pride Carl expresses in the planting and growth of his trees, suggests a connection to the wooded landscape beyond a merely occupational appreciation.

The memoir also reveals Carl to be a doting father and family man. References to the tragic death of his first child provide poignant description of Carl's family feeling. Speaking nearly fifty years after "the little angel passed away," following his wife Julia's difficult labor, Carl asserts, "...I shall always consider those weeks the severest trial of my life." [10] Carl's grief at the death of a child is balanced by the birth of a second healthy baby boy in 1885. In his recollection Carl says, "That occasion was one of the happiest occasions of my life, as he was such a fine healthy baby and every indication that he would live, which I at the time thot (sic) seriously about on account of the passing away of our first born. With much delight and pleasure I saw him grow and develop..." [11]

Carl's memoirs, written near the end of his life after returning to Wisconsin, are interspersed with references to the pleasure he derived from the birth and growth of his children and, to slightly lesser extent, the trees he planted. Here was a pioneer literally creating a forest around his family, a man who not only adored his children, but also appeared acutely conscious of the preciousness of childhood. I could not have cast a more perfect steward of the *little kubbestol*, if I had written him into existence myself.

Of course, the fact that Carl's character cooperates with my romantic vision for the kubbestol's

domestic context, does not amount to proof. However, numerous accounts in the memoir of visits between Carl, his parents, Aslak, and other siblings, may support the broadening of that context. The relative frequency of these visits, and the warmth with which they are recounted, suggests a close-knit clan. And though it would be irresponsible to assert that the values and character Carl expresses through his memoirs can be applied to the Grimstad's as a whole, the strength of the extended family bond at least suggests a harmonious kinship.

Regardless of which member of the Grimstad family is responsible for the *little kubbestol*, its making and keeping signify a connection to their Norwegian heritage that extends beyond the inheritance of practical customs, to a purposeful engagement with a creative folk tradition that employs an imaginative interaction with the landscape. However the kubbestol form was originally conceived, it had long since ceased to be an efficient or practical seating solution. And whether or not the little kubbestol was created to accommodate a small child, or as rehearsal for an aspiring craftsman, its existence implies that the art form was valued not only as a decorative symbol of heritage, but as an expression of ethnicity worth fostering in the next generation.

If we accept that the *little kubbestol* was made either by Knut, or by one of his children while still living at home, then its long life in the Grimstad homestead further supports its reading as a symbol of the family's regard for their heritage. It would have been safely kept in the family home for at least fifty years by the time Aslak parted with it. The sale itself contributes to the idea that the kubbestol was a cherished household object. At the time of the sale, Aslak was an elderly man. The quote previously mentioned from Carl Grimstad's memoirs continues, "Now only Aslak is left, he is on the old homestead yet, but is now past "three score and ten", the biblical age allotted to men." [12] Carl's somewhat dour reference to his younger brother's age and his position as the only one left, implies that they were both facing the end of life. And it is possible that, just as Carl was writing his memoirs as a preparatory act ensuring the posterity of his legacy, so perhaps was Aslak, as the last of his generation and proprietor of the family home, preparing to ensure the preservation of part of the Grimstad heritage.

My sentimental appraisal of why Aslak sold the kubbestols should be qualified by an acknowledgment of the particular moment in economic history in which the sale transpired. The June of 1929 was just a few months before the fateful "Black Tuesday" stock market crash that solidified the beginning of the greatest economic depression this country has ever endured. But as many economists acknowledge, the nation's economic woes had begun well before the event that came to define the depression. Very few Americans were untouched by the depression, and it is possible that Aslak was motivated by an uncertain economy to take advantage of Isaac Dahle's fascination with Norwegian folk-ethnicity in exchange for the (not inconsiderable at the time) sum of twenty-five dollars.

Carl Grimstad references the depression in his memoir when he recounts how he was never paid for a short stint of teaching school in 1881. Carl says,

I have still the pay coming for teaching six or eight weeks. Needless to say, I never asked them for the pay, and I am afraid it is outlawed by this time. I reasoned I could better afford to do this teaching gratis than crowd those poor settlers for pay. Now, I would like to live those days over again. I am more worried about money matters now in 1932 than I was fifty years ago, when I looked the world in the face, and had no doubts about the final outcome in the future.

Carl's lament over a fifty-year old payment is significant. In a memoir that otherwise attests to

Carl's generous and civic-minded character, his regret that he did not "crowd those poor settlers for pay" suggests the extremity of the contemporary economic climate.

Even if Aslak's kubbestol sale was fiscally motivated, the fact that it was sold to Little Norway is a testament to the regard he and other family members had for the stool. Isaac Dahle's rabid enthusiasm for Norwegian folk art provided Aslak with a way to commit a piece of his family's heritage, to a shrine devoted to that heritage.

### **Finale:**

After all of my research, the *little kubbestol* is perhaps more an object of mystique now, than it was the first day I encountered it. It has been a portal, leading me to uncover some of the family history of Mount Horeb natives, as well as some of the cultural identity that infuses the lives and imaginations of Norwegians and Norwegian-Americans. But the kubbestol itself has operated much like the magical objects and creatures that populate Norwegian folk-tales; appearing without explanation to influence the actions of the characters, and direction of the plot.

[1] Though not an official title, I will from here forward use the italicized *kubbestol*, or *little kubbestol* to distinguish the particular object of this study from more general discussion of a kubbestol or kubbestols as a type.

[2] Sherry Turkle, ed., *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 5.

[3] The Norwegian work 'kubbe' designates a section of timber that is shorter than a log, but longer than a stump.

[4] For an in-depth discussion of "the migration of tradition" see the book by Marion J. Nelson, *Norwegian Folk Art: The Migration of a Tradition* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995).

[5] Unless otherwise noted, all facts and figures regarding Norwegian geography are sourced from, Asbjørn Moen, Arvid Lillethun, and Arvid Odland, in *Vegetation* (Hønefoss: Norwegian Mapping Authority, 1999).

[6] Little Norway purchase logs are housed in the Mount Horeb Historical Society Archives.

[7] Spelling of the surname "Grimstad" is an American simplification of the original "Grimstveidt."

[8] For further discussion of the choices immigrants faced when relocating, see Jon Gjerde, "The Immigrants Luggage: Observations Based on Written Sources," in *Norwegian Folk Art: The Migration of a Tradition*, by Marion J. Nelson (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995).

[9] Carl Grimstad, *Pioneers in Dakota Territory, 1879-89 From Carl M. Grimstad's Memoirs*. Mount Horeb Historical Society Library, pg. 54

[10] Carl Grimstad, *Pioneers in Dakota Territory, 1879-89 From Carl M. Grimstad's Memoirs*. Mount Horeb Historical Society Library, pg. 80

[11] *Ibid*, 93.



[12]Ibid, pg. 54.

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# 64. Community, Kindness, and Humor: Looking at the Trolls of Mount Horeb, WI

BY MEGAN ROESSLER

During the 1980s the Wisconsin Department of Transportation began work on a road that would bypass Business Highway 18/151, the main road running through downtown Mount Horeb, a small town 20 miles outside of Madison. Concerned about the fact that the bypass would divert traffic from the town, thus hurting the local economy, the Mount Horeb Chamber of Commerce embarked on a mission to “Exploit, capitalize, and profit from [their] Norwegian heritage”, and settled on branding the town as the “Troll Capital of the World”, decorating the main commercial strip with troll cutouts, sculptures, and other imagery, and nicknaming it the “Trollway”, a name which today still stands proud, synonymous with the identity of the town.

Dell Upton’s “Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Invented Traditions” considers the ways that themes and behaviors of acceptance, resistance, or reinterpretation of different cultural values engage with identity and authenticity. Upton specifically takes the allegory of an American Indian, Opechancanough, and analyzes the ways that he responds to both local and European cultures, ultimately arguing that the possibility remains that he neither embraced nor rejected either, but instead combined them into what became a distinct, individual identity. To take Upton’s paper and this allegory as a framework to look at the folk art of Mount Horeb allows for an analysis of the cultural influences that led to the creation of the Troll Capital and the Trollway.

These influences, a result of Mount Horeb being uniquely situated at a cultural crossroads between the Scandinavian folk culture celebrated by its early settlers, and the small town American highway culture which would later serve to shape it during the 1980s. This paper then focuses on the relationship between Mount Horeb’s trolls – specifically a roadside cutout painted by Oleanna Cunneen in the mid-80s (fig. 1) – and the larger stories and themes present in Scandinavian folklore which will be discussed in Section I, and American tourist culture, discussed in Section II. It is by studying these relationships through the framework of Upton’s argument that we might focus them back on a discussion of Mount Horeb in Section III, finding a more nuanced understanding of the cultural landscape of Mount Horeb and Southwestern Wisconsin.

## I. Scandinavia

Scandinavian immigration to the Upper Midwest, which began during the 19th c. led to a persistent and undeniable influence of Scandinavian visual and folk cultures on the traditions of the region. Subsequently, we see much of the ethos of the Upper Midwest draw from this shared ethnic and cultural heritage, and to think more broadly about the culture of Mount Horeb in this respect, it becomes necessary to analyze the ways in which we see these cultural influences become manifest. Although today Mount Horeb is not overwhelmingly Scandinavian, early in its history nearly three-fourths of its citizens had claim to some sort of Norwegian heritage, something which is still emphasized in the town today through the troll brand. Consequently, a focus on the

resilience of Norwegian culture specifically, and in respect to the character of the troll, will offer an understanding of its presence in the folk art and culture of the greater Mount Horeb area.

It is important then when considering the material culture of the Scandinavian Upper Midwest to first look at folk art traditions and to consider how aspects of visual and material culture may inform and signify a cultural identity. Aesthetically, this emerges in the use of artistic techniques such as rosemaling, which underscores Mount Horeb's name on the town water tower, (fig. 2), and in the architecture of landmarks such as the welcome center, otherwise referred to as the Velkommen building, downtown (fig. 3). These types of infrastructure, both widely recognized as things that would distinguish a place from its surrounding landscape and serve as a landmark, use Norwegian folk imagery as decoration thus associating Mount Horeb with Norwegian heritage. Further illustrative of how ubiquitous this material and visual culture is, shops such as Open House Imports specialize and deal almost exclusively in gifts which celebrate Norwegian heritage such as dala horses, clogs, and rosemalled household goods.

This emphasis on ethnic or craft backgrounds in the folk and popular cultures of Wisconsin is an echo of Upton's article, suggesting that the distinct cultural influences upon a society – or individual – may push it towards becoming a more unique product of its environment. Furthermore, this trend in the shaping and reshaping of identities and aesthetics which become uniquely representative of a society asserts these elements of culture as authentic to a place or people. They develop, as described in From Hardanger to Harley, “through direct contact and communication between the makers and their audience”, something which is seen again outside of the visual and material spheres of culture. Accordingly, since the visual arts are only a small part of the realm of folk culture, and in order to better understand the cultural and artistic context of the Mount Horeb trolls, it is important that we also look at the troll in the context of Scandinavian folklore.

Although non-visual and straying from material culture, folklore and storytelling remain a persistent aspect of the Scandinavian cultural landscape of the Upper Midwest. Von Krogh writes that stories passed from generation to generation, “reflect conscious as well as unconscious needs, values and defenses in the storyteller as well as among his audience”, which indicates that the study of oral storytelling traditions would offer us a unique perspective from which to consider the ways recurring themes, character traits, or expressions of social order might reveal cultural values. Moreover, the fact that something such as the legend is, “More typically presented in a kind of dialogue or informal conversation” suggests that there are patterns of importance placed on the oral tradition over that which is written. Of course, there are times at which a story might be told with more accuracy or written down, but largely this seems to not be the case.

Recurring figures in Norwegian folklore, as in most folklore, include both the hero and the creature or monster. Where heroes such as Askeladden tend to be portrayed in a favorable light, trolls, described in one instance as, “Particularly unsavory Scandinavian monsters”, become subject a less favorable treatment. There exist a number of tales in which trolls are stated to have tendencies towards violence or kidnapping. We also see, as pointed out by Eastman Attebery, that this type of troll occupies a well-established niche in written literature, both in traditional folk narratives such as those collected by Asbjørsen and Moe and in more contemporary works such as Tolkien's “The Hobbit”, or in Gaiman's “Troll Bridge”. Additionally, in the plays of Ibsen, the troll has been used to, “Represent the evil dormant in man”, suggesting the extent to which this

characterization of the troll as evil has developed. There of course is an evolution between the early and late literary works, although both engage with similar themes of cruelty and meanness.

In contrast to the ogre-trolls of early folktales and more contemporary literary works, there remains a more pleasant characterization. This is that of the humanoid-trolls – a term borrowed, again from Eastman Attebery to describe those which, “Oftentimes take on the role of the trickster, and have emotions, families, and depth.” In a survey of Mount Horeb, we see a similar representation and characterization of the troll, to the extent that in addition to those that are purely fictitious, we see trolls modeled after individual townspeople. One handout available in the town, deals further with this mischaracterization, stating that:

There are: Kind trolls and mean trolls, Happy trolls and very sad trolls, Laughing trolls and trolls with migraine, Helpful trolls and destructive trolls (vandals)

Although here we do see the unpleasant troll remain, there is more nuance developed, and the monolithic characterization is dismantled, leaving room for the kind, happy, laughing, and helpful trolls that we find along the Trollway.

This is exemplified by the work of Michael Feeney, a local artist who has carved many of the trolls along Mount Horeb’s main commercial road, who employs an aesthetic that leans heavily towards folk art, and assigns each of his works a personality for which it is named – these range from gardeners to peddlers. This again distances the Mount Horeb trolls from existing literary characterizations and further illustrates the adaptation of Scandinavian tradition to meet the needs of the town’s aesthetic and cultural ambitions.

Outside of the use of troll imagery, one of the most places where we most clearly see this cultural resilience is in Little Norway, a “living museum” that existed between 1927 and 2012 in Blue Mounds, just outside Mount Horeb. Home to several recreations of traditional Norwegian homesteads, and most notably a stave church used originally at the 1893 World’s Colombian Exposition, the museum sought to give its visitors an experience that, while by no means authentic, would recreate something of the lives of Norwegian settlers. Bøhn notes in “A Quest for Norwegian Folk Art in America” that from an art historical perspective, surveys of Norwegian immigration to the United States have neglected to look at antiques and material culture, and especially those which hold personal value. This is one area in which Little Norway was remarkably successful, in addition to the use of a form of spectacle to bring attention to the area.

The duality in the role of the troll character in arts and literature, and the broader artistic and storytelling traditions of the Upper Midwest are significant in a study of Mount Horeb’s folk art in that they allows us to consider the image of the troll in a wider cultural context. Mount Horeb, a town deeply rooted in its Scandinavian identity is defined by landmarks such as Little Norway and a water tower featuring the town’s name underscored by rosemaling, in addition to roadways, restaurants, and a town mascot that references the Norwegian troll. All play into a desire to differentiate from other small towns and to attract attention from passengers in a speeding car, something which is far from unique to Mount Horeb, and in fact aligns with a broader tradition in American culture.

## II. America

If we consider the relationship between Mount Horeb’s trolls to their Scandinavian cultural roots, then we must also consider the equal importance of their position in small town America. Roadside

attractions – landmarks such as Cadillac Ranch or Carhenge – and other oddities have long been used to draw motorists off of the highway and towards downtowns or Main Streets to bolster local economies, and it has been argued that this phenomenon is uniquely American. An analysis of both the wonder that is the roadside attraction illustrated here by Dr. Evermor’s Forevertron (fig. 4), the Dickeyville Grotto (fig. 5), and a sculpture of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Ox (fig. 6), as well as the commercial strip exemplified here by downtown Las Vegas, will afford a context in which to think about how Mount Horeb aligns itself with these traditions.

The importance of the highway to American culture cannot be understated. In fact, it has been said that the American, “National character [has] come to be embodied, to a large degree, in the image of restless wanderers”, something which ties the most essential spirit of this character to the open road. Like the culture of Scandinavia this is rooted in artistic traditions which draw from folk traditions, there is a persistent tendency in the arts of the American roadside to align closely with common practices of American folk art, using of found objects, combined with a sense of heart and humor. This can include both the visual forms of art – which commonly reference the outsider and self-taught, illustrated by Dr. Evermor’s Forevertron and the Dickeyville Grotto, as well as In “Sublime Spaces and Visionary Worlds”, Umberger discusses the vernacular and outsider art and architecture of the United States, particularly that in the Upper Midwest and in Southern Wisconsin.

Here, we find massive sculpture parks such as Dr. Evermore’s Forevertron in Sumpster, WI, and the Dickeyville Grotto, in Dickeyville. Both take materials conventionally used in industrial work or construction – scrap metal, concrete, stone, glass, or farm tools, and repurpose them into works of art, with the artist relying on skills that are self-taught. These massive forms announce a place as itself, expressing a distinct local culture, even if the local is so specific that it becomes representative of an individual, and of these pieces relates the arts of the outside as well as the roadside, ultimately tying them back to the folk arts of Mount Horeb.

However, this is not always the case, as in other works we find the influence of oral storytelling tradition in addition to artistic and craft traditions. In Northern Minnesota, we find a roadside sculpture which takes equally from artistic tradition and those of storytelling and community. These ways that roadside sculpture and oddities relate to local and regional folklore is written about extensively by Marling, Harrison, and White in their book “Colossus of Roads: Myth and Symbol Along the American Highway”. They write that the sculpture of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Ox in Lake Bemidji, Minnesota, has roots in Depression-Era storytelling, when stories of his feats became “fables testifying to the force of the American will”, and that as more stories were told, the character assumed “the awkward solidity of real life”.

The increasing popularity and subsequently, increasing authenticity of the Paul Bunyan myth, inspired the creation of visual representations of his story and in 1937, a sculpture of Bunyan was constructed and placed in a field next to a main road in Lake Bemidji, MN. The sculpture shares a number of conventions with the trolls currently on display in Mount Horeb – most notably an aesthetic simplification of form, and thematically an inspiration taken from a cultural heritage. Whether this is a more recently developed heritage as in Lake Bemidji, or a longstanding one as in Mount Horeb, both find themselves transmitted into the arts and visual culture of those who claim it. In this manner, we see the art of Mount Horeb align once again with American popular culture.

The cultural microcosm found in rural Northern Minnesota echoes and validates that in Mount Horeb – both are communities which take some element of local storytelling or heritage and

reinvent it to be used as a visual identifier. Just as a massive lumberjack and ox mark the landscape as “Lake Bemidji”, trolls dotting a commercial streetscape identify Mount Horeb, representing a local heritage that informs local identity. However, there is also a clear influence of the American commercial strip on Mount Horeb in addition to that of the American roadside attraction. The commercial strip is part of a commonplace trend in business and city planning, and we see this play out both on the scale of small town Main Streets and on something of more acclaim, such as the Las Vegas strip.

Both of these step off from the traditional “High Street”, and although we may think of the vast spaces, high speeds, and bright lights found in downtown Las Vegas rather liberally when applied to downtown Mount Horeb, the relationship between the two cannot be lost upon us. In both, the user – whether presented as the traveler, the driver, or the pedestrian, “relies on signs for guidance”. These signs, whether they come in the form of troll sculptures or bright, glowing neon, then exhibit a reliance on the ability to communicate visually and quickly, and fulfill their function of being able to identify a place within seconds.

Furthermore, Wisconsin folk traditions take from both the ethnic histories of the state and the distinct popular culture which has developed in the time since its early settlement. For instance, the very title of the Kohler Art Center’s *From Hardangers to Harleys: A Survey of Wisconsin Folk Art*, gestures toward Norwegian artistic and musical tradition as well as the iconic Harley-Davidson manufactured in Milwaukee. These influences push the folk arts and culture of Wisconsin to reconcile the two cultures, resulting in a distinct set of values and signifiers that become representative of the state. To circle back to a discussion of the arts of Mount Horeb, then, this broader trend seen in the folk arts of Wisconsin – like that of the commercial strip – is still at play when we bring it to a smaller scale. Local tradition, whether or not it calls upon an ethnic heritage, still impacts the identity of a place or person.

When we consider this in relation to the commercial landscape of a town, it becomes even more important to something such as branding. Subsequently, the use of the troll as a town symbol references a shared and valued cultural heritage, and the transformation of this element of a shared past into a defining and marketable signifier of a town, aligns a troll cutout such as ours with American cultural tradition. An examination of the advertisement and folk art of Mount Horeb in this context will allow for a more nuanced understanding of how it fits into larger themes in American culture. This then allows for a more nuanced understanding of Mount Horeb’s culture, and its relationship to both its Scandinavian and American cultural roots.

### III. Mount Horeb

After looking at Oleanna Cunneen’s troll cutout within the broader of Scandinavian folklore and folk art, and American highway culture, it is essential that we return to look at it once again in the context of Mount Horeb’s history. This makes an allowance for an understanding of how these themes weave together to create and define a local culture, and how that culture might produce something such as the object in question – a roadside cutout, silhouetted and painted in the image of a jolly old troll.

This troll cutout (fig. 1), designed and painted by Oleanna Cunneen, was made in 1984-1985. It is made of 0.5 in plywood, and is 46.5 in tall by 18.5 in wide. The troll is an aging man with a white beard and frizzy hair, four fingers on each hand, and four toes on each foot. He is grinning with a single toothed smile, and has wide, excited eyes and pointed ears. He is wearing fine blue coveralls, with red accents at the cuff and chest, all fastened with grey or perhaps silver buttons. A sparrow

is perched on his folded hands, and on his head is a smaller female troll. The cutout is attached to a metal pole with two sets of screws – allowing it to be staked into the ground. There are a number of places around the edges where the plywood has chipped off, a result of its being displayed outdoors along the side of a busy road, although the paint itself has not weathered or faded. An important question though how this cutout relates to the trolls displayed in Mount Horeb today, which aligns our object with a historical narrative, as Cunneen was not the only Mount Horeb area artist to work with the theme or imagery of the troll.

Michael Feeney, also a Mount Horeb local, carved a number of the trolls seen downtown as mentioned in Section I of this paper. While working with the same subject matter, and like Cunneen adding distinguishing characteristics to his trolls that might model them after specific Mount Horeb citizens, Feeney's work differs from Cunneen's in a number of ways. It is important firstly to note the difference in medium – where Cunneen painted plywood cutouts or sculpted smaller trolls out of clay or plaster around a metal armature, Feeney's work is done in wood and carved by hand. Understandably then, there are striking stylistic differences between the two. We can take, for example, the fact that Feeney abstracts his figures much more than Cunneen; for instance, if we look at “The Tourist Troll” (fig. 7), we find it becomes much more solid, less detailed and more geometric than Cunneen's, whose trolls are highly illustrative.

This is particularly evident if we look at one of Cunneen's troll sculptures (fig. 8). Here, the exaggeration of the figure comes not from simplification as in Feeney's, but from a high contrast between the raised and recessed facial features, and a proliferation of detail. The troll becomes more elfin than rock-like. Interestingly, though, both express a sense of humor and a playfulness that references the role of the troll in the tourism of Mount Horeb, and breaks from their conventional portrayals in literature. To understand this further it is necessary to think about the creation of these trolls within their original historical context.

During the 1980s when a bypass of Business Highway 18/151 was constructed, the decrease in the number of people who would be driving through the town center became a concern. With natural traffic drawn away, it became necessary for Mount Horeb to establish a town brand – some form of spectacle, wonder, or awe that would bring traffic back towards town. The Chamber of Commerce assembled the Mount Horeb Advancement Association to decide on which actions to take in the development of a town image. With goals such as to, “Exploit, capitalize, and profit from our Norwegian heritage,” and to, “Coordinate the troll theme with the ethnic concept”, the relationship between Scandinavian tradition and American branding once again cannot be forgotten. The troll, then, aligns with this larger brand in its emphasis on community, kindness, and humor, responding to influences from the small town and a distant homeland in Scandinavia. Accordingly, a discussion of the history and cultural landscape of Mount Horeb is directed back to the troll cutout. Representing an early point in the story of how Mount Horeb became the “Troll Capital of the World”, it reflects the beginnings of a cultural identity that still remains today.

In a discussion of the folk art of Mount Horeb one would be remiss not to discuss, at least briefly, the influence of Oleanna Cunneen. The pride that Cunneen took in her Norwegian heritage is evident. Born to a Norwegian American and a Norwegian immigrant, Cunneen undoubtedly grew up surrounded by Scandinavian tradition. Although she was most widely known for her prolific storytelling and her work as a guide at Little Norway, she worked in fashion – designing bunads, as well as practiced painting, embroidering, and making troll sculptures. Cunneen worked



extensively with the art of rosemaling and played an important role in the social community of Mount Horeb.

While some of the first roadside trolls were made by a Delos Kobs and students at the area high school, Cunneen had been making sculptures and figurines – such as fig. 8 – of the creatures prior to their adoption as the town brand, which afforded her a larger platform upon which to display them. After these early trolls were used to decorate the roadside, being placed in front of a number of downtown businesses, a number disappeared and it was gathered that, “They must have been very popular since most of them were stolen the first summer.” This is a slight ironic twist when we consider the vandal trolls of early literature. Still, even after the disappearance of a number of cutouts, some remained, such as fig. 1, Cunneen’s troll cutout which will be displayed at the Driftless Historium, representing a specific moment in Mount Horeb history which still has modern iterations today.

The embrace of the imagery, character, and spirit of the troll is prevalent throughout the culture of Mount Horeb. Stoughton, located just East of Madison, hosts the largest celebration of Norwegian independence in the United States, and across the state there are various roadside oddities such as the aforementioned Forevertron in Sumpter, the Dickeyville Grotto, or the Tin Man Mailbox in Black Earth, all attracting attention to shops or downtowns, or that at very least serve as photo opportunities for those who happen upon them; despite not being alone in its pride in Norwegian heritage, or its playfulness and folk art roots that embrace the culture of the American highway, Mount Horeb is distinctive in its combination of the two.

Analyzing this combination of ideas and influences in the context of Mount Horeb’s culture then leads us back to Upton. The resonance of his description of the Opechancanough allegory, describing how the stitching together of different cultures to create a unique, authentic, and personal identity frames the story of Mount Horeb, and it becomes clear that the melding together of Scandinavian and American traditions creates a distinct cultural landscape that remains authentically “Mount Horeb”. We see this in the use of trolls to both emphasize Norwegian cultural roots, and to establish a sense of wonder and marvel about the town which continues to bring in travelers and tourists who would otherwise never have driven down the Trollway.

# 65. The Rosemaling of Patricia Edmundson: Expressing Norwegian-American Folk Art in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin

BY JARED LEE SCHMIDT

Whether they take the form of Easter eggs, musical instruments, or national costumes, the folk arts practiced by members of Wisconsin's ethnic communities symbolize the continuing importance of ethnic identity within America's mass culture. They help create a sense of continuity and belonging.”

~ John Michael Kohler Arts Center (1987:55)

## **Introduction**

Patricia “Pat” Edmundson (1929-1993) and her husband, Wallace, moved to Mount Horeb, Wisconsin in 1974, after being drawn from their home in Monona, Wisconsin by the community's “Norwegian charm.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout her life, Edmundson was a prolific, award winning, and diverse self-taught artist who left a significant impact on both her family and adopted community's ethnic identity through her artwork.

Edmundson was skilled in multiple mediums, several of which are currently on display at the Mount Horeb Historium, while others are preserved in the archives, they range from writings to drawings and painting on various surfaces and of distinct character.

One folder in the biographical storage units dedicated to Edmundson contains a series of eight hand drawn troll images.<sup>2</sup> Edmundson was known for her passion for these folk creatures and contributed greatly to the image of Mount Horeb as the “Troll Capital of the World” and the development of the “Trollway,” several of which were featured as paintings for local businesses. Three of these painting as currently on display at the exhibit, demonstrating her range of artistic talent and repertoire.<sup>3</sup> A second folder contains a collection of her original poems which was assembled following her death and range from the poignant and heartfelt to the humorous and scandalous. The cover poem, “Thinking of You” by Steve Edmundson, printed on pink paper, introduces the reader to the collection, Pat's passion for friends, family and artwork. He concludes the poem by writing that,

Someday we will join you,

1. Mount Horeb Historical Society – Scott Edmundson

2. Accession number 2007.018.0001.

3. The troll paintings by Edmundson currently on display include one painted for the former Mount Horeb Library featuring Mother Goose, trolls and Nisse (2014.017) in Section 3; Section 4 includes two more of her paintings – one features a troll wearing glasses that was painted for Drs. Guenveur & Sutter (2009.029), and the other (1999.098) features a troll wearing an A&W shirt and balancing the fast food chain's fares.

And again you'll show you care.  
We'll be greeted with poems and paintings,  
And Rosemaling everywhere.

It is in rosemaling, a style of Norwegian folk painting, that, as the poem suggests, best represents the passion and expression of Edmundson's work with Norwegian-American heritage and her artistic talents.

Considering the scope of Edmundson's work, the current study will focus on her Norwegian and Norwegian-American ethnic art, centered on the objects rosemaling by Edmundson displayed and archived as critical lenses through which object biographies can be constructed.<sup>4</sup> Utilizing a folkloristic approach and drawing from material culture studies, these objects and their biographies will be contextualized in relationship to not only Edmundson's life and career as an artist well versed in rosemaling, but the immigration of Norwegians to Wisconsin and the revitalization movement of this folk art in "America's Dairyland." This analysis will shed light on the role of craft in the development and performance of created ethnic identity and heritage among both the individual artist and their community.

### **Heritage and the Production of Norwegian-American Ethnic Identity**

At the center of this study focusing on the life and career of Edmundson is the concept of heritage. According to folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, heritage is an ascribed value determined by communities or folk groups through whose actions geared towards preservation and performance provides an item or lifestyle a "second life."<sup>5</sup> She suggests that, "Heritage not only gives buildings, precincts, and ways of life that are no longer viable for one reason or another a second life as exhibits of themselves. It also produces something new."<sup>6</sup> This notion of producing "something new" will be important to the story of both rosemaling and Edmundson's practice in the craft, particularly when considering that she did not claim any Norwegian, nor Scandinavian ancestry but descended from English and Irish immigrants. Edmundson's husband, Wallace, was the family member who claimed Norwegian ancestral identity.<sup>7</sup>

Heritage as that which is performed is particularly significant with regards to the notion, practice, and vernacular transmission of "craft" as folk art. Bruce Metcalf notes that

...most people agree that a craft object is made largely by hand, in a small studio setting and in fairly modest numbers. Studio crafts are clearly distinct from objects made by machines, or in large numbers in factory settings. On the 'art' side of the field, craft objects cannot be dissolved into pure thought the way conceptual art can. Crafts must remain handmade, more or less. If it doesn't have the imprint of the hand on it, the thing ceases to be craft in any meaningful sense.<sup>8</sup>

Craft, therefore, provides artists an opportunity to apply an "imprint of the hand" into their

4. Accession numbers 1984.041, 2014.56, 1994.015, and 1991.047.

5. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 150. .

6. Ibid.

7. Scott Edmondson, telephone conversation April 20, 2016. Scott Edmondson is Patricia and Wallace's grandson.

8. Bruce Metcalf, "The Hand at the Heart of Craft," *American Craft* 60:4 (2000): 54-61 & 66.

art. This “imprint,” regardless of the distance between the creator and craft brought on by sale, exchange, or even death, is perpetuated for fellow members of their folk group to connect with the messages being transmitted within a particular tradition of folk art. Rosemaling, through its painting by an individual artist utilizing brushes dipped in rich, vibrant colors skillfully guided by their hands, produces a craft upon the (typically wooden) surface which it is applied. However, before examining the construction and enactment, or in Edmundson’s case, adoption, of Norwegian heritage through craft, it is critical to briefly discuss the push/pull factors of Norwegian emigration to the United States. It is there that we see the source of this heritage, and the manner through which rosemaling was transplanted to Wisconsin.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Norway was amidst an economic crisis following the Napoleonic Wars coupled with a population boom and a scarcity of resources, spurring what Robin Cohen calls a “proletarian,” or labor diaspora.<sup>9101112</sup>

The first major wave of Norwegian emigration began in 1825, spurred by religious motivation. Over the course of the next three decades migrants largely consisted of families from the impoverished agrarian population. They had “caught” what historians refer to as “America fever.” Emigration from Norway began in the country’s southwest coast, followed by those from the northern coast, and eventually “spreading” to the interior, resulting in the arrival of eighty percent of all Norwegian immigrants in the United States. While emigration dropped as a result of the American Civil War and Dakota-US War of 1862 in Minnesota, by 1865, 77,873 Norwegians had moved to the United States. Of the approximately 885,000 total emigrants, 41 percent of whom were women, the dominant proportion were working class peasants with backgrounds in agriculture, fishing, and logging arrived during these periods of largest Norwegian immigration to America. These largely Lutheran practitioners established ethnic enclaves, particularly in small rural communities,

9. Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).
10. James Griffiths, *Scandinavia: At War with Trolls – A History from the Napoleonic Era to the Third Millennium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
11. James P. Leary, “Norwegian Communities.” In *Encyclopedia of American Folklife Volume 3*, ed. by Simon J. Bronner. Armonk (NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 892–895.
12. Odd S. Lovoll, *Across the Deep Blue Sea: The Saga of Early Norwegian Immigrants from Norway to American through the Canadian Gateway*. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2015).

throughout the Dakotas, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin. By 1930, Wisconsin had a first- and second-generation Norwegian immigrant population of 135,953 individuals.<sup>131415161718192021222324</sup>

In addition to community proximity near fellow Norwegians, members of this ethnic group experienced high rates of intermarriage, producing a distinct sense of identity within their enclaves.[11] Cohen suggests that within these communities there tends to develop, “a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, the transmission of a common cultural and religious heritage and the belief in a common fate.”<sup>25</sup> South Central Wisconsin became a dominant site for Norwegian immigration during the mid-1800s, particularly in Dane County. By 1900, approximately 35,000 residents of Dane County claimed Norwegian ancestry. By binding together through their traditions and shared cultural narratives, a sense of individual and group ethnic identity was strengthened

13. Betty A. Bergland, “Introduction,” in *Norwegian American Women: Migration, Communities, and Identities*, edited by Betty A. Bergland and Lori Ann Lahlum (St. Paul: Minnesota State Historical Society Press, 2011). Leary, 2006. .
14. Odd S. Lovoll, *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People (Revised Edition)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). .
15. ---, *Norwegians on the Prairie: Ethnicity and the Development of the Country Town*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006). .
16. ---, “Norwegian Immigration and Women.” In *Norwegian American Women: Migration, Communities, and Identities*, edited by Betty A. Bergland and Lori Ann Lahlum, (St. Paul: Minnesota State Historical Society Press, 2011). .
17. ---, 2015.
18. Kathleen Stokker, *Keeping Christmas: Yuletide Traditions in Norway and the New Land* (St. Paul: Minnesota State Historical Society Press, 2000).
19. Betty A. Bergland, “Introduction,” in *Norwegian American Women: Migration, Communities, and Identities*, edited by Betty A. Bergland and Lori Ann Lahlum (St. Paul: Minnesota State Historical Society Press, 2011). Leary, 2006.
20. Odd S. Lovoll, *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People (Revised Edition)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).[/footnote [footnote]---, *Norwegians on the Prairie: Ethnicity and the Development of the Country Town*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006).
21. ---, “Norwegian Immigration and Women.” In *Norwegian American Women: Migration, Communities, and Identities*, edited by Betty A. Bergland and Lori Ann Lahlum, (St. Paul: Minnesota State Historical Society Press, 2011).
22. ---, 2015.
23. Kathleen Stokker, *Keeping Christmas: Yuletide Traditions in Norway and the New Land* (St. Paul: Minnesota State Historical Society Press, 2000).
24. Lovoll, 1999.
25. Cohen, 2008:17.

in opposition to those which were similarly being developed around them.<sup>2627</sup> This pattern of settlement, rural localities, and intermarriage, would provide the groundwork for what Scandinavian Studies Scholar B. Marcus Cederström refers to as *folkloristic koineization*, which, coupled with the concept of heritage, provides another theoretical lens through which Norwegian-American identity and the expansion of rosemaling in the United States can be examined.

### **Folkloristic Koineization and Rosemaling among Norwegian-Americans**

Folkloristic koineization draws from linguistic *koinés* to examine the formation and expression of ethnic communities (i.e. Swedish-American). Cederström defines this as,

...an amalgamation of forms of folklore and practices which have been simplified in some cases, complicated in others, practiced, celebrated, and observed in somewhat different ways, all the while invested with meanings somewhat different than the original. What emerges is a unique culture and ethnicity that is often performed or celebrated with the involvement of various audiences, even participants who are cultural outsiders to the original.

He then suggests seven guiding principles which may produce an “amalgamation” of ethnicities:<sup>28</sup>

Principle 1: Cultural traditions found only in one region or country, i.e. marked regional traditions, are disfavored. Traditions found in two or more regions or countries, i.e. traditions which are unmarked, are favored by community members for whom social integration is paramount.

Principle 2: Culturally simple features are more often adopted than complex ones.

Principle 3: Adults, adolescents, and children influence the outcome of cultural contact differently.

Principle 4: The adoption of traditions by a community member depends on his or her social network characteristics.

Principle 5: There is no normal historical continuity with the locality, either socially or culturally. Most first- and second-generation immigrant community members are oriented toward traditions originating elsewhere.

Principle 6: From initial dissemination, focusing takes place over one or two generations.

Principle 7: Because of cultural maturation, the structure of the new immigrant community is first discernible in the traditions of native-born adults.<sup>29</sup>

These principles can be utilized to describe the construction and perpetuation of folk groups

26. Janet Gilmore, “Mount Horeb’s Oljanna Venden Cunneen. A Norwegian-American Rosemaler ‘on the Edge.’ *ARV Nordic Year of Folklore* 65 (2009): 25-48. Lovoll, 1999.

27. Mount Horeb Area Historical Society, *Mount Horeb – Presettlement to 1986: A History Celebrating Mount Horeb’s Quasquicentennial*, (Blanchardville, WI: Ski Printers, 1986).

28. B. Marcus Cederström, “Folkloristic Koinés and the Emergence of Swedish-American Ethnicity,” *ARV Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 86 (2012), 124.

29. *Ibid*, 131-132.

through which ethnic identity is a unifying factor. This framework is useful because it can be extended to examine any ethnic group one may seek to understand in the United States (and beyond) and observe variation within the performance of ethnic identity within similar ethnic groups.

The material culture to which rosemaling has been applied tell the stories of thousands of Norwegians as they immigrated to the United States, their struggles to recreate their way of life in diaspora, the development of ethnic folk group identity among their descendants, and the revitalization movements of folk art in the State of Wisconsin. Due to their capacity to tell narratives of rich, emotional depth which connect people across space and time, these items, such as those by Patricia Edmundson, become what Rachel P. Maines and James J. Glynn refer to as “numinous objects.” Numinous objects, the authors suggest,

...are examples of material culture that have acquired sufficient perceived significance by association to merit preservation in the public trust. They are the objects we collect and preserve not for what they may reveal to us as material documents, or for any visible aesthetic quality, but for their association, real or imagined, with some person, place, or event endowed with special sociocultural magic. The “numinosity” of an artifact or place, the intangible and invisible quality of its significance, consists in its presumed association with something, either in the past or in the imagination or both, that carries emotional weight with the viewer.<sup>30</sup>

The “sociocultural magic” attached to Edmundson’s pieces are derived from multiple sources. Throughout her career, Edmundson directly participated in the production of Norwegian heritage in Mount Horeb, donating pieces of artwork for display, sale and competition at numerous community events, like *The Song of Norway* play, and the popular tourist attraction Little Norway. As a result, her objects attained a status of significance to the MHAHS which denoted the necessity for preservation of these pieces of folk art. During discussions with Scott Edmundson, one can hear the fondness of his memory for his grandmother when sharing information about her rosemaling. Such memories associated between Patricia and her paintings which the family has carefully preserved in their own homes and offices imbued these objects with a “numinosity” derived from connection to an extended family which still resides in Dane County.

Through attributing the numinous of family and community, heritage as that perpetuated through craft creates an “imprint.” This is found on both a physical and intangible level through Edmundson’s artistic manipulation of material culture. Odd Lovoll demonstrates the intimate connection between craft and the meaning of heritage in rosemaling, stating that,

Even given the appeal of rosemaling on purely aesthetic and decorative grounds to Norwegians and non-Norwegians alike, its striking visible call to a unique heritage, in its artistic as well as in its more spurious presentations, speaks to an individual search for roots and identity with the past that is evident in many areas of Norwegian-American reinvention and reinterpretation of tradition. Rosemaling, even on caskets and grave markers, discloses a deep emotional component in ethnic identity.<sup>31</sup>

One of the most important aspects of “numinosity,” according to Maines and Glynn, is the interaction between these objects and a claim to authenticity. Regina Bendix notes that to

30. Maines, Rachel P. & James J. Glynn, “Numinous Objects.” *The Public Historian* 1 (1993): 10.

31. Odd S. Lovoll, 1999: 233.

be considered authentic means to be “original, genuine, or unaltered,” however, “the semantic domain the term invokes has grown so broad and elusive that one is tempted to place it in the catalogue of ‘plastic words’...words that have come to mean so much that they really mean very little while nonetheless signaling importance and power.” When the “ideal” of authenticity is invoked, Bendix notes, it becomes “increasingly intertwined with sociopolitical, aesthetic, and moral aspects with market concerns.”<sup>32</sup> This is important to take into consideration when remembering that Edmundson was not Norwegian-American, but adopted this folk art through a passion for the craft, a talent for painting, and association with Norway through her husband. Does this make Edmundson’s rosemaling no longer “authentic”? Maines and Glynn, through declaring that Edmundson’s rosemaling are numinous objects, would argue otherwise. “The force of belief in numinous objects,” they suggest, “transforms artifacts and places for believers with great power and persistence, even when their authenticity is denied by authorities.” I agree with Maines and Glynn, and to demonstrate a claim to the authentic through the numinous, we must briefly engage in the development of rosemaling in Norway and the revitalization of the craft in Wisconsin.

Rosemaling emerged during the eighteenth century and proliferated in Norway, developing distinct and representative stylistic variations as practiced in specific regions by villagers in country sides and valleys. This folk art is derived from an infusion of influences from the Viking’s use of interweaving patterns, mainland European “zig zag” borders and motifs centered on geometric shapes during the Renaissance, and rural folk carving designs. Bertha Mitchell Whyte further observes that, “Baroque scroll forms based on the acanthus leaf were popular throughout Europe in the eighteenth century and were incorporated into the rosemaling designs also. In Sweden, designs featured figures, animals, and realistic flowers. In Norway the flower designs were more imaginary and stylized.”<sup>33</sup> Rosemaling is a folk painting characterized by two-dimensional floral designs and typically features roses, geometric shapes, tendrils, and the use of several colors, especially reds, blues, whites and greens. This art form was originally applied to wooden surfaces which had been carved or on the interior walls of churches, but predominantly came to represent art in the home, and was eventually expanded to be applied to any wood surface of various size and purpose and is utilized in print form for various commercial or decoration.<sup>34</sup> According to artist Nils Ellingsgard, the name rosemaling, “is probably derived from the name of the flower, even though in some dialects it encompasses a great deal more than merely flora painting. In Norwegian the verb *rose* can mean to *decorate*, and rose painting means quite simply decorative painting.”<sup>35</sup> As Norwegians immigrated to the United States, many, like Per Lysne (1880-1947), brought this painting technique with them across the Atlantic in the form of learned skills. Thousands of others would bring the artwork of their homeland with them via heirloom

32. Regina Bendix, “Diverging Paths in the Scientific Search for Authenticity”. *Journal of Folklore Research* 29.2 (1992):104.

33. Bertha Kitchell Whyte, *Craftsmen of Wisconsin*. (Racine, WI: Western Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), 31.

34. Janet Gilmore, 2009.

35. Nils Ellingsgard, *Norwegian Rose Painting in America: What the Immigrants Brought*. (Decorah: Scandinavian University Press, 1993), 12.



items, such as ale bowls, *tinas* (wooden food containers) and the trunks donated by Guri Jeglum and the Ole Vingi family currently here on display.<sup>36</sup>

Rosemaling has distinct stylistic variations bearing the name of the region from which it developed largely through the artistry of talented individuals from lower socioeconomic status who incorporated the design influences brought to Norway by those of higher class structures. The two most prominent forms of rosemaling, both in Norway and the United States, are Telemark and Hallingdal, which Ellingsgard refers to as “the core areas of the art (and where) the most distinctive local styles came into being and here we find the greatest number of painters.”<sup>37</sup> The significance of Telemark and Hallingdal cannot be overstated in the narratives of rosemaling in America and the artistry of Edmundson. These regions, located in the south and the eastern portions of Norway, experienced a vast population drainage to the United States through diaspora. As such, many of these immigrants brought with them their renowned, highly marketable, and lavish variation of rosemaling to their new hostland.<sup>38</sup> As a local example, the rosemalled water tower in Mount Horeb is located on Telemark Parkway. Folklorist Janet Gilmore observes that this water tower “rises at Mount Horeb’s eastern border alongside the major northeast–southwest freeway, alerting travelers that they are entering a territory with a heightened sense of Norwegian–American heritage, and denser Norwegian–American settlement. It reveals emphatically that specific design motifs have been adopted as badges of Norwegian–American identity in the greater Upper Midwestern region.”<sup>39</sup>

Here Cederström’s first principle, wherein immigrant ethnic communities produce their koineized culture through practicing traditions that represent a wider “old-world” regionalism as opposed to specific political localities becomes particularly salient. Rosemaling in all variations operate as representatives of this folk art which is prevalent throughout both countries, and Lovoll observes that, “The folk art of rosemaling is the most emblematic of a Norwegian–American identity and the most popular expression of a transplanted, and, if you will, reinvented folk tradition.”<sup>40</sup> Yet through immigration from and the influence of the Telemark and Hallingdal regions, they operate as the dominant expressive form of this art among Norwegian-Americans. Drawing on the widespread practice of rosemaling among Norwegians represents Cederström’s second principle wherein ethnic groups express identity through traditions which may be considered “culturally simple features,” while those deemed more complicated are left behind. With so many individuals knowledgeable about Telemark and Hallingdal, it would not be surprising to observe that individuals not only practice these more commonly, but pass them along via vernacular exchange. These principles help denote the development and expression of a Norwegian–American ethnicity and the role rosemaling, particularly among these two distinct variations, play in creating heritage.

36. Nils Ellingsgard, “Rosemaling: A Folk Art in Migration.” In *Norwegian Folk Art: The Migration of a Tradition*, ed. by Marion Nelson (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 190–237. Kitchell Whyte, 1971. .

37. Nils Ellingsgard, “Rosemaling: A Folk Art in Migration.” In *Norwegian Folk Art: The Migration of a Tradition*, edited by Marion Nelson, 190–237, (New York: Abbeville Press), 1995.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Janet Gilmore, 2009: 25–26.

40. Lovoll, 1998:228.

Figure 1 (Accession 2014.56)<sup>41</sup> of this study, which is currently on display, can be identified as Telemark due to the stronger emphasis on calligraphy that is formed around the C- and S-shaped Rococo stems. Meanwhile, items in the museum's archive, like item 1994.015, a rosemalled wooden plate with rust coloring (Figure 4), fall into a unique category as it appears to blend design elements from both Telemark and Hallingdal due to the muted degree of calligraphy and the style of the flower in the center, which are characteristics of Hallingdal. Due to the fact that this plate was among one of Edmundson's earlier pieces (1973), she may have still been experimenting with styles, learning techniques per each variation, and refining her brush strokes as opposed to the wooden plaque she painted in 1984. However, and this may be more the more likely answer, the case may be that Edmundson was enacting her own artistic perspective onto this wooden plate. Scott Edmundson suggests that his grandmother, "intentionally deviated from technically 'correct' techniques and/or colors out of personal preference. For some of those pieces, she would sometimes win 'most popular' awards."<sup>42</sup>

In *Harley's to Hardangers: A Survey of Wisconsin Folk Art*, a collection of folk art gathered by folklorists Jim Leary and Janet Gilmore collected by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, the scholars make the following commentary which contextualizes not only rosemaling, but folk art more broadly and the role Patricia Edmundson played in this tradition,

Within Wisconsin communities, most folk arts are passed from generation to generation by informal means. Novices acquire their skills by observing and imitating the work of more senior artists, through loosely structured apprenticeships or more casual review and criticism. Through this direct interaction, artists learn the techniques and processes necessary to the making of a costume, fiddle, or fishing fly. They also master the vocabulary of forms, designs, and decorations which gives the object meaning and significance within the community.

Other methods of passing on folk arts have emerged recently. 'Revivals' and 'revitalizations,' for example, are deliberate efforts to reclaim folk art forms no longer actively practiced within a particular community. Workshops, classes, and publications devoted to teaching traditional arts have also grown in popularity. Such efforts sometimes permit the reinstatement or continuation of a particular folk art form within the original community."<sup>43</sup>

Rosemaling in Norway was similarly passed along through vernacular exchange, particularly among the peasantry as they sought a living. However, Lovoll notes that when Norwegians arrived in the United States, many who were trained in this art were unable to continue practicing it as an income producing craft due to the demands of building their new lives. Furthermore, the necessity to produce one's own goods was dramatically reduced in the United States due to readily

41. Accession numbers 1984.041 (a rosemalled oval plaque – Figure 5) and 1991.047 (a rosemalled cutting board – Figure 6) in the museum's collection similarly display Telemark.

42. Scott Edmundson, personal communication, April 21, 2016.

43. John Michael Kohler Arts Center, *From Hardanger to Harleys : A Survey of Wisconsin Folk Art* (Sheboygan:John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 1987)81.

available mass produced items necessary to settle and build a homestead. As such, folk arts like carving and rosemaling slowly began to fade from practice yet remained significant through heirloom items brought from Norway.<sup>44</sup>

During the 1940s, an American revival of rosemaling began spurred largely through the intricate and public paintings of the “father of American rosemaling,” Per Lysne.<sup>45</sup> Lysne had immigrated to the United States from Laerdal in Sogn, Norway in 1907 and moved to Stoughton, Wisconsin, thirty miles to the east of Mount Horeb. In Wisconsin he began quickly producing artwork in a struggling economy, but this high production gained him accolades and recognition across his new country, as well as followers and students through whom his influence can still be felt within the rosemaling community. In Norway, rosemalers were predominantly men, but due to the nature of social structures in the United States and the allure of craft, this art style was largely picked up by women who utilized it as both a hobby and an opportunity to express identity. During the 1960s and 1970s the folk art revival for rosemaling truly took off in the United States, and during this period Edmundson began practicing rosemaling. Due to a lack of initially available teachers, the majority of these women, and men, were self-taught artists who joined together in community.<sup>46</sup> This, Gilmore observes, “promoted a community identity that acknowledged a strong Norwegian–American component while honoring the region’s tradition of ethnic pluralism.”<sup>47</sup>

Through the folk art revival brought on by interested individuals like Edmundson, rosemaling experienced an Americanization in how the tradition was transmitted and expressed via folkloristic koineization. Traditions among koineized groups, Cederström notes in his fifth principle, are not tied to the site wherein immigration took place but instead to where they originated. Had a large Norwegian immigrant population not arrived and established ethnic enclaves like Mount Horeb, there would be no real reason to identify this folk art with Wisconsin or the Upper Midwest since it did not develop in this region of America. Gilmore, concerning the spread of the rosemaling folk art revival, states that,

Nationwide, interests in decorative folk painting of varied traditions at first drew women of all backgrounds who liked to paint. But the trend fueled interest specifically in rosemaling among women of Norwegian descent—often second- and third-generation Norwegian–Americans who were beginning to explore their ethnic heritage.<sup>48</sup>

This embodies the sixth principle of folkloristic koineization wherein, “From initial dissemination, focusing takes place over one or two generations.”<sup>49</sup> Specific regional variations of rosemaling traditions may be lost for the sake of the practices continuation and folk group formation and

44. Lovoll, 1999.

45. The current exhibit has on display a chair (2014.050.0049) rosemaled by Lysne which can be found in Section 3.

46. Gilmore, 2009. Lovoll, 1999.

47. Gilmore, 2009:33.

48. Ibid.

49. Cederström, 2012:32.

cohesion. This can further be evidenced by artists adopting styles not typically associated with their ancestral homes and blending styles, as Edmundson frequently practiced. The seventh principle suggests that traditional expression of folklore is most prevalent in the first generation of immigrant adults. As their children grow they begin to incorporate American cultural values and practices, which can be observed through the craft movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the leisure associated with rosemailing, and a desire to express an ethnic identity that blends American ideals of *e pluribus unum*.

### **Edmundson, Craft, and Tradition**

Edmundson was born in 1929 in Janesville, Wisconsin. Around the age of 19, she married Wallace and, as newlyweds, moved to Monona, Wisconsin in the late 1940s. In 1968, Edmundson enrolled in a rosemailing course due to her curiosity in this art style and demonstrated a natural talent and proficiency. Scott notes that his grandmother entered one of her pieces into a competition in Stoughton, and, still very new to practicing this craft, placed it into the “Novice” category. Nonetheless she was awarded 2nd Place in the “Professional” category. This was the very first time she had competed in rosemailing.

The couple moved to Mount Horeb in 1974 where they resided for the remainder of their lives. Moving to the ethnically expressive Norwegian community of Mount Horeb with her Norwegian-American husband provides the context for Cederström’s fourth principle, in which social networks are required for folkloristic koineization to occur within a community. Edmundson was surrounded by fellow artists performing their heritage in a town which openly embraced this Norwegian-American identity. The family moved into a four bedroom household, with the smallest room operating as Edmundson’s rosemailing studio. Scott fondly recalls that during his summertime visits, which lasted from one to two weeks each season, his grandparents’ entire household smelled like oil paint.<sup>50</sup>

Through observing Edmundson’s work over her career, one can observe not only a refinement of her craft, but a development of individual style within the motif structures of rosemailing. Scott notes that while she initially learned rosemailing from a class, she was largely self-taught. This is one reason for the confusion among some pieces or rosemailing which may preclude stylistic categorization. Additionally, objects such as the oval plaque (1984.414) represent her introduction into the economy of the art world through the necessity to purchase brushes, oil paints, wooden materials (she did not carve her own bowls, for example), and the requirement of setting aside a special room as a studio in her home. As such, funds were continuously needed to be allocated towards her passion and would similarly need to be produced through a reciprocal relationship from her passion as her pieces were sold, commissioned, or received awards.

As Edmundson honed her craft, she also began teaching rosemailing. Dorothy Noyes suggests that tradition contains a “performative action.” She states that, “Performers may hope to hand on their knowledge to inheritors authorized by blood or formal affiliation, but above all they look for those who will be willing and competent to do the work. That hand-to-hand transfer we may take as a metaphor for the transmission of metaknowledge along with the practice itself...”<sup>51</sup> A wooden cutting board archived in the museum’s collection (Figure 6 - 2014.56) is a representative of both

50. Scott Edmundson, interview via telephone. April 19, 2016.

51. Dorothy Noyes, “Tradition: Three Traditions”. *Journal of Folklore Research* 46, (2009): 233–68.

this “handing down” of tradition via vernacular exchange through educational opportunities, but the development of community and relationships among members of this folk group. According to Gilmore, rosemaling as it spread in the United States among Norwegian-Americans was commonly transmitted via vernacular exchange from a skilled teacher to student(s).<sup>52</sup> Items like the cutting board represent a connection of shared heritage through the “performance” of a tradition, a passionate exchange from one tradition bearer to another, and enacts Cederström’s third principle of folkloristic koineization, wherein the success and perpetuation of an ethnic tradition depends on the involvement of and influence on generations of practitioners over time.

The cutting board Figure 5 (1984.41), along with the oval shaped rosemalled plaque, donated by Edmundson and held in the archives, represent another critical component to the role of rosemaling and the intentionality of folk art in Wisconsin. According to the folk art guide collected for the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, “Many of Wisconsin’s ethnic folk traditions are intended for use in the home. Their audience is limited to family and friends. Many other ethnic folk arts address larger audiences – the ethnic community as a whole and the general public. These traditional arts serve both as personal expressions and as public emblems of ethnicity.”<sup>53</sup> Neither of these objects were utilized as practical day-to-day items, as is evident through the lack of cut marks on the cutting board. Rather, they are for decoration and declaration of Norwegian-American ethnicity to family and friends and a reminder of either one’s heritage or passion for artwork brought to the United State through immigration. Through the application of rosemaling, they become numinous due to the story of rosemaling and the practice of passing along a tradition.

In addition to teaching, competing, and crafting pieces for family, Edmundson created artwork for Little Norway and contributed to the *Song of Norway* festival in Mount Horeb, both of which operated as strong expressions of heritage and the development of folkloristic koineization in the community and impacted her identity and reputation. Little Norway was a popular tourist attraction located four miles west of Mount Horeb. This site was originally inhabited by the Haugen family, Norwegian immigrants who settled and farmed in the valley until 1920. Isak Dahle, who was struck by the picturesque nature of the valley and its “Old World” buildings, purchased the site in 1926. Dahle then restored and repurposed many of the available buildings to operate as cobbler shops, storehouses, and other Norwegian immigrant farming structures. Dahle remained the valley *Nissedahle*, or Valley of the Elves. In Norwegian, the word would actually be spelled *Nissedal*, however, Dahle altered the spelling to place a family mark on the valley and harken back to the ancestral home in the Telemark region of Norway. The most striking and characteristic structure was the relocated *stave* church constructed in Trondheim, Norway for the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition. After eighty-five years the site closed its doors due to financial constraints. Housed within the ornate structure was 7,000 individual artifacts, many of which were either auctioned off or donated to local historical societies.<sup>54</sup>

Edmundson was among many of the artists to participate in expressing her Norwegian heritage

52. Janet Gilmore, “Mount Horeb’s Oljanna Venden Cunneen. A Norwegian-American Rosemaler ‘on the Edge.’

ARV *Nordic Year of Folklore*, (65)2009: 25-48.

53. John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 1987:55

54. Little Norway Tourist Promotional booklet (N.D.) – Courtesy of Mount Horeb Historical Society. Little Norway

at this site by contributing her craft and hosting rosemaling demonstrations. Through her rosemaling she was able to participate in the tourism economy by producing works of art for sale. The painting in Figure 2 (2014.050) was painted during the late 1970s, and features a single, simplistic yet elegant rosemaling motif set against a creamy background framed by an egg and dart trim which was built circa 1900. In 1980, the owners of Little Norway removed it from sale and placed it into their collections. This piece is now on display at the Historium. The firkin (Figure 3 - 2014.050) was also painted for Little Norway during the 1970s, but this item was a gift to Little Norway. Firkins are designed to store food and cooking items, such as butter and sugar, but through rosemaling this most basic of household functional items becomes an expression of ethnic identity. Edmundson effectively transformed the everyday into something extraordinary.

Of particular significance to this essay and the contextualization of Edmundson's rosemaling is the pageant *Song of Norway*. Beginning in 1966, this annual outdoor pageant featured local and professional actors presenting a fictionalized account of Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg. This play operated as a cultural performance of Norwegian identity and heritage from which Norwegian-Americans could draw inspiration as professional actors and members of the community viewed on stage.<sup>55</sup> Richard Baumann notes that cultural performances "tend to be the most prominent performance contexts within a community. They are, as a rule, scheduled events, restricted in setting, clearly bounded, and widely public, involving the most highly formalized performance forms and accomplished performers of the community."<sup>56</sup> This provided a strength to what Norwegian-American identity in the community meant and connected residents to the larger story of Norway.

In recognition of the play's 25th anniversary, Edmundson painted an intricately decorated bowl (Figure 1) as a gift to Richard "Dick" Horn (1941-1990), who was incredibly active in the success of this play and served as the organization's president and vice president. Additionally, he was as a board member for the Mount Horeb Historical Society for fifteen years and operated as a curator for the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison for twenty-six years. This 12"x13.5" wooden bowl is significant due to its connection with this performance of heritage and the celebration of the role he played, but also because of the intricate work displayed. The rich blue Rococo C stems delicately interweaves with the red and green floral motifs and delicate flowers against a stark black background. This central design with Edmundson's signature tucked into the bottom center, is bordered by a matching print highlighting the artist's skill with fine lines and contrast as it is situated next to a continuous series of blue blocks at the bowl's edge. This bowl demonstrates Edmundson's high degree of skill to complete each intricate brush stroke across the curved surface.

Painted on the outer edge of the bowl in Gothic Norwegian is the (translated) phrase, "The Biggest Happiness One Can Have is to Make Another Happy." This not only harkens back to the mother tongue of many of Mount Horeb's Norwegian-American ancestors, and the language which

– Mount Horeb Mail. Mount Horeb Chamber of Commerce, *The Mount Horeb Centennial Book 1861-1961* (Mount Horeb Chamber of Commerce, 1962).

55. Jack Holzhueter, Sherri J. Hefty & Andrea Christofferson, "Song of Norway: 25th Anniversary," Mount Horeb: Song of Norway, Ltd., 1991.

56. Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, 1977):28.

would have been spoken by the characters featured in *Song of Norway*, but is reminiscent of the work by artists like Per Lysne who utilized Gothic print to write Norwegian messages on the walls of homes and on other pieces of art. In this piece one is able to view the culmination of Edmundson's craft *and* her embrace of Norwegian-American ethnic identity and heritage passed across generations through a rich craft tradition.

### Conclusion

Folk art and craft do not exist in a vacuum but are enacted through the expressive talents of passionate tradition bearers across generations, particularly when they concern the identity formation of ethnicity. Patricia "Pat" Edmundson was just such an artist who, through her loving adoption and representation of Norwegian-American folk traditions like *rosemaling* was able to positively influence the material culture of her family, friends, and community. With each stroke of paint across a wooden surface, whether it be a bold blue Rococo motif, Gothic Norwegian print, or a beautiful flower on the edge of a bowl, Edmundson transmitted the narrative of thousands of Norwegian immigrants as they journeyed to a new life in the United States.

### Appendix



Figure 1: Rosemalled Bowl (1991.047)



Figure 2: Rosemald board with frame



Figure 3- Rosemald Firkin (2014.050)

Figure 4: Rosemald Plate (1994.015)

Figure 5: Rosemald Plaque in Telemark style (1984.041)

Figure 6: Rosemald Cutting Board (2014.56)

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# 66. Martin Cliff's Hardanger Fiddle: An Epitomic Norwegian Cultural Icon

BY ALEXANDER DAVIS



**Hardanger**  
Norwegian-  
Martin Cliff  
Wood (maple,  
spruce, ebony,  
mother of pearl,  
metal, bone)  
Museum of  
MHAHS  
2003.028.00

The music of Norway is as iconic as it is rich with cultural history, tradition and aesthetic appeal. Passed down from generation to generation, having traveled and transformed from its origins in Scandinavia to the Midwest region of the United States, Norwegian musical culture carries a complex narrative ripe for scholarly analysis and educational discovery. A prime example of an object for analysis is one of the most prominent symbols of Norwegian music, the Hardanger fiddle. The Hardanger fiddle is arguably representative of the country's musical heritage for its unique, recognizable form and style, as well as its historical connections to the cultivation of musical culture in Norway as a whole. I had the privileged opportunity of being able to engage with a Hardanger fiddle from Mt. Horeb hands on for this class and see for myself the mythical qualities this object is said to possess. This specific fiddle was crafted by none other than a Mt. Horeb resident of the former half of the 20th century, Mr. Martin Cliff. In this paper, I will examine the essential qualities of the Hardanger fiddle as an object of folk art and folk music history and argue that the Hardanger fiddle serves as the defining cultural symbol for Norwegian music culture and is significant in the realm of material culture because it is a model object, defined by Jean Baudrillard in his work *The System of Objects*. I will rely on Baudrillard's work, as well as the works of Kristian Lange and Theodore C. Blegen, who both wrote extensive works on Norwegian music, in order to further support my thesis.

I would like to first detail the process of my research into the life of the maker of this fiddle, Martin Cliff, discuss my findings, then later on examine the formal aspects of the object itself after providing a foundation for which key artistic choices may be more easily understood. Afterwards, a comparison between the closest to the original model of the Hardanger fiddle to Cliff's Hardanger

fiddle series object, another term defined by Baudrillard, will serve to distinguish Cliff's fiddle from the model object based on differentiating aspects and personalizations that prove to be useful in arguing for the Hardanger fiddle as an important cultural material object. Having then identified the unique qualities of Cliff's fiddle, I will broaden the scope of my approach and examine the larger-scale tropes of Norwegian music culture as a whole and present my research respectively. By blowing up the scale of my argument, then narrowing in on the consistent qualities found in Cliff's narrative and his fiddle's narrative, I will be able to fluidly maneuver my example and further support my claims. Finally, after going sufficiently in-depth about the object, its maker, and the culture it represents, I will connect Cliff's Hardanger fiddle and its individual narrative to the greater narrative of the Hardanger fiddle as a significant material object in Norwegian music culture. The representation of Cliff's heritage will be made clear through the deeper analysis of this fiddle and hopefully shed light on the importance Norwegian music culture has on the American Midwest, specifically in Wisconsin.

The research that went into this project began with first asking the question: what is it I want to achieve in studying this object as art? After actually seeing and handling the fiddle myself the answer to that question began to seem more clear. In wanting to connect this object of beautiful craftsmanship to its crafter on a personal level, I gathered all available information I could on Martin Cliff. Unfortunately, the only viable information I was able to find was from the Mt. Horeb Historical Society. Most of his closest relatives were also deceased, and I did not have the means, nor the use of contacting any living ones. However, the information the historical society had was more than sufficient for the argument I was trying to make. Son of Norwegian emigrants Siri and Arne Klevgaard, later adapted to Sarah and Arne Cliff, Martin Cliff was born in the township of Blue Mounds, Wisconsin on March 3rd, 1876. His parents were pioneers to the settlement of Blue Mounds, one of the first settlements in the state of Wisconsin. Martin spent the majority of his life in Blue Mounds, originally being a carpenter but later transitioning to a life of farming that he would sustain until he died. In 1904, he married Miss Clara Kompelien and they settled down as farmers in Blue Mounds. He had 4 children 4 children. Cliff also held multiple positions in the departments of treasury in local bureaucratic establishments, from a communal cheese company in the Blue Mounds area to the Mt. Horeb Parochial School in the latter half of his life. However, he excelled in the area of farming, being detailed as an "artist farmer, doing everything with perfection" by a former neighbor of his, Alvin Thompson, who lived next to him in Blue Mounds. In 1936, Martin moved with his family to Mt. Horeb after retiring from farming to settle down once more on a farm, this time with a larger family and in a new location. Martin died on the 18th of December, 1950, on his farm and was buried in Mt. Horeb. He lived a wholesome life involved in his community and devoted to his family, humbly in tradition.

It would have been at the age of 19 that he made his Hardanger Fiddle, aforementioned a cultural icon in the realm of music in Norwegian tradition. A young adult engaging in the trade of carpentry, eager to craft a piece reflective of the efforts of his studious labor and training. Examining the formal aspects of his fiddle and trying to make assumptions based in his artistic choices, in this case, has its limits that should not be exceeded, or else incorrect judgments based outside of fact would be made. For instance, a safe observation paired with an interpretation can be made about the neck of the fiddle . Compared to a professionally crafted traditional Hardanger fiddle, which exudes a more native Norwegian ornamentation aesthetic, the flowered designs of the abalone shell which run down the neck to the tailpiece on Cliff's fiddle appear to be crafted by

someone not traditionally trained in apprenticeship of Hardanger fiddle making; that is to say the design was done by eye and done in the style Martin produced, not a traditional style he fabricated verbatim after years of intense training. The spirit of this detail represents the very nature of folk art itself, being the translation of tradition and heritage by second generation individuals of first generation artistic traditions. The omitting of artistic details from the model in a series object is one of the few safe assumptions one can make in examining series objects in comparison to their respective model objects they take design from. In order to better understand the intricacies and observable artistic choices Cliff could have made in the crafting of this fiddle, and the significance of these observable differences let us further explore this idea of model and series, presented by Jean Baudrillard in *The System of Objects*.

The idea of the first Norwegian Hardanger fiddle being a model for all other Hardanger fiddles to come after it is distinguished by Jean Baudrillard by its visible qualities compared to the varied personalization of its modeled series objects. To directly quote Baudrillard, “the psychosociological dynamic of model and series does not operate at the level of the object’s primary function, but merely at the level of a secondary function, at the level of the ‘personalized’ object” (Baudrillard 151). This jargoned sentence broken down simply means that the difference in “operation,” or social function of the object comes down to the level of personalization a series object has inherited distanced from its original model object it was based off of. Examining Cliff’s fiddle under this theoretical lens, let us critically compare it as a series object to examples of the closest known traditional Hardanger fiddle model objects.

The model Hardanger fiddle, colloquially described by the Hadanger Fiddle Association of America (HFAA) as “sort of like a violin, but it has a whole lot of pegs, the top is carved funny, it has pearl and bone inlay, and is decorated with flowery drawings,” is easily identifiable and distinguishable as a unique model object in terms of cultural operation. Although some may argue that it is a series object of the violin, for the purpose and scope of this paper, no such comparison will be engaged with. The traditional Hardanger fiddle presents physical qualities identifiable of the cultural heritage of Norway: light brown woods, rosemaled designs in carvings, shellfish shell ornamentation, the carving of a dragon/lion in the scroll, and hand-carved pegs in the head of the scroll as well. Each traceable quality has originated from centuries of inherited artistic tradition, from the mysterious, oldest traceable fiddle back to 1651. Personalization over time has adapted in tandem with changing cultural norms, for instance the massive emigration of Norwegian peoples to America brought the Hardanger fiddle to America, which would be sure to have drastic impacts on the personalization of second generation’s crafting of the fiddles (like Cliff’s). Each following deviation in variable combination strays the series objects further away from their model foundations, yet connects them more deeply to the model just as easily. Any personalization that seems so outrageously deviant from the model can be seen as paying homage to the cultural foundations the model was founded on, yet simply incorporating contemporary elements in order to personalize and internalize the object. The objective of personalization is not to separate the series from the model, rather connect the series object, the model object, and an individual together through commonalities found in the cultural aspects of each agent. The important question to ask is who the individual is in this transaction, for it may differ depending on the situation. In the case of the consumer, personalization allows for the individual to feel deeper connected to the spirit of the model object in the form of a series object that is personalized better to accommodate to the varying qualities of the subjective consumer. In the case of the

crafter of a personalized object, the crafter must first understand what he/she is changing from the model when personalizing their series object in order to confer any subjective meaning in their personalization of the object. And in terms of the original creator of the model, being able to see the cultural differences between personalized series objects and the model object displays the infinite variability of subjective interpretation from others onto a work of art, proving its unlimited connective power in forming such complex cultural potential. These relationships form the aspects underlying the foundation of grander concepts in material culture and consumerism, and can further aid in interpreting the cultural significance of the Hardanger fiddle.

The personalized aspects of Cliff's fiddle show not only the deviation from the model Hardanger fiddle, but as well the care and consideration towards Norwegian cultural tradition. Although the fiddle was restored by renowned Hardanger fiddle craftsman Ron Post in 2003, the key parts that reflect the aforementioned homage to Norwegian culture are still in tact. For instance, the carved scroll of the fiddle in the shape of a dragon/lion , an identifiable icon of royalty and pride in Norwegian culture, gives perhaps the most insight into the personalization of this object. Although it nearly identical to the model Hardanger fiddle scroll, incredible detail in the form of wood carving and abalone inlay is found on the back of the dragon's head. Cliff succeeds insurmountably in his use of the abalone on this object; the careful placement of each fragment and its relation in location to each other fragment of shell gives the neck downward, as well as the back of the scroll ornamental focal points for the aesthetic of the object. It is in this style, where the identical aspects of the series object to the model object deviate, yet remain consistent on a level of the cultural identification of specific artistic components, that Martin Cliff is able to claim artistic ownership and individuality of his fiddle while still paying homage to Norwegian artistic tradition.

However, in order for one to clearly see said discernable traits and differences between the model fiddle and Cliff's fiddle, some basic level of Norwegian culture, specifically musical culture, must be understood. Given that Norwegian musical culture dates back before the common era and is extremely diverse and somewhat pedantic, let us focus on only the essential history for this argument: the cultural history and development of the Hardanger fiddle and its classifiable Norwegian sound. In his work, *Norwegian Music: A Brief Survey*, Kristian Lange details carefully these words on the Hardanger fiddle:

“The youngest of the essentially Norwegian instruments is the Hardanger fiddle. It is believed to have developed in its present form between 1550 and 1650—the oldest specimen persevered is to be found in the Museum at Bergen and is dated 1651. The special feature on the Hardanger fiddle is that apart from the four strings found on an ordinary violin there is another set of strings set below, which vibrate in sympathy. The origin of these sympathetic strings can be described as traditional but it might also have been borrowed from abroad, where there were several types of instruments with similar undertones, such as the Scottish bagpipes, the Drehleier from Central Europe, and the Viola d'Amore. These sympathetic strings on the Hardanger fiddle have made the shape of the instrument somewhat different from that of an ordinary violin. The neck is broader and a little shorter, while the peg box is longer in order to make room for the four extra pegs. The back is more arched and the belly higher. The fiddle is usually much more ornate than an ordinary violin, both neck and soundbox being richly decorated with inlaid silver and mother-of-pearl, and the end of the tail-piece is often elegantly carved. Finally, the bridge is higher than that on a violin, to allow for the underlying strings, but it also has a less pronounced curve on top, to enable the player to use the bow on as many as three strings at once” (Lange 15-16).

Lange's focus on the comparison of the Hardanger fiddle to the traditional violin is not simply a comparison between the fiddle and its closest instrumental relative, but as well an opportunity for comparison between cultures. Each difference and similarity can be used to delineate key tropes of Norwegian culture that differ from other European cultures. Lange's most essential difference he writes about is the additional set of strings that "vibrate in sympathy" (Lange 15). The most important aspect of an instrument is arguably how it sounds and because of these additional sympathetic strings the fiddle becomes individually unique and separate from the violin. An instrument conceived in the traditional styles of music from ancient Norway, although it is young in comparison, still equally, if not more significantly is recognizable of Norwegian culture. Given its further cultural history in music writing and songs, the Hardanger fiddle is an icon of Norwegian musical culture.

Now, another concept to consider when trying to understand the greater history of Norwegian music and tradition is the turning point of mass emigration to America in the 19th century. Understanding the culture in Norway is one thing, but the translations and transformations of certain cultural ideals, traditions and tropes is particularly prevalent and important to the case of the Hardanger fiddle. Lange writes "the years between 1814 and 1905 were essentially a period of fermentation, a time of striving towards national self-expression, both intellectually and politically" (Lange 21). In a period of cultural development in the spirit of national pride and growth, Norwegian music saw great advancements and spectacles that would be carried over from Norway to America via emigrants. The translation of the home culture of Norway to America created a unique design of rich traditional foundations inspired by the novelty of a new homeland and the establishment of pioneer cultures rooted in the duality of Norwegian and American lifestyles. The Hardanger fiddle would take part in an evolution in design and sound that would firmly establish a Norwegian cultural presence most significantly in the upper Midwest.

Sarah Cliff, Mother of Martin Cliff, having emigrated from Norway in 1836, falls neatly under the scope of this Norwegian cultural revolution. It would be a safe assumption to surmise that she, being a first generation pioneer of Blue Mounds, as well as a matriarchal figure, would want to continue to uphold the rich tradition of her homeland. Martin's father, Arne, who was also a fiddle player, would have most likely inspired Martin to follow in his footsteps as a fiddle player, however this statement is more of a reach given the lack of factual information. Martin's brothers were both fiddle players as well, according to the information from the Mt. Horeb historical society archives, so this assumption might be more solid after all. The combined mother-father impartment of cultural knowledge and tradition onto Martin would have made his reasoning for crafting his own fiddle much more objectively significant because it would mean he was not simply practicing skills in carpentry or wanting to play some random instrument as a hobby. The crafting of one's own culturally important object at an age where one is still learning, experiencing, doing things for oneself objectively adds on to the greater narrative of the culture of origin he or she descended from. Martin's coming-of-age testament as a Norwegian emigrant young adult is his self-made fiddle. It is actually more just that his series object deviated further from the original model Hardanger fiddle. This is a clear indication and support of the cultural shift from his parents' home country, as well as his life as a maturing individual having a profound impact on the art he made in homage to his family's ethnic culture. And for the greater scope of the narrative of the Hardanger fiddle as an essential Norwegian cultural icon, Cliff's story is a wholehearted case study

that beautifully represents the impact the Hardanger fiddle has had on Norwegian culture as a whole.

The aesthetic of Norwegian emigrant culture in itself is unique and deviated from original Norwegian culture. Much like the model and series in the realm of objects, culture too bears the similarities and differences of personalization from adapted and translated traditions, customs and norms from the “model” culture. In the context of music, Norwegian emigrant culture carries with it from Norway the traditional sound of the nation developed in the 19th century infused with the perspective of freshly arrived persons to America, making a new life for themselves and their families. Theodore C. Blegen writes in his work *Norwegian Emigrant Songs and Ballads*,

“Like every great folk movement, the nineteenth century emigration from Norway to America produced its own literature...It would be strange if so great a movement had not produced a literature of songs and poems. All the world knows that the Norwegians have a native love of music and form. They cannot—or at least they could not before the age of steam and electricity—embark upon a popular movement without singing about it in one way or another, either in praise or in condemnation” (Blegen 5).

The narrative of the Norwegian emigrant translated into song reflects an artistic mode of expression and perspective on such a grandiose life event. The transformation of a pilgrimage, a journey to something hopefully greater, or perhaps more novel, into art is a powerful statement of passion and tradition that embraces the values of Norwegian culture according to Blegen. The various ballads and songs depicting aspects of emigrant life and dealing with the daily motions are a window into the vast history and culture of Norway that is open to interpretation, understanding and exchange. A noble value reflective of a noble, wholesome cultural rich with cultural prowess.

For the Cliff family, Norwegian emigrant culture was fully embraced and cultivated. With the continuing of traditions like fiddling and farming in Blue Mounds and Mt. Horeb, the Cliff family is a prime example of Norwegian emigrant life in the Midwest. Cliff's former neighbor, Alvin Thompson recalled that Martin would “be playing the fiddle at family and community get-togethers.” The spirit of fostering community through art and championing cultural heritage, as well as sharing said heritage with others is well representative of the strong sense of unity Norwegian emigrant culture embraces. Sharing the songs of Norway, possibly certain popular emigrant ballads and songs from the time would not only have been a form of empathetical music but also an engaging pastime, as simple as it sounds. Being able to share music from a self-crafted instrument would be sure to bring a high level of satisfaction and pride. The multi-faceted levels of operation the Hardanger fiddle produces in tandem with Norwegian culture further support from yet another approach for the argument of the hardanger fiddle being a Norwegian musical icon.

The exploration of the model Hardanger fiddle's origins, which led to examining the personalization of Martin Cliff's handmade fiddle, has now lead us to thinking about these objects and their significance in a contemporary context. For starters, the fiddle, after the passing of Cliff, found its way to a garage sale in Illinois for an extremely low price of \$25. Given that it had not been restored yet, the condition it must have been in must not have been very high quality. The fiddle was later purchased by a volunteer from the historical society after bidding for \$1030, and restored for an additional \$100. The question is this: does this mark the end of the narrative of Martin Cliff's fiddle? The answer is a stout no. If anything, thanks to the actions of the Mt. Horeb historical society, the fiddle's narrative as an object will soon be immortalized with its addition to the new museum installation in Mt. Horeb. Placing the fiddle in its own limelight may pique the

interest of the uninformed museum goer to do their own individual research on the vast intricacies this fiddle carries in its own personal object narrative. Although Martin may not have thought of his object as such a valuable addition in his time, the cultural significance this fiddle represents is deserving of its own pedestal to engage with an audience eager to understand the culture of Norway.

The Hardanger fiddle has served as a symbol of Norwegian musical culture for centuries, iconic in its appearance, sound and style. Easily discernable as a feat of Norwegian excellence in music and art, the Hardanger fiddle carries on its back the weight of rich tradition and profound artistic passion. From its soft, yet bellowing sound that played the songs of emigrants wanting to make a new life for themselves and their families in a new, unfamiliar land, to the wonderfully nationalistic and prideful anthems of the early Norwegian musical revolution in the 19th century, the Hardanger fiddle has yet to feign it is boisterous appeal. The contemporary effort to honor the wholesome tradition of making, playing and educating about the Hardanger fiddle has been spearheaded by the Hardanger Fiddle Society of America for the past 30+ years. Their devoted effort into ensuing the continuance of what some may call a “lost culture” or “dying instrument” is precisely in the spirit of Norwegian pride in their country and their desire to make it known to the world through music. Such a noble effort is one of the leading reasons why this instrument is given such intent attention by scholars today.

Martin Cliff's legacy left in his Hardanger fiddle is one of great familial pride and prowess that will surely be known for many years to come in the Mt. Horeb area. Being such a devout contributor to his community, from serving on the parochial school board to being the treasurer of a local cheese company, Cliff genuinely cared about his local community and wished to see it grow, as it reflected the cultural traditions he grew up in and those which preceded him by his mother and father. Carrying the weight of a nation's heritage in a foreign land is no easy task, but undeniably I would argue it is best handled via expression through art. Raised as a carpenter, Martin Cliff wished to make an object representative of both his country of origin and his skills in the trade, and did so with effervescent success. His Hardanger fiddle is unique to his craft, a series object made with the personalization of a young second generation Norwegian emigrant looking to make an impact of expression to his homeland, America. The greater scope of folk art recognizes the patterns of tradition through culture, passed down from generation to generation, looking for themes which vary from culture to culture, all for the sake of creating significance for that culture in the form of physical artistic objects. Folk art calls for the object as a symbol, a defining symbol of heritage, of nationality, of home. The strong familial ties which folk art represents are incredibly prevalent in Norwegian folk art, especially in this case in the Hardanger fiddle. Fiddling as a coming of age tradition kept its niche from Norway to America, adapting with the journey new songs expressing the profound emotions that came with such a mass exodus. The culture of a people affectionate towards musical expression is not only embodied, but also symbolized by the Hardanger fiddle in Norway and America.

In conclusion, one cannot separate the concept of Norwegian musical culture from the Hardanger fiddle. The two are necessarily bounded together by the evolution of the culture over time and space. The growth from the earliest dated unique musical recognitions in Norway to its contemporary translation into American society while still paying tribute to its roots is so critical to understanding the narrative of Norwegian culture as a whole. Martin Cliff's individual subjective experience of the birth of his fiddle is a contribution to the greater objective narrative



of Norwegian musical culture that ultimately makes for a great piece for analysis and appreciation from a scholarly perspective. The richness behind the fiddle's identifiable journey as an object of folk art, as well as a musical instrument surely confers a greater meaning and purpose to the fiddle itself. An icon well representative of Norwegian culture, the Hardanger fiddle, although young in comparison to its instrumental predecessors, leaves a bigger footprint. Martin Cliff did not just simply make an instrument to play music as a hobby, he made his own personalized version of an object which epitomizes Norway, its greatness, its artistic achievement, and most importantly, its fiery, passionate heart and soul.

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# 67. Explore the Material Culture Meanings of A Frame at Mt. Horeb Historical Society

BY ALYCE WANG



**Frame**  
American  
Attributed to  
the Donald/  
Sweet Family  
c.1890  
Wood, walnut  
shells  
Gift of Delma  
Donald  
Woodburn  
Estate  
MHAHS  
2002.001.007

My object for the final project is the picture frame with photographs of Ellen Sweet and her brother George Clark Sweet, decorated with walnuts. It is currently collected at the Mount Horeb Historical Society in Dane County, Wisconsin. The date that the object was made is around 1871 to 1933. The reason why I chose this object is the materials of the decoration on frame are unconventional, which are sliced walnut or butternut shells glued to the wood frame. At the back

of the frame, there is a handwriting note in black ink reads: “George Clark Sweet, and his sister Ellen, who is mother to John Sweet Donald. These pictures were taken in 1867-1871 respectively. Madison Wisconsin Dec. 25, 1933” And there is a second note, in blue ink, reads: “Given to John S. Donald by his mother 1933.” Ellen Sweet Donald Jones gave the frame to her son John Sweet Donald (1869-1934) in 1933. The maker of the frame might be Ellen or by her daughter-in-law Vona DeCrow Donald. Another particularity of my object is that it is both the “container” and the “contained”.

In my paper, I would investigate both the “container” and the “contained”. For the “container” – photo frame, I would examine the three stages of its biography and fluid social lives. Through exploring the hand-making technique, I also found the limited role women played in the society at that time. For the “contained” – portraits of Ellen Sweet and George Clark Sweet, I would discuss how the photography tells us about the technological and intellectual development at Mount Horeb and how fashion proves that material objects are status symbols and social markers that have categorical functions and expressive functions.

The history of Mount Horeb can be traced back to late 19th century. Most of the settlers there were of English and Scottish descent. During the early days of Mount Horeb, the main industries were cheese and livestock. In 1855, the Sweet family moved from New York to live in Wisconsin on the farm. The figures in the photographs, Ellen Sweet and her brother George Clark Sweet, are two of the seven children of William Sweet and Sally/Sarah Clark Sweet. Ellen married John Strong Donald in April of 1868. Within a year John Strong Donald died from Typhoid at the age of 26. Then Ellen married John Jones, Jr. in 1882. The frame is something that Ellen gave to her son John Sweet Donald in 1933. The frame intends to display and protect the photographs in it, which also functions as a way to record the family history.

Furthermore, the picture frame indicates that women’s work was mostly restricted in domestic space during the late 19th century and early 20th century. The possible makers of the frame are Ellen or her daughter-in-law Vona DeCrow Donald, both of whom are women. The walnut shell picture frame is not a mass-produced consumer product, but a hand-made craft that most likely made at home or a small studio place. Many women in the 19th century mainly carried out home-based work and in addition, they were also responsible for the unpaid work at home like cooking, cleaning, child care and often keeping small animals and growing vegetables and fruit to help feed their families. During the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century, woman started to work in textile factories, coal and tin mines or farms. The picture frame is a historical source that records women’s engagement in a variety of social activities. In the book, *Woman and the Material Culture of Needlework & Textiles*, it states that “the needle has been a as a vehicle for women’s own construction of alternative discourses, discourses with the potential to expand women’s discursive worlds and the power they wield over their own lives” Here, the frame is also a vehicle for Ellen or her daughter-in-law to show the gender’s construction by the dominant discourse. Women’s craft has been always a performance of femininity. However, although women’s work expanded to a larger range from 19th century to 20th century, the role of women was still limited to domestic work like doing hand-making craft works. Unlike today’s society, women and men’s roles were sharply defined and had clear boundaries in social activities at that time. Women were more suited to the domestic space for a conventional perspective.

Despite its maker, the frame itself also has great values to conduct the material culture studies that help us understanding the larger context and relationship between human, nature and

society. By applying the biography approach to the frame, I focus on three phases during its social lives: raw material, family possession, and museum collection. Since the biography approach mainly focuses on the exceptional characteristic within its own time, thus those stages are characterized by the use of natural resources, particular human connection, symbol of local identity respectively. Recent conceptualizations of material culture studies hold the view that objects have 'social lives' (Appadurai, 1986) or 'biographies' (Kopytoff, 1986). Material objects have biographical turning points or stages in the life cycle. The turning points or stages of the photo frame evolve over time and the meanings and interpretations attached to it also flexible and fluid. Here I apply the biography approach to explore the different phases of the photo frame's social lives. This approach traces a complete life story in an infinite time frame and highlights the exceptional and unusual features.

### Object Biography

3 stages

raw materials, family possession, museum collection

3 features

natural resources, human connection, local identity

Before the photo frame was been made, the walnut shells and wood frame were just raw materials in nature. The uniqueness of the first stage of the frame is its origin from nature. In Marcinkus's book *Nature Fancywork*, she mentions that both Aristotle and Plato considered that nature's purpose was to serve those with an intellect. Nature and humanity were part of a whole living organism. "Organismic theory emphasized the interdependence among the parts of human body, subordination of individual to communal purpose in family, community and state, and vital life permeating the cosmos to the lowliest stone," argues Merchant in *The Death of Nature* (1980: 1). Exploring natural resources is a way to study the laws of nature, by which nature becomes something that people can conquer, discover and exploit. The use of walnut shells can be seen as something unified human and nature. The portrait and walnut shells organically integrate together, which signifies a bond between human society and wild nature.

Moving to the next stage of its biography, the frame became a memorial decorative object for the Sweet family after processed by hand-making techniques. The value of the object mostly lies in the human connection attached to the people in the photograph and the Sweet family. In the article by Sherry Turkle called *The Things That Matter*, she found that the photograph of her mother serves as a clue to her possible identity. The walnut photo frame also has the same function that builds a connection between the person in the photograph and the rest of the family members. The materiality and physicality of the picture frame make it a vehicle for the family members to sense the family history and conclude the possible identities of themselves. Thus, the photo frame became the thing that mattered. The photo frame carries both ideas and emotions. Thought and feeling attached to it are inseparable from our study on the material object.

Finally, now the frame is one of the museum collections at Mount Horeb Historical Society. Its value transformed from personal human connection to the symbolization of local identity that is precious for historical archaeologists to study the local and regional history. The estimate date of the frame shows that it was made 20 years or more later after the Sweet family settled in Wisconsin. In American art history, immigrants prefer to carry something precious like luxury goods or portraits to show their social status and identity. However, according to its time, the frame must not serve as something that the Sweet family eager to reveal their status and identity

as new immigrants but as something functional and practical to the family. So the frame contains lots of historical evidence of the family and the region at that time. Now, as a museum, it can point toward to the artistic, cultural, scientific and historical facts of Mount Horeb, which speaks to its local identity and regional history.

According to Erving Goffman (1951), there are two principle roles for status symbols. First, status symbols have categorical functions in that they serve to ‘distinguish’ and ‘socially place’ the person who uses the symbol. So the frame and clothes serves as symbols of social and economic status. The frame, as a decorative object, is not a necessity goods, which indicates that the Sweet family was not under poor living conditions that needs to struggle with necessity goods. However, at meantime, the material of the object, walnut shell, is not considered as a luxury goods, so we can infer that the family might has a social and economic status as a upper middle class. Secondly, status symbols can serve expressive function related to a person’s style, taste or cultural values. The shape, color and materials of the frame all have expressive function that we can see how the personal style, taste, and value embody in the material object. The shape of the frame is seemingly a house. It might be the notion of a unified family or any other harmonious living environment. The style of the frame conveys a taste of simplicity and rusticity from the Sweet family. And the use of natural materials like walnut shells and wood may suggest their embracement to the nature and wild.

Material objects are also markers of aesthetics and cultural value. The clothes in the photograph also reflect the aesthetic and culture trend at that time which is “appropriate European styles in American subject matter”. During the early days of Mount Horeb, there was a rapid growing of European immigrants population due to the overcrowding in European countries. And it might be a historical explanation of the clothes that Ellen Sweet and her brother George Clark Sweet wearing in the photograph are heavily European-influenced. The tall collars that Elle Sweet was wearing are one of the features in the 1890s fashion, which is one of the fashion trends in Europe. In the 1890s, women’s fashion in America became simpler and less extravagant. American was in its “Gilded Age”. During the period, those Americans who travel to Europe tend to apply the European styles in American artistic forms like architecture, paintings, decorative arts as well as fashion. The clothes that George was wearing are the common trend shared by America and Europe, the shirts of linen or cotton with collars and neckties tied in a bow. Those elements are gentlemen at that time were often seen with.

The photographs in the frame of Ellen Sweet and her brother George were taken in 1871 and 1867 respectively. During that time, photography was mainly documentary to capture real objects like portraits, landscape, and historical events. Photography did not step into the artistic venue until the 1900s. Thus, the function of the photograph of Ellen and George was used as a memorial portrait that can last long and be seen by generations of their family and the society. We can also infer that camera was been used by middle-class people at that time. Also as an new invent, telephone was just brought to Mount Horeb in 1895 by J. N. Dahlen, editor of Mount Horeb Times. The new technology and electronic devices like camera and telephone contribute to the popularization of communication in the community. By investigating the photograph, we can conclude that the photo frame is not only an indicator to the Sweet family history but also to the industrialization and technology development of Mount Horeb at that time. Growing interest in communication through visual imagery or sound influences the later development of Mount Horeb in a profound way.

“If you want to know your future” said Winston Churchill “look backwards first”. Material culture can record the history that has significant meanings to future generations. Both the “contained” and “container” of the frame carries valuable artistic, cultural and historical significance to the family, the region and the anthropological study of human society. Woodward also states that objects are material embodiment of human labor that produced them. Any object represents exploit human capacity and ultimate degradation of human creativity and identity.

To investigate how a material object fit in the large social context, we could not only acquire a clear vision of what role does the object play in the large cultural and historical context but also get a clue of our relationship with the object, the nature and the society.

In the 21st century, the advancement of manufacturing technology and transportation methods in the consumer society provides a platform for the consumer products and commodities grow rapidly. Traditional ways of making and designing gradually vanished in our horizon. The life cycle of an object has become shorter and shorter because people have easier access to get new objects. Fast-fashion and fast-food are dominant in our age. For my perspective, we still need to hold a rational and critical attitude towards our production and consumptions of material objects and treasure those things that really matter.

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# 68. The Paradox of the Rocking Kubbestol

BY LAURA SCHMIDT





**Log Rocker  
(Kubbestol)**  
Norwegian-American  
Maker, workmen at  
Little Norway;  
decoration  
attributed to Olaf  
Colberson, c.1930  
Wood (oak), paint  
Little Norway  
Collection, Gift of  
Scott & Jennifer  
Winner  
MHAHS  
2015.021.0004

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### **Introduction**

In the basement of the Mount Horeb Historical Society, there sits a rocking kubbestol. Covered in

cloth and placed in a poorly lit room, it is hidden to those who do not know about it. To study the chair in this room, two people must pull it out slightly, so it can sit in the dim light. The kubbestol's weight is unbelievably heavy and that is why it sits below the museum during construction. It cannot be moved across the street with the rest of the collection. It demands to stay one place.

Observing the kubbestol rocker, the details come to life. There are scars covering the chair, details from carving out the giant log with an axe. There is paint on the end of the seat worn away from use. There is rosemaling along the bottom of the chair, large and swooping. There are two horseshoes carvings on either side of the chair, easily scanned over to study the rest of the object. A large crack traces the left side of the chair, showing the wood expanding with age, stretching out and making its presence known.

Then there are the rockers. How did they come to be on this kubbestol? This powerful, heavy mass of a chair seems like it would smash the rockers into the ground. This beast of a chair could not possibly move the way the rockers imply. Who thought this was a good idea? Marrying this uprooted tree to such a fluid, calming idea of a rocking chair seems ridiculous and yet it is perfect for this exhibit. Mount Horeb was a community of immigrants that wanted to pass their culture down to their future generations and they clearly succeeded when you look around the Historical Society. However, this Norwegian culture does not remain untouched. Children of these immigrants not only cared for their Norwegian roots, but they also wanted to grasp the shifting nature of American culture. By placing rockers on a kubbestol, they create a cultural hybrid of their idealized identities. Both the rocking chair and the kubbestol are symbols of the nostalgia that is a focal point at Little Norway. By combing these two chairs, this object highlights an equally prevalent theme of reinvention and cultural fusion of Norwegian-American immigrants. In this essay, I will explain the history of the object specifically, but also the histories of kubbestols and rocking chairs generally, so a wider picture can be analyzed. This will all help elaborate what this object could mean for Mt. Horeb and even Norwegian immigrant culture.

### **The History of Little Norway**

To start with the object itself, we must start with Little Norway. In 1926, Isak Dahle, a Chicago businessman, began creating Little Norway, or "Nissedahl," (the valley of the elves). This place was meant to preserve "a typical pioneer farmstead settled by Norwegian immigrants." It included sod-roofed outbuildings, a hunting lodge, a summer cottage, and the stave church. In fact, the church, modeled after a 12th century Stavkirke and made in 1856, was used for Norway's display at the Columbian Exposition in 1893. The buildings were meant to look as though they were authentic to the time period and some, like the church, were. However, Dahle had to commission many workers to create the furnishings.

Little Norway was heavily romanticized and many articles and stories about the destination discussed elves, the Norwegian royal family, and wonderland. Some even said, "The furnishings are so realistic that one almost wonders whether, perhaps, the family has not simply gone away for an afternoon to visit neighbors down the road." It seemed as though associating magic and wonder is second nature to the area. Nevertheless, it was idealized for good reason: thousands and thousands of visitors would visit the southwest Wisconsin attraction.

Dahle was inspired to create it after a trip to Norway and, within the year, he bought the 160-acre Osten Olson Haugen farm to build his dream. The site was, and still is, 20 miles west of Madison, Wisconsin, near the town of Mount Horeb. Little Norway was built during the height of the Great Depression, but Dahle employed many Norwegian architects, carpenters, and painters.

It was completed in 1935 and was dedicated to Dahle's mother. He believed that she was, "the 'motivating inspirational force and the effort' behind the project."

Little Norway continued to evolve after it was created, particularly in regards to their collections. Dahle's friend James Stavrum was a Chicago decorator and was responsible for bringing in furniture. However, Little Norway's collection policy accepted items from local people and they received many family heirlooms from the surrounding area. Dahle died in 1937, but expansion and renovation would continue on throughout the century. Dahle's mother oversaw collecting efforts and Isak's brother Otto was the superintendent. Ownership would then fall to Asher and Thea Hobson, Dahle's sister, and their descendants continued it. In Little Norway brochures, the writers brag that the number of objects in the catalog, "would take a book to list everything."

### **The History of the Object**

Throughout the archival material housed at the Mount Horeb Historical Society, it is hard to find mention of the rocking kubbestol. However, in one book from the Historical Society, the rocking kubbestol is pictured with the caption:

The dining room of the two-story house which was once the cattle barn contains some fine examples of Norse peasant furniture such as this cupboard decorated with rosemaling (brightly painted designs) and the heavy log rocking chair, which is an improvement on the ordinary "kubbe-stol."

This is a hugely important discovery, because the book shows how the rocking kubbestol was displayed. It tells us about where it sat at Little Norway and whether or not it was used. The object itself also tells us that the black paint has been rubbing off from use, could patrons have been allowed to sit in the chair and really experience a Norwegian-American life?

Through another brochure, the chair is found and it states that, "The furnishings in the dining room make one marvel at the ingenuity of the Norse pioneers, who could create such handsome things with whatever was at hand. There are two beautifully rosemaled kubbe-stols, one made from a hollow log with the seat fitted in, and the other a solid log with rockers added." Within this same section, the writers claim, "it would not be hard to believe, in the peaceful, Old World atmosphere of this almost enchanted spot," though this idea is complicated when you dwell on the fact that this chair was created for Little Norway.

The rocking kubbestol was probably made between 1927 and 1930 and carved from an oak tree. According to the catalog notes, the chair was, "based on the Norwegian kubbestol chair," and it was crafted by one of the Norwegian workers who helped to build Little Norway. Which one? After digging through the archives, there is no solid conclusion. However, there are hints as to whether this piece is unique or not.

Deep within the financial receipts of Little Norway lies a letter from, well, someone. The signature is odd and is included in the appendix, but it looks like Julius E. Gleon (Gleason?). The text is much more legible and about halfway through the letter to Isak Dahle, it hints at the rocking kubbestol:

Dr. J. H. Lee of this city, a Norwegian doctor, used to live at Iola, Wisconsin, not far from

Amherst. When he came to Madison some years ago, he brought with him a Norwegian chair made of one piece of wood, and rounded off at the bottom so that it could be used as a rocker. It was made by a man in or near Iola. If you are interested in this sort of thing, I shall make further inquiry about the matter, as I have friends in Iola, whom I visit every summer.

After this letter, Emma L. Lee continues to write Isak Dahle, but there is no mention of the rocking kubbestol. Could it have existed? Was this Dahle's inspiration? Why isn't this design mentioned anywhere else?

The design that truly makes sense on the chair is the rosemaling. This is one of the most distinct features of the chair and it is extremely common for both the time and the history of kubbestols and Norway. Olaf Colberson, a folk artist with a tragic past, most likely decorated the piece. His wife institutionalized him unwillingly and stole his money. Luckily, the community rallied together and got him released from Mendota Mental Health Institute. He was accepted back into the community with open arms and both the townsfolk and even the governor celebrated his artwork. His story alone would make the chair an interesting piece, but there is a more pressing question: why put rockers on a kubbestol?

### **Importance of Chairs**

Before we delve in to talking about specific types of chairs, the idea of the chair as an object to be studied must be discussed. Material culture is a growing field that analyzes culture through material objects. By studying things, we can better understand history and culture, because we can see what people value, use, and create across time.

Often, chairs are considered utilitarian above all other characteristics. We need them for an easy way to sit down, we need them to sit at the table, we need them in crowded theaters, and we prefer different styles based on our comfort needs. However, chairs represent much more than a resting position. They communicate our identity and our lifestyle. Think of a rocking chair, a stool, and an office chair. These are clearly not interchangeable, but they all chairs and it matters which one you are sitting in. According to Galen Cranz, chairs are, "a culturally-loaded symbol which helped to express our attitudes, aspirations, and identity: it communicates to others our chosen 'lifestyle'" (67).

How the chair is styled is important. If you wanted to be taken seriously, you would not chose a beanbag chair to sit on. You would want something like an office chair and, almost as important, a chair that fits the environment around it. How the chair looks represents not only the owner, but also anyone who choses to sit in it. Cranz states that, "interest in the look of a chair means that some people become enthralled with connoisseurship—knowing which ones are the more authentic expressions of a type and why," which fits into the idea of whether or not the rocking kubbestol being an authentic piece (67).

Studying the kubbestol and rocking chair separately will honor the idea that these two chairs come from different cultures and must be analyzed independent from the other before scrutinizing the paradox of this combination.

### **The History of the Kubbestol**

When you sit in a kubbestol, you are rooted to the ground. There are many different designs and sizes for each kubbestol created, but they all share one thing in common: stability. This Norwegian

chair demands its presence be felt. Representing power, the kubbestol is an immovable piece with a proud sense of self.

These chairs are created from the trunk of a tree, carving the trunk with an axe. They are typically designed with birch, as it is abundant and easy to work with (keep in mind the rocking kubbestol is made of oak, a heavy, sturdy wood). Sometimes, they are hollowed out to make the chair slightly easier to move. The cross-section seat on most kubbestols exposes the kind of tree that was cut and how old it was.

Why make a chair that is so similar to a tree? Both Norway and southeast Wisconsin have an abundance of trees. Forestry is a huge market, but, more than that, Norwegian folklore is constantly surrounded by the intersections of human and nature. Trolls and magic are abundant in these stories and the newspapers might not be off when they describe Little Norway as a kind of wonderland.

Calling back to the caption of the rocking kubbestol I quoted, kubbestols were extremely popular in 18th and 19th century peasant homes. Elaborate designs of kubbestols date back to the 12th century. When the rockers aren't taken into account, this simply designed kubbestol would easily fit into the peasant home that Dahle created at Little Norway.

These chairs aren't made often, anymore, but they still call back a sense of nostalgia for the "fatherland," as Dahle put it. Making these kinds of chairs emphasizes the longing of the immigrant for their original home. This longing is passed down, but it is also a celebration and a reminder of where they come from.

### **The History of the Rocking Chair**

The rocking chair doesn't share this history, but it does share the nostalgia. Rocking chairs date back to the early 18th century in America, though some credit the invention to Benjamin Franklin. In its early days, rockers were merely attached to regular chairs, but, by 1860, the German craftsman Michael Thonet created the first bentwood rocker. This meant that the design was much easier to rock on and much lighter, because bentwood creates one curved piece of wood.

Rockers came back into popularity in the 1950's, thanks to John F. Kennedy, according to Cranz. He was prescribed to use a rocker for his bad back and enough people admired JFK's charisma that it became stylish. Cranz even states that, "if the shape of a chair communicates the right message, we don't care how it feels physically. How it feels emotionally is what counts" (67). That being said, the chair was also functional. Cranz waxes poetic about the rockers on page 184 of his book:

Their chief virtue from a somatic point of view, is that they move the ankle, knees, and hip sockets directly, and the head-neck joint and the entire spine only slightly less directly. In addition, rockers usually offer appropriate support to the shoulder, neck, and head because they often have high backs. Seat height does not go up and down so much as it pivots around an invisible axis, part of how rockers allow for internal adjustments kinesthetically. How gratifying to find that rocking chairs exemplify a kind of comfort that accommodates the body, yet is not so enervating as to induce slumping and drowsing. Everyone should have one. The historian David Hanks says rocking chairs were the most comfortable chair of their time when they were introduced.

This chair is the epitome of comfort. Even going through the Furniture: Made in America 1875-1905

Price Guide, the log rocker is a clear winner in comfort. Nothing compares to this cozy, lazy chair, because everything was sharp lines, no cushions, no movement. You couldn't even lean back slightly in any of the other chairs. Rockers connote soothing infants, being in a bassinet, being on a porch in the middle of summer, American nostalgia.

### **The Rocking Kubbestol**

The kubbestol and the rocking chair share two major characteristics: they are chairs and they are fixated on nostalgia. One touches on the "fatherland," and the other on the American Dream. The dance around this idea of the American Melting Pot, where cultures and ethnicities are poured into one country, is nothing new, but the prospect of seeing it so clearly in something as simple as a chair can feel astounding.

That being said, by studying the two different kinds of chairs, the paradox of the rocking kubbestol is made apparent. Although the chair reaches back to nostalgia for both Norwegian and American culture, there are clear incongruities in the piece. Kubbestols are rooted to the ground and they represent power. The rocking kubbestol couldn't even move out of the basement for construction. It wanted to stay, so it stayed. Rocking chairs are specifically designed to move and sway with the person who is sitting in the chair. The goal of a chair is to constantly make itself more and more efficient and light. The chair doesn't represent power, even if JFK used it, it represents relaxing after a hard day's work. The combination of the two chairs simply doesn't belong. And yet it is still here.

### **Reinvention and Nostalgia**

Immigrants didn't make the rocking kubbestol, but their descendants did. The idea of reinvention, of combining two drastically different parts of your culture and your identity to create something new and entirely your own is one of the most important things about Mount Horeb.

Everyone in the town of Mount Horeb, even the visitors, feel a sense of nostalgia for what it was like to live there—be it Norway or the 18th century. However, the idea of just being nostalgic rings false. It's not just about wishing you could be somewhere or someone else, it is about having and creating a distinctive culture. Wanted to participate in American culture, like the rockers, shouldn't matter. Accusations of wanting to assimilate are a big deal, but the creators of this chair made that argument nearly impossible, anyway. Placing rockers on a kubbestol isn't assimilation, it's reinvention. Both sides of the self are important. Both sides of the self are invested in best representing identity.

The chair is confusing and there are no distinctive lines (or there are too many lines) to understand what was going on in the head of the creator. However, the rocking kubbestol perfectly aligns with what the reinvention of American culture.

### **Conclusion**

Little Norway's main purpose, was that it "should serve as a haven and preserve the arts and crafts of the fatherland, and that it also served as a tribute to those whose study sons and daughters faced the terrific hardships of making a future in the land of promise..." and it clearly has. Little Norway ended up closing its doors, but the Mount Horeb Historical Society generously picked it up.

The strength of the collection is only matched by the strength of the community, no matter how messy certain objects seem to be. The rocking kubbestol lives in a paradox, but it really is the best way to describe Mount Horeb's community. The Norwegian culture is everywhere and yet, it's updated. It's rockers on a kubbestol, it's rosemaling hot pink pumps. It's reclaiming history

and forging a path forward. With each new generation, more people will be able to see this special town. And this town will evolve into something greater than nostalgia for a different location or different time, it will evolve into a flourishing, merged, Norwegian-American identity.

# 69. Olaf ‘Ole’ Colberson’s Wall Murals: Finding a Voice Against Stigma

BY ALYSSA KOWIS

## **Introduction**

Going into this research project I had a lot of concerns about how I myself could approach this project. First, I have little to no academic or practical background in art history or material culture. I did have experience working in a museum under my internship at the Milwaukee Public Museum, where I worked with objects retired from the collections that would later be used in their children’s programming. However when I was eighteen, I paid less attention into the cultural significance of the objects I was handling, and more determined to create a physical and online sorting system and have an opportunity to build a stronger resume. I have always loved museums and jumped at the opportunity to take this course that would allow me to be part of an amazing opportunity to create something that would last within a community.

My academic background is a Bachelor of Arts in History, focuses on European history and modern chronological history (18th century onwards), with a certificate in Classics, and currently I am working towards my Masters in Library Information Sciences. Second, I have no Norwegian, or Scandinavian background—my family is VERY German—and other than Norse mythologies and Disney’s Frozen, came in with little cultural understanding, but have an eagerness to learn. During my undergraduate career I often wrote about the human or societal portions of history, specifically gender roles, political theories, and societal and international conflict while attempting to write with as little personal bias as possible. I learned rather quickly that History and Art History took very different approaches. After a semester in this class and discussing with people who have actual backgrounds in these topics, I believe that I needed a new approach to this research project.

## **Selection Process And Initial Thoughts**

When we went through and selected our objects for this assignment, I remember initially reading through and selecting four or five objects that stood out to me. It was not until we chose on class day that I decided on Olaf ‘Ole’ Colberson’s Wall Murals. The biggest decision making factor was the blurb on the pieces significance and history.

Large landscapes that adorned walls at Little Norway. Olaf Colberson was born in 1860 or 1861, immigrated to the U.S. from Norway in 1888. Moved between Wisconsin and Minnesota before finding himself in the Madison area. A eulogy in our collections explains “devious means had been implemented to get him committed to Mendota” mental hospital in Madison. Friends assisted with his release and helped him get set up in Black Earth. He was a trained painter and eventually painted these murals at Little Norway. He died in 1931.

After reading through it I was intrigued by the concept of forced institutionalization and thought, “there’s a story here, with this particular artist.” I wanted to find out why he was institutionalized, I wanted to know how his friends helped him get out, and lastly I wanted to find



out why the entire blurb was more about the person than it was the object itself. It made me wonder if this particular person was prominent in Mt. Horeb. I also have an interest in mental health services (my sister works for UHS in their mental health services department) and policies, specifically looking at how they have changed throughout the years.

To add onto my inexperience with material culture and art history, on my first trip to Mount Horeb where I first saw the pieces, I was initially impressed with their quality, but immediately thought there were proportion issues. Some of the figures seemed to appear as too large or too small, and I was not sure if it was from issues in perspective? This also only occurs in his paintings that have creatures in them, comparative to his landscape only works. This led me to believe that maybe he learned how to paint as a hobby, or had a natural ability, perhaps learned at the hospital itself, and was less of a professional or school training—this I would later learn was very wrong, and I will go into those details when I discuss more about Ole’s background.

My next observation was that each of the images had nail holes throughout the center of the images, and was informed that the frames were not original to the paintings. So these were not hung, but pinned (or nailed) to wherever they were displayed. The pieces were described as wall murals, and I was surprised that they were displayed in what I would consider a damaging way. Why would they not hang it from the back, or attach it to some wire?

Lastly, I noticed that the paint didn’t reach the frames along each edge, or may have been worn or rubbed off—hence why the historical society, or whoever, provided the paintings with new frames. All this initially led me to believe was that, although these paintings may have been beloved, they were not given proper or gentle treatment in their past locations or during their transition to ownership from the Mount Horeb Historical Society.

### **Folk Art Versus Outsider Art: My Internal Debate About Ole**

Because I was only able to see the pieces twice, and read the history of the item once near the end of the semester I was working with minimal information at the beginning of my research. I had problems placing Ole for what type of artist he was, and one thought I kept returning to, where was he trained? Was he traditionally trained or did he receive training through his forced stay at the Mendota Mental Hospital? Would the answer to those questions technically define who Ole was as an artist?

My first few searches into Olaf ‘Ole’ Colberson had little findings. His work was not publicized anywhere, hospital reports are confidential, and was seemingly not placed on the internet. In fact the only specific findings I had on Ole or his family were the census records that tracked him, his wife, and his daughter’s movements between Wisconsin and Minnesota. These reports also show the U.S. government’s inability to track certain people or groups, as Ole was listed repeatedly, but under different spellings or adaptations of his name. This was fairly common for most immigrants, especially prior to the 1900’s once World War I started and the U.S. government became stricter on the groups of people that came, and keeping records of them. I will discuss what I learned more specifically about Ole in the section about him, his life, and his work.

One of the earliest ideas someone said that could relate to Ole and his murals were about outsider art. Outsider art is generally defined as art created by those who are not officially trained or are outside of an establishment. How this pertains to Ole is through his perceived mental health conditions, as many people use this form or definition of art as a therapy for mental health disorders. This concept of mental health issues and art interested me as they do discuss a lot about the people and the conditions themselves while still addressing what they are capable of

artistically creating or crafting. Because I was not initially informed on when Ole was trained, it was plausible that he received training or practice while he was institutionalized at Mendota. Looking more into outsider art I found a few studies and movements that use outsider art as an aid for those with mental health, but also a political force to garner attention to larger issues. These included gaining more notice for ‘othered’ artists, promoting awareness about people with mental health conditions, and attempting to raise funds and research into how art can help those who are diagnosed with these conditions. How can art, and the promotion of outsider art lead to improved lives and awareness about the community of those who suffer from mental health conditions?

A quality example of outsider art as a political platform can be seen from the case in Denver, Colorado where a piece initiated by Leo Tanguma and David DeLay was used to increase discussion on real issues. “The artwork...was created and is exhibited with several goals in mind: to provide persons who are mentally ill with a chance to express feelings about their lives and to choose how people with mental illness are represented; to provide a reason for various community members to work together and gain confidence in their abilities; and the educate the general public.” The idea of the project was to have those with mental illnesses describe to the artist what they feel like, how they are represented, and how they wish to be represented. The initial discussion lasted about 3 hours and from there they all collaborated in designing, sketching, and painting the murals. This group included people from a wide variety of mental illnesses, ages, racial backgrounds, and health treatment.

It was clear very on that being in this environment was helpful to many of the participants in not only engaging in their own self-awareness, but also in building an understanding about art and how it can represent them too. During the building and decorating process of the project, the group of artists had to work together in lifted, decorated, and pinning the giant murals together. This process alone helped the participants improve in their social interactions, as they discussed with others in a safe and aware environment. As the meetings continued more and more people came and interacted, bringing food, or family members. They taught the group how to operate the different tools and equipment to build and together erected the murals.

The design was intricate, light, sharp, and essentially conflicted. “The shape would be basically triangular, with irregularities along the edges and two voids left in the design plane: one void an asymmetrical heart, the other a somewhat abstractly drawn butterfly with jagged borders. The openings would represent the emptiness that existed in the lives of many of the participants. The irregularities along the edges would represent a general societal view of mental illness as bizarre; they were also simply to intended to catch the eye.” The product was also divided into 2 halves, light and dark. The dark half showed how mental illnesses can be viewed, and how those views can alter a way in which the participants saw themselves. The light side was bright and colorful in hopes that they will be ‘normalized’ and understood for themselves and not for their conditions. The pieces were first shown altogether in an exhibit, and were received positively. After the initial exhibit the pieces were split up and divided throughout the Denver metropolitan area, where they continued to promote the conversation about mental health, and those who suffer from those illnesses. “The story of the murals creation and the impact of its display have conveyed to them that there is a growing community of individuals who are “coming out of the closet,” so to speak, about mental illness.”

This is only one example of how outsider art can be used as a platform, and how being “othered” or different can give people a voice in order to bridge gaps through artistic creations. Another,

more recent example is the Porch Light Initiative in Philadelphia. The initiative is currently working on an ongoing, community based, healing through art project that emphasizes the importance of universal health and wellness. Together the community has banded to form an entire grouping of outsider artists who are transforming their society from the outside in. “A finished Porch Light artwork shines a light on those people who helped bring the project to life and challenges social stigmas of around mental and behavioral health, offering a fresh window of opportunity for continued progress and community growth.”

The project began as a research opportunity. They wanted to learn if creating art helps improve social, behavioral, and mental health. Not only were they measuring those participating within the program, but within the community itself. The program works by pairing porch light artists with locals who have been known to struggle with addictions or mental health disorders. Together they paint murals around the city and conduct qualitative and quantitative research to determine if the murals have a positive impact on people’s lives.

Throughout the experiment the researchers followed two timelines, individual timelines for the participants and an overlying community timeline. Starting with the individual timeline, the researchers established a baseline. They interviewed their participants to see how they felt about their specific situations, and how it was difficult to get past some of their issues with society. These interviews then continued throughout the entire process of the experiment. Next they would work with their paired artists and design and install the different murals. They would be interviewed after the artwork was completed to note any changes in their behavior or thoughts, and interviewed one last time much later to see if there were any further changes, once they were not consistently creating the artwork. The community was surveyed, interviewed, and observed once prior to the start of the community’s makeover, during the installation process, and once after in order to determine how their thoughts and feelings changed. They selected 3 communities for the large-scale mural projects, measured their demographics, and compared them to similar communities that would not receive assistance or partnership from Porch Light.

The results showed promise for future Porch Light projects, as the participants reported being less secretive about their mental health issues due to stigmas, reported experiencing less rejection, and reported a decrease in stress levels. “When Porch Light is implemented consistently with a regular group of participants, it holds promise for promoting recovery and resilience at the individual level.” The results of the study were promising enough for it to continue today. One participant, Adam Alli stated, “If I sit painting, it gives me self control over who I am. Everybody has their downfall, but right now everyone around this table has the courage and motivation to heal.” Together these participants were able to work together and create a safer sense of community, while also improving their own mental, or behavioral health. So far Porch Light has accomplished in finishing 30 murals, having 374 participants, and achieving over 3,000 community members within the project.

Their research and numbers continually show how this project has helped create a safe and more engaged community. This graph shows the results of one of the sites after one year of Porch Light’s involvement and assistance within the community.

As we can clearly see in the graph the community experienced a relatively significant change within one year of the murals project. Not only did this project create positive results in individuals but it also increased positivity throughout the community.

The concept of mental health and how it coincides with art is fascinating to me, and spending

time researching these projects was an absolute joy. It is refreshing to read about people who actively make a difference in their communities, and provide awareness about the stigmas and problems we can take approaching mental health disorders and illnesses.

The reasons I thought Ole could be an outsider artist was because of his background in Mendota mental hospital. Many times outsider art does center on mental illness, and I thought perhaps there was a connection between Ole and this platform. But after getting back to Mount Horeb's Historical Society, I learned that he would not be classified as an outside artist, as his background and work (at least the murals he painted for Little Norway) does not have the general characteristics of outside art. He can be classified as a traditional Norwegian folk artist, who presumably has a clear understanding of mental health stigmas.

### **Olaf 'Ole' Colberson**

Most of what we can learn about Ole comes from his funeral and wake, where his closest friends spoke about who he was as a person, his talents, and his family. Anne Sinley, displayed the vast majority about his personal life in a touching sermon where she provides information about his travel to America, his family, his time in Mendota mental hospital, and most importantly how he was trained and commissioned to paint the murals for Little Norway. She also details that his tombstone identifies him as Olaf Kolbjornson, much different than how he was more commonly known.

She starts her letter by detailing how she came to meet Ole and his family. They were neighbors across the lake in Black Earth, Wisconsin, and because of their shared immigration experiences the families became fast friends. This was very common for many immigrant groups, and they would often form communities together. Ole was a trained painter, who learned his trade in Norway before moving to the Midwest. “—not only a house painter, but an artist who created beautiful pictures.” Anne points out an interesting cultural practice we discussed in class, and that is how folk artists and communities viewed women and needlework. In her sermon she discusses how Ole had a beautiful wife who made beautiful embroidery. It exhibits how women were valued by their creation of homely goods and how they often used those skills on their clothing. By 1909 Ole and his family had moved to Amery, Wisconsin and took in their nephew who was also coming from Norway. His nephew would later become his son-in-law as Ole's daughter (and only child) married her cousin.

Next Anne goes into detail on Ole's personal tragedy, and how he was placed in Mendota mental hospital, and how his friends secured his release:

Sometime about 1922 or 1923, we heard that Mr. Colberson was at Mendota, supposedly a mental case. My brother, Ole, was just then taking a degree in Psychology. He and my father went to Mendota to see our old friend. It seems that while he was undergoing some minor surgery, devious means had been implemented to get him committed to Mendota. He was listed as manic depressive and with good reason. He had been completely disowned and deserted by his wife, daughter and son-in-law and stripped of his home and all of his assets.

The people who should have cared for him the most abandoned Ole, and society had shunned and

temporarily forgotten about him. In this way he does relate to the outside artists, and the stigma that follows mental health conditions.

However Ole's artwork does not coincide with what is considered outsider art. After his friends discovered what had happened to him, they worked diligently to obtain his release from the hospital. Anne's father obtained permission to allow Ole for one-month temporary release, and when the community saw that he did not have any ongoing mental health illnesses the governor, Phillip La Follette, obtained a permanent release for Ole. Phillip then purchased a house for Ole to reside back in Black Earth, and the community helped assist Ole to get his life back together.

While rebuilding his life Ole started with redecorating. He kept himself busy and spent his time creating artworks, and was even hired by others in the community to create art for their homes. It was around this time when Little Norway was searching for a person to help decorate some of the community spaces. They wanted someone who could paint in a traditional Norwegian style, and they selected Ole.

They began driving him back and forth between Black Earth and Little Norway for the entirety of his commission, and his work was very well received. The Mount Horeb Historical Society has in its possession a letter from Little Norway exclaiming, "Your effort is a marked contribution to the attractiveness of Little Norway and receives very high commendation on all sides...I can imagine no artist but one of Norse birth who could have done this work as they could not have gotten into the spirit of it." It was not long after that Ole was commissioned for another large job, and began painting for the Colonial Lodge. Once he had finished that project, Ole gave back to the community and for no cost redecorated the community's church. Ole passed away around Thanksgiving in 1931, and his obituary kindly remarks, "Mr. Colber[t]son, as well as being a musician, was a hand painter of unrecognized ability. Landscape scenes were his specialty and he produced original work." Ole was survived by the family that left him, and a community that supported and appreciated him, and who continued to show appreciation in his work.

### **Conclusion**

It is through his narrative, and the story behind the man and the murals that leads me to believe that his work can only be identified as traditional Norwegian folk art. He was trained in Norway and brought his skills to America. He was specifically commissioned for his Norwegian style of artistry for Little Norway, and predominantly lived in relatively small, significantly Norse (or Scandinavian) communities. But I also believe Ole can provide example of cultural importance, and the unfair stigma placed on those who are labeled as outside artists, and those struggling with mental health illnesses. Although I was not initially correct in my research, I found a topic that is truly amazing and promotes a healthier and more accepting society.

Although his physical work is not consistent with outside art, his life was. He felt and faced the stigma of mental illness, and how difficult it is to move on with ones life once they have been labeled—even incorrectly. Art can be a therapeutic representation of a community or one's self, and through Ole's landscapes we can see a man who was represented by his ethnicity and his community. Art was able to help give people in Denver and Philadelphia, and Ole a chance past the stigma of mental illness. I was correct in my initial decision in selecting these pieces; there is a story and a message here.



# 70. The Mystery of the Mount Horeb Mangle Board

BY JENNA MADSEN

Mangle boards, or mangletre, were used in courtship in Scandinavia by young men who would carve these boards, and then leave the board on the doorstep of the woman the young man was interested in courting. If the woman accepted, she would take the board inside of her home and the courtship would begin. However, in the case that she rejected, in which she would leave the board outside, the young man would have to move on and carve a new board for his next courtship. Mangle boards are intricately carved, and are intended for women to use in the house as a pressboard. The Mount Horeb mangle board is unique, as it has elements incorporated that are not of Scandinavian origin. Not only for its unique design, but because the past is also unknown about it. Although we know the history of mangle boards, the Mount Horeb mangle board is a mystery, and more a folk art piece than a historical object.

Mangle boards are not only native to Norway (Norge), but also other countries in Scandinavia such as Denmark (Danmark), Iceland (Island), Finland (Suomi), and Sweden (Sverige). Other European countries such as Germany (Deutschland) and the Netherlands (Nederland) also have a history of mangle boards. The purpose of a mangle board was to be used in conjunction with a rolling pin to smooth wrinkles from linen. They are carved objects made for a practical purpose. They are the result of skilled and unskilled craft. They are folk art. They use symbolism. The design motifs are drawn from antiquity onward and from regions inside and outside Europe. Some of the earliest mangle boards are dated back to the 16th century. During the 17th and 18th centuries, mangle boards were produced in large quantities, but they would later be produced in smaller quantities. However, by the 20th century, mangle boards were relics, as they were replaced by mass produced sadirons, which were popular because they used heat whereas a mangle board does not.

Mangle boards are a work of art. It is not something that can nor should be read as a story as it does not tell a story. A mangle board is a carved, and sometimes painted, piece of wood, with visual language. Shapes, patterns, texture, line, composition, color, light, space, and so on are the components of the language, which the maker of the mangle board strived for. Thus, when looking at a mangle board one must pay attention to visual qualities. There are both broad and specific qualities one must pay attention to when studying a mangle board. A broad quality is universal; it could be seen in any medium, material, or object, regardless if it was made by a human or nature. Specific qualities, like the surface and texture, are unique to that one object. Since the mangle board is a work of art, it expresses these qualities using visual means, and it is up to each person's interpretation. These are qualities that are needed to gather an understanding of the Mount Horeb mangle board.

If one uses just aesthetics to study mangle boards, they are not assessing the boards for the expression that each one of them has. The definition for aesthetic in *The Oxford English*

Dictionary is, “a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, especially in art.” While one can appreciate how beautiful mangle boards are, it does not help in understanding the board itself. If you look at the board as the artist did, you yourself can experience what it was like to make the board and gather an understanding of the expression put into the board.

Mangle boards are made from woods such as birch, beech, or oak, which were the most popular choices. An average mangle board measures about 5 inches wide, 26 inches long, and 1 inch thick. The bottom of the board is flat, smooth and undecorated, as this is the part of the board that is used for pressing the linen, and of course, the top of the board is decorated, with a handle toward the end of the board. The handle helped with balancing the board on the roller to make the process easier. A form of rolling pin was needed to work with the mangle board, and by rolling the slightly dampened linen on the pin, and using a much force as possible, the operator of the mangle board would press the linen. The board needed to be placed at the right angles for a good rolling action to occur. This process was something that would take practice to gain experience.

The earliest known mangle board was produced in the nation of Frisia, located in the northern part of the Netherlands, in 1544, and is on display at the Zuiderzeemuseum in Enkhuisen, Netherlands. The condition of these older boards depends on where the board is kept. Typically, boards in private collections are in better condition as they are often restored, whereas museum boards are kept how they are received. In English, the word “mangle” comes from the Dutch word “mangel,” which is the noun form of the verb mangelen, meaning, “to mangle.” Mangle board of course is an English term, and the term “board” is considered slang in native countries of the mangle board. Boards varied in different countries as far as specific elements. For example, animal shaped handles, like the horse, were popular in Norway and Sweden. The more beautiful the board, the more likely the woman was to accept the proposal, which is why mangle boards have so many similarities.

“Beware of the man with many mangle boards,” was an expression used to warn women of men who may be a problem for them later on in life. The aspect of the woman accepting a home tool as an acceptance of a courtship shows the role of the woman in the home in society during the 16th through 18th centuries. Up until about 1840, when the feminist movement began in Norway, women were considered incapable of the traditionally male roles in society. Single women lived under the authority of their fathers until they were married, and then the authority transferred to the husband. Therefore, in a sense, a woman accepting a mangle board from a suitor was her accepting her new authority. These mangle boards were carved for practical purpose, to be used around the house, and certainly not to be put on display. They are folk art pieces.

Folk art is primarily decorative than purely aesthetic. The Oxford English Dictionary definition for aesthetic is, “a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, especially in art.” Mangle boards are filled with carvings and paintings of many different scenes, foliage, animals, religious, and many more themes that go along with inscriptions of names and prayers. So yes, mangle boards have aesthetic elements to them, but they are primarily decorative because the art has no meaning if one does not try to understand the piece itself. The Mount Horeb mangle board is a fascinating piece. The origins of the board are unknown, but we do know that the board was carved in 1806, as that is the date on the board. The carver of this board carved what appears to be a story featuring storks, swans, flowers, an angel.

The mysterious mangle board at Mount Horeb is a fascinating piece. Little is known about the



board, and when reaching out to other museums, they had nothing that could match this piece. All that is known is that the board is dated 1906, and that it was on display in Little Norway for over 80 years, which is why it is in poorer condition today as it was not in a climate controlled area; the beetle damage however, was already there when Little Norway cataloged the board in 1935. Mount Horeb's description of the board is as follows:

Flat bird tail shaped wooden piece with a handle in the shape of a horse fitted into the board at one end. The board is extremely carved with what is believed to be a wedding proposal motif. There are two swans facing each other at the base of the design and above this is what appears to be a church building with a stork perched on its spire. There are two plants with heart shaped leaves on either side of the stork and these are topped by birds above this is an angel facing a man and a woman with the year above them, above this is more flowers. The handle is in the shape of a horse with its head bowed wearing reigns. The entire edge of the piece is bordered in a zig-zag design. One corner of the board has been eaten away by beetles.

The board is also painted with colors of orange, green, yellow, red, and blue. The bottom is smooth like traditional mangle boards, and the top appears to be chip carved. The imagery featured on the board coincides with the same meaning as it means in other cultures as well. The swans are a symbol of love and partnership, the flowers are a symbol of fertility, and the storks are a symbol of children. There is what appears to be a Harold angel announcing the union of the two people featured on the board, which at first glance looks like the angel of death, but after finding that religion is often featured on mangle boards, concluded that it was just a poorly carved angel. There are also a series of three buildings that remain a mystery, but my hypothesis is that they are symbolizing two families becoming one, as two of the buildings appear to be houses, and one appears to be an official building where the marriage may have taken place. The board's handle is a horse, so that indicated that this board is probably from either Norway or Sweden.

Still, this board is unique. Comparing this board to other boards from the 18th century, the Mount Horeb board is incredibly unique.

The board on the left was the most intricate board from Norway's online digital archive of mangle boards. It depicts Christ on the cross with Adam and Eve being tempted by the serpent at the bottom. Flowers and vines fill the empty space of the board. To the right is the Mount Horeb mangle board. There are similarities between the two boards. The Mount Horeb board has an angel, religious feature, on the left side of the horse, along with flowers and vines filling up what little space was left on this board. Both board feature the horse handle.

The swans at the bottom of the board, and the couple near the top located above the flowers and vines indicate their love growing. The man that carved this board appears to be more into the idea of having a relationship and growing with someone rather than just having authority over them. This man must have really loved the woman that he carved this board for, so that she could always be reminded of their relationship as she did her housework.

The buildings on the board are a very interesting element. Buildings are not seen on any other 18th century mangle board that I have seen, so the significance of these buildings is unknown. As previously mentioned, my hypothesis is that these buildings are the two homes of the bride

and groom, with the church binding their families. The coloration of the buildings indicates where the buildings may be. If this board is in fact from Norway, the color of the buildings, along what appears to be a body of water as that is where the swans are located, that indicates that the area this board came from was a city like Alesund, Norway or Trondheim, Norway. If this board is not from Norway, it is possible that it came from a city like Reykjavik, Iceland or Copenhagen, Denmark. All of the cities above are known for their colorful coastal buildings, where the Mount Horeb mangle board may have come from, or at least where inspiration for the board was found. Of course, this is just a theory, not a fact, but it is something that I plan to continue researching as the project moves forward.

Boards in the 18th century were very intricate, yet very simple. They are further away from being folk pieces than the Mount Horeb board is. The typical mangle board was just a few designs such as circles and line work. They were very impersonalized unlike the Mount Horeb board. The Mount Horeb board leads me to believe that the man and women knew each other before they potentially began their courtship. Perhaps this may have been a wedding gift as the original one may have been lost, damaged or destroyed. The fact that mangle boards are considered folk pieces is fascinating.

The Mount Horeb mangle board still has a lot of questions that need to be answered, and I look forward to continuing my research on the board. The board is a fascinating piece that no one has ever seen before or even anything like it. With continued research on the board, and a better understanding yet of the history of mangle boards themselves, I am determined to find out more about the Mount Horeb mangle board so that this beautiful piece of folk art can be presented as best as possible, so that others will know about the Mount Horeb mystery mangle board.

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9. <http://www.oldandinteresting.com/mangle-boards.aspx> Figure 3
10. 14 Most Colourful Towns and Cities in Europe. August 2, 2014  
<http://www.theculturemap.com/14-most-colourful-towns-cities-europe/> Figures 5 and 6
11. All images of the Mount Horeb mangle board are from my photos

# Suggested Readings

On Norwegian Folk Art

*Book Title 1.* Lastname, Firstname. blah blah blah (Madison, WI), 2014.

On Rosemaling

On Furniture Making

# Making of the Exhibition

# Fall 2015 Art Exhibit

# Oral History with Brian Bigler

Interview with Brian Bigler by Carolyn Stephenson, April 27, 2016. Student project for Prof. Ann Smart Martin

0:00 – testing the recorder

0:44 – Introductions, explanations about how the interview will work, discussing the interview guide and questions

1:38 Brian Bigler was born in 1955; his renting a farm (farmstead) on town hall Road, they came there in 1945 when they were married. His family eventually bought the farm from the Bang family (Anna and Martin Bang). Father took over operations of the farm and eventually bought the farm. The Bangs, became like a third set of grandparents to him. One of the previous tenants, Mr. Gregor, left many things behind, so all the buildings were filled with several buildings of things on the farm. In 1961, when he was six years old, his mother was going to be in a parade float for the centennial for the town. They needed clothing from the so his mother called and took them to visit the Bangs who they thought would have something. Anna took them up into the attic

“and I can still remember the sunlight streaming in. There was a big trunk and she started showing us things and it there were a lot of things wrapped in newspaper and laying on top was a Norwegian tea strainer made out of tin and I was memorized by how important this stuff must be to be all wrapped and protected in paper or to be reserved in the attic like this. So at that young age I started noticing that those things that were still on the farm, that I could get access to at age six.”

Recalling the centennial: there were hundreds of people (the crowds frightened him out as a child); they knew many different people in the parade. One was a farmer friend, he drove a gas-powered, old antique tractor.

“So just that whole introduction to things, about how they were shaped how important they might be.”

4:57 In grade school, he had a teacher, Collet O’Ryan (Colleta Ryan?), who was interested antiques and had them do show-and-tell at school. Though a bit shy, he liked doing show-and-tell because he was interested in the objects. In the farm house he found a kerosene operated vaporizer to bring in. “I didn’t have a clue what it was but I just said how I found it, I thought it was so fascinating. So that was the spark of interest.”

5:49 B – He also got involved in conservation in 4-H (many UW-Madison professors and their wives lived in Mt. Horeb when he was growing up who helped with 4H). They went on lots of school trips to museums (6:30) Recalls noticing all the historic objects behind glass and thinking how important they must be. It was very formative for him (“put me over the edge with those kind of things”).

7:00 By the time he was in high school he had established a museum on the family farm that came about as part of a 4H project. It started as a nature trail, then filled up 4 buildings on the farm. People started giving him things they no longer wanted that were slated to go to auction (butter churns, cream separates – he was most interested in the farming artifacts). It got big enough that boy scouts and girl scouts would come on tours. But it got to be too much (he was supposed to be

helping his father on the farm as well), he maintained it through the end of high school (graduated in 1973).

8:08 – Talks of how in high school he was bullied quite a bit, but in his case turned out to be a good thing, because to avoid it he went to work in the library. While there he found the History of Mt. Horeb book from 1961. He was inspired by all the photos (8:44 “Wow, Mt. Horeb looked like that? That was really fun.”). Though he decided he wasn’t going to do the museum he wasn’t sure what he was going to do with all the objects. So [inspired by the book] in 1974 (he was 19 at the time) he went to the Mt. Horeb librarian Gladys Martin, and asked her if there was any kind of Mt. Horeb Historical Society. She said there had been some interest around the time of the centennial but there was nothing currently.

9:50 – Gladys put an ad in the local paper to gauge interest. Got together a group of around 12 people (that she knew): an attorney from town (also involved in 4H), a Wisconsin Historical Society Curator, most people who had lived in MH all their lives, Gilbertson’s owned a hardware store. About 10 people came to the first meeting (talk about how he wasn’t deterred by the number of people who turned out) One person was Olive Skingrew, daughter of Anna and Martin Bang. “She was just like her mother, like your typical storybook grandparent, with the hair up in a bun on the head and just the sweetest people. Olive was a lot like that.”

11:36 – One day he had to go visit her house to drop off board paperwork (she was one of the first board members and he was the first acting president; Bob Bokowski- the attorney, later Dane Co. Judge, was the first elected president.) He said, “Olive you’re going to think I’m crazy, and I think I’ve imagined this, but I’m not sure...that your mother may have been part of the inspiration of me getting into the historical society and she said “Oh? What do you mean by that?” and I said, “Well, during the centennial in ’61, we had to go over to your house and she showed me this tea strainer, and Olive goes, Oh, uh-huh, uh-huh.” She invited him in and showed him around and down into the basement where she recreated the farm kitchen she called it and as she’s showing him around “She points over to the wall and said ‘So is that this odd little tea strainer that you mentioned?’ and I just about lost it because I wasn’t imagining this, it was true...You know how when you’re a kid you think, ‘Did I make this up?’”

13:20 Recalls how later, when he moved to an apartment all the board members gave him housewarming gifts. When there was one unclaimed package left, he opened it up and it was the tea strainer from Olive. “Of course I just sat down and wept like an idiot. So that was the beginning.”

14:07 Historical Society started in March of 1975. The first elected president, Bob Bokowski, had the idea to have a museum and also wanted to collect contemporary objects – thinking of collecting for the future. At the time, he thought that was an odd notion.

14:45 In 1977, the then village president, Kurt Widdy, offered the Historical Society the use of vacant upstairs of the municipal building. There was mold on the walls, radiators had blown up, but it seemed like the perfect place for their museum. By then the group was growing, they had already had temporary exhibits in the bank, library where people had brought in their own collections to display.

15:22 (Carolyn asks: “Was the bulk of the first collection from what you had collected on the farm? Or did other people all of a sudden start donating things?) By this time, nobody had donated anything because they had no premises and he was still holding on to all of the objects at the farm thinking eventually they’d have a museum. He brought in things starting in 1977.

15:45 They didn't catalog things at that time, they knew all the objects because it came from the area. "And the stories weren't as much a part of it as accumulating something to show to people. So they borrowed things from people. But the first museum was what I would call today, provincial or traditional. Because the older ladies in the group were big on what they remembered from childhood, which was Victorian home. There were 4 rooms [in the new museum] dedicated to furnishing the home (living room, bedroom, dining room and kitchen) which was fine. At that time, in the 70s that's what people were still interested in." The Gilbertsons donated an entire hardware store. They started to put out requests when they were close to having a museum, the first stuff to come in (1976-77). During the early years they had a curator from the State Historical Society advising what to take and Bob Bokowski insisting they also collect contemporary. At this time, he agreed ("It just made sense. You never think to the future when you're only 19/20 years old." Recalls that when photographs and photos started arriving, even though they had been part of the book that had inspired him back in high school, they didn't interest him as much as the 3D objects. The historical society started to become his outlet, he stopped collecting as much personally. "It became an outlet where you could collect and not have the [personal] responsibility for it and [still] have community and see it."

18:00 - Period rooms were a challenge because you had to get detailed ("right down to a flypaper strip hanging from the ceiling"). People often reacted to the detail more than a storyline, which there wasn't much of in the period rooms

18:30 - Through the historical society he met lots of people who had come and gone in his life, and what he's learned after 41 years of being in the MHAHS, especially with the new building project, he's reflected a lot on those early years, wishing that those people could see [how far they've come]. "It's melancholy because you realize that along the way you met all of these wonderful people that have so many stories..."

19:03 - When traveling to other museums (he mentions Henry Ford Museum) he started to think not only about historical changes in technology or society but how these changes affected people in MH. He began to think of how the artifacts themselves could show progression. A lot of these stories came from what he calls "courting people," but he found that "you don't fall in love with their things, you fall in love with their friendship, and one woman in particular, Delma Donald Woodburn."

20:00 Met her in 1975, she took him in like an additional son. Her motto was "History should be preserved where it happened." MHAHS incorporated with the State Historical Society in June 1975, she still believed that things should stay local. Her family had done made notes on hundreds of their objects. He was always intrigued that she had created a museum of sorts around her family.

20:57 - Around 1983 collecting began to focus folk arts. Hundreds of people over the years (many on the board) should also get the credit for collecting. He called it "a slow moving train that started moving faster and faster." Irene Gilbertson going to Masonic lodge meetings to ask for costumes and textiles. Mariana Ripp - costume enthusiast from MH focused on specifically what people in the region wore, what inspired them, tracking fashion changes. It became about collecting categories, with in bigger categories, with a special interest on archives and photographs. It was acknowledged early on as important supportive material to the artifacts and over time became very useful to the public in its own right. People began coming to them for information - new concept. People became more interested in genealogy than artifacts.

22:47 - The more they grew the more people gave. They stayed in the "attic" until 1996 - they ran



out of room. There was also a shift, for Brian personally about exhibit design. Up to this point they were very well known for their dioramas and displays (they had reproduced the MH hospital from 1918). He laughs that every medical doctor who passed away donated their equipment and they probably have the largest medical equipment collection around.

23:35 – He was inspired by an exhibit at the Neville Museum about Victorian mourning customs and death. He observed that when photos of a Victorian funeral came in older curators would react negatively and stuff them away. He thought, why are they ignoring the “bad” parts of history? And it wasn’t even bad at the time, people embraced it having almost wedding-like celebrations. So he had the idea to create a Victorian funeral in the Victorian parlor room in the museum making it more than just a static exhibit and push a few buttons of history. Board members weren’t fond of the idea, so he thought they should do a survey to see if it was actually a good idea. But the wife of the previous president, Dick Horn (the curator at the WHS) who had died the previous year, contacted him and said, “Of all people I should be the most upset about this, with Dick’s passing...but Dick would be absolutely ecstatic about this idea, he would be so proud of you.” So that settled it, especially if they focused on the customs of death.

26:03 It started out in the hallway, showing various tombstone headings; they had found actual tombstones from cemetery dumps that had been thrown into the trash. News of the project spread by word of mouth so the community started donating photos of funerals, the florist offered to do all the flower arrangements for the exhibit. Though they didn’t know it at the time, this exhibit became a turning point for the historical society because it also involved programming. They found they needed to have programs with this exhibit to put people at ease. The funeral director came in to talk about customs and the florist from town talked about the tradition of flowers (they also loaned their antique supplies). And we had all of that [information/objects] in the exhibit. People learned what people wore, e.g. in the hardware store the mannequin wore a black armband (with no explanation) [so it made people observant]. Later there were photos of people in the cemeteries, explanations of the flowers. As you went back into the Victorian kitchen there were dishes piled up and mannequins doing food prep. Then in the parlor we found an original casket (a New Glarus undertaker loaned them one). It was done very respectfully where people sat up all night with a candle on the table and the mourning cards that people brought.

28:28 It hit the news, the State journal came out and did a full page spread in color, which got people buzzing. A woman who was writing a novel on Victorian funerals wanted to come out and sit by herself in this setting so she could contemplate the feel of it for her novel. This show took them out of the “attic,” people said they needed more space to do more exhibits like this.

29:00 The current museum was originally the hardware store of the Gilbertsen’s who were big in the historical society. They rented it to the Wisconsin Folk Museum, which was separate from the MHAHS – the two organizations were mutually supportive, loaned each other things, etc. but they had to close. They overextended themselves by printing lots of posters of artwork that they planned to sell and had to be foreclosed by the bank. They bought the building for 125,000 (which the village helped pay for).

30:03 The very first exhibit in the new building: photos taken of Mt. Horeb in 1899 Elva Webber, bicycle shop owner in MH. New space was a blank canvas, how could they take the photos and make a unique exhibit? They’ve always collected actual object that showed up in photographs from the town (a favorite thing of his and the board). For this exhibit they borrowed or collected any of the objects in the photos they could find; a screen door, an actual horse-drawn buggy. Some were

borrowed because they looked close to the one in the photo. But while doing it they realized that they actually owned a couple of objects that were in the Webber photos. A dress that was worn by a little girl during a fourth of July parade was put next to the photo of her wearing it in the parade. For the outside of a hotel they had folded up bedsheets and glass wear. For a picture of a circus they used some tent awning, the town pump photo was displayed with a pail. Picket fences, all to give you the feel of the small town. The exhibit was titled Elva Webber's Small Town Wisconsin. It was hugely popular; opening had several hundred people – a new venue and a new concept of exhibiting. However, these new exhibits meant changing the space over and over.

32:52 He went back to college late and got a degree in history from Edgewood College – studied nationalism and construct of ethnic identity. From 1975 to almost 1990, he never gave a thought to the ethnic makeup of the town, Why was it so Norwegian when there were so many Germans, he came from a Swiss background. He created a thesis to tell the history of Mt. Horeb and surrounding area through its ethnicities. (Mt. Mary, Blue Mounds, Mt. Vernon). Wanted to build an exhibition around this question. Took two years to collect all the items, called people, created a timeline focused on the ethnic background. Discovered that as time passed and immigrant generations passed away, the subsequent generations wanted to reestablish that connection – went back to Norway, etc. But why did the Germans not talk about their heritage? Turns out there was a great deal of sedition during WWI. Documents, clippings, letters in the MHAHS archives proved this. Letter from the editor used derogatory language “Are you all German or what?!” And, yes, 50% of them were. Collected specifically for this exhibition. They had about 2000-3000 people coming through annually to see the exhibit. Being on street level helped a lot. There was no payment except the satisfaction that people were coming in and learning from your work.

35:49 – The more people that came the more artifacts were donated. Now they have some 20,000 artifacts, 25,000 photographs, 1000s of documents. There are things that are still coming in – things that he's heard about for 40 years and it finally gets donated. One such object: (2014-two years ago) Byron Jordens-lived out in MH, painted a series of set flats for the skits put on for the centennial. Brian saw one going into an auction and managed to snag it before it went on sale (he was able to get a discount for the historical society). Recalls that he sometimes had to rescue things last minute out of dumpsters before they were thrown out, or out of a home that was to be demolished, or that people said come get it now or never.

37:40 They are more selective about what to collect now, but back then they collected whatever they could get. He was always thinking “How can this be used in an exhibit?” After the 1980s stories became a huge focus, especially with the computer age, everything has a story. The recent curators have been very focused on the story. A conflict for him as he sees objects as props for exhibits. Of course there is a story for each individual object, but he likes to focus on the bigger picture. To create that picture you need a massive amount of material, but today you can't collect everything. You have to select one or two things that tell that story vs. the entire [collection/set of objects] – not enough storage.

38:38 (C asks, “Why has that changed today?”) Money. Even after new building was established (after 1996) they used the old museum as storage. But he couldn't believe how fast it filled up. The more they were recognized for caring for objects and using it for programming (though the programming has changed for the better today). 12 years ago they started looking for new a new building. They got a lot, but it would still split the locations.

39:55 He stayed with the MHAHS all those 40 years, always mindful to try not to be set in his

ways, but embrace new people and fresh ideas. Vs. old timers who get stuck in their ways. People have viewed him as a figurehead for the historical society, but he doesn't see himself that way, he sees the 1000s of volunteers that have worked hard, he has been a director/guide but can take credit all the work. Every time someone [a president] died he wound up back in there.

41:02 He did realize however, that he was central to the organization, that if he got "hit by a bus" he would take a lot of institutional knowledge with him. MHAHS was getting too big, so they worked to get a paid position. His dream (and laughingly he said his first mistake) was to dream that they could become as big as any major area museum. [At this time - in the last 2-3 years] They decided they needed a director. He decided it was time for him to step sideways. Which was hard for him after 40/41 years. They conscientiously got some new board members to mix fresh in with the old. He has stayed on in the collections committee - his favorite - working with things. He stayed out of the hiring process, he didn't want his bias involved in selecting the new director. He only met the new director, Destinee Udelhoven, after she was hired. He and Destinee have had their moments (he said laughing), but now she feels like a sister. She comes with young ideas, getting the younger people in.

44:04 - One person can't do it all: "Preserve it, collect it, trying to get it into the computer, answering requests for information, running out to somebody's barn one moment looking at something before it got destroyed." At times they had to increase the board members to cover the work. Everyone was a volunteer and had other work. Fortunately for him he worked at an Antique store where he could do double duty with the MHAHS. They still lend objects as props for exhibitions - very fortunate to have those collections. Now Destinee, the director is full time, and they have a ¾ time curator who also can't keep up, with additional programming.

45:35 Having UW-Madison students come out has always been a dream of his. Staff from HLATC came out years ago to do a talk. MHAHS has a huge costume collection and he'd love to get HLATC connected to it. One downside of storage is that it's not publically accessible. You have the expectation from the public [when they donate] that you are going to protect their items, but also make it more publically available.

46:35 The new building project is mushrooming. Private anonymous donors have donated millions. The new building has turned into a campus. He always wanted to have a campus. He loves the community of Mt. Horeb, the rural landscape. He thinks it's a great setting to interpret the regions history more broadly. They need to do more than say this is "so-and-so's photograph." He's interested in asking questions like "How did these things make you what you are?" and also developing the programming to go with it. Destinee has really pushed to get young ppl involved in a way that was difficult when you had just volunteers. Though it's still difficult, you'll never have enough money. It's easy to ask people for artifacts, but not as easy to ask for money. It's been an adjustment for the board. "Rather than giving us your best piece of fur nature how about giving us a \$100 or a \$1000?"

49:07 - (Carolyn asks - "Do you/have you placed an emphasis on "numinous objects" - ordinary objects with special stories or connections to people, places or events - or on objects that are more representative of historical themes?")

The objects that have those profound stories are still there. When discussing the permanent exhibitions [for the new space], they had discussions, about dioramas [his preference] vs. putting certain objects on pedestals [idea floated by Destinee & Johnna]. His initial reaction was that they

didn't have any pedestal-worthy objects like Judy Garlands Ruby Red Slippers. But then started to realize that, in fact, yes they did. Displaying things this way presents a creative challenge.

50:40 One example: from donation of objects from Little Norway that were collected in the 1930s – a battered rusted canister used by a Norwegian family to hold their daily water ration on their trip [sea crossing?] – it was all the water that the whole family had available to drink for the day. It had sat on the front porch exhibit [diorama-like] in little Norway, it's profound story hidden. The object in itself has a powerful story but can also be used to represent a broader story of immigration– most Norwegian settlers in the area had similar experiences. It could be placed in front of a manifesto, or picture of a ship. This one object represents how hard that voyage was.

51:58 Another example – Debbie the Doll who belonged to Wiconsiana Peck, the first European child born in Dane Co. Singular profound items that tell a story, will still be groupings but they will be joined with documents and photos and brought to life in a different way. A trunk packed for America – we've done things like that, but now – it will include things like burlap (which they were told to bring to sell because there was no burlap for sacking, or the plants and potatoes to grow – thing you don't always hear about – you always hear about the “cutsies” – as we do more research we're hoping to tell fuller stories.

53:08 – Modern CSA crate in the exhibit will show the evolution of farming in the region. Historically done for family sustenance evolved into industry with modern CSAs. People might not think it should be in a museum – it helps connect people contextualize their communities, historically and contemporaneously.

54:02 (Carolyn asks- about the narrative of ethnicity that he did for his thesis exhibit – how did ppl react to that topic? Did it change the way they viewed their contemporary identities?) He was initially nervous about that very topic – the German sedition with veterans – but he told himself he was telling the true story, and they were trying to do it very respectfully. You had pressure – not only tell the story but to display the “prized possessions” that people lent for the exhibit – [had to make them all work together in a respectful way]. They had programming on the topic to help people process and understand the topic – a prof. from Edgewood spoke on German sedition in the region during the period. \_\_\_\_\_? spoke on constructed Norwegian identity – the whole idea of making trolls. The lectures had a good turn out.

56:00 – A German man, whom was respected by Brian's family, came to the program, and after the program said to Brian “I am so please with what you've done and how you brought our story to life.' He had come late and made his way here in America and was proud of his ability to do that.” [He also had to construct his new identity as an immigrant] which for the whole town happened naturally over time as the first generation of immigrants passed away, people [continued to look back to construct their identity]. Especially for tourism, developing an identity like that helps. Even the identity for tourism has morphed over time from rose-maled buildings to trolls (that are stolen by university students.

57:45 The hope is to focus on world events through the lens of the home front, how larger events like WWII or the depression played out in our region. Makes the story tangible.

58:46 The more creative you are [with exhibits] the more you hope people will respond in creative ways. You don't have to say as much, ext is good, especially for the Native American sections [he moves on but implies, that you want to use text where it helps people understand, but want to not overdo it and use other exhibition strategies to communicate].

59:00 They haven't really done a lot on Native American groups. They have done heavy research

on the topic because they wanted to respect that part [of the region's history]. So they wanted to keep themselves in the middle of history and report from both sides – using settlers accounts of what they had observed, which all seemed positive and inquisitive, so we presented their story. But we also went back to originally documents, from the Ho-chunk, who were the main group here at the time, and what were their firsthand accounts? The exhibit doesn't make any judgments; it lets you make your own interpretations.

1:00:35 New exhibition will start out with introducing the Driftless Region and people's interactions with the land, first peoples, interruption of white settlement, and the changes over time. Hopefully without too much text! "It's like writing a storybook and putting it on the wall, then supporting it with 3D objects."

1:01:44 (Carolyn asks about collecting contemporary objects – a focus from the beginning of MHAHS – how has that continued to present day? It's easy to preserve in hindsight, but how do you decide what preserve when you've got so many contemporary objects to choose from?)

1:02:05 It's tough. For example, when they acquired the bar next door to expand the museum campus (bars have played an important role in the social life of regional small towns like MH), his initial reaction was to collect the whole setting [to capture the atmosphere], but Destinee's perspective is to collect one stool – and there's something to be said about that lonely bar stool. She also wanted to collect the bar's pay telephone that was covered in duct tape. His initial reaction was how awful an example it was and that they had better examples in better condition, but she said, "Think of all the calls made home on that telephone."

1:02:55 Now they have collection's committee meetings, they don't just take everything. Now all objects have to go through the committee and have a good reason established for why they should be collected. More singular collecting, rather than plural. He's still worries that they could miss opportunities.

1:03:50 The concept of collecting contemporary has also changed from the founding days. Things, like toys, used to be collected at a broad scale, any toy from the time would be collected. Now however, everything has to have a direct connection to the area. If a toy is collected it has to have belonged to a child from the area.

1:04:30 (Carolyn asks: Even the parameter of only collecting objects from the community is still broad. Do you have any further hierarchies of what kinds of objects you want to collect from the community [like toys, textiles, agricultural tools, etc.]?)

1:05:03 It is because he is big on trends. Rubix cubes, etc. Less of that now and more specific, like a t-shirt created because the school won the state tournament. Also, controversy about "the book" I am Jazz, the transgender child who was here – the one problem with collecting [contemporary things] is that when something explosive happens, you have to go out quickly and be in the middle of it and try to get every side as fast as you can because everything happens so quickly now. Had to act fast to collect news stories from both sides to get the actual book. The buttons they wore, it's all perishable. He always dreads those kinds of moments. Facebook helps because you can see things coming [though he's not personally]. You can use local newspaper archives too. Then do we have space for all the objects that come out of these events [can't plan for them ahead of time] "You think to yourself, please don't have a large protest sign, have a small one!" (laughing). They give out slips of paper at those kinds of events that says please think of us [think of donating these items once the event is over].

1:07:39 (Carolyn asks, how have people reacted to the thought that they are now in a historical

moment, that by you approaching them and saying, “We would like to collect this to keep for the historical society” that puts them in a historical moment.)

Usually people who feel like they are on the “pro” side of something are thrilled. The people who are not on the “pro” side...there have been several cases – out in Perry Township there has been a lot of controversy over land issues there. Both sides have been very honored to have their signs, or materials, in the MHAHS collections. In other situations, where there are 1000s on the “pro” side and only a few against it, there is much more tact that’s involved in those situations [so that people don’t feel threatened or singled out]. There is sometimes some back peddling [the MHAHS’s involvement does make people stop and think about their stance], and we don’t judge that. It’s not always easy to stay in the middle of history. You can collect all the positive – going back to the Victorian funeral exhibit, it’s the same thing – “you can collect everything positive and never deal with death and dying as it was at one point or you can collect it all and it’s your story.” Since 1975 they’ve tried to collect both sides of history – posters from a local marijuana festival, kids talking about AIDS at the high school to a local minister who went around town with discriminatory pamphlets. If it happens on a big scale it’s part of our history.

1:10:45 discusses cell phone collection

1:11:00 (Carolyn asks about exhibiting the contemporary culture. “For something that happened recently, in the 80s, etc. do you feel like you need to wait a certain amount of time to get those objects back out and present them?”)

What he has found, the more recent it is the more people relate to it. Their 1970s snowmobile – it was a major sport in MH – and when they had it out it was all that people would talk about, that snowmobile. It was dated but they could still relate to it. Talks about presenting various pieces of technology/equipment (cameras, cell phones, typewriters, computer, TV, a track tape player) and how the statement was that all of those things are now found on one device and how profound that is for the contemporary audience.

1:13:05 He has started to think (along with Destinee): how are these things profound enough to start conversation with an adult who is coming thought with their child? Generations change and the Victorian interior of a house doesn’t mean anything anymore. It’s just not relatable. (:27) They have a Hardee’s glass from a Hardee’s Restaurant. They collected the glass, not because there was a Hardee’s Restaurant there, but because of the Hardee’s Restaurant controversy, tearing down a historic home and everybody boycotted the restaurant. The cup has been in an exhibit twice now and has come to have profound meaning through its connection to the idea fast food and whether or not to embrace it. They don’t embrace it well, they like to have their local shops and food.

1:14:15 (Carolyn recaps the point about the relevancy Victorian periods rooms – important because there was a connection to that setting in peoples’ living memory. Do you see that shifting in the way create exhibits? The store exhibit as an example – people remember it now, but in 50 years it might not be as...)

Brian responds ... that though it might not be as impacting, there will still be grocery stores, Wal-mart, etc. and you can always compare the historical to the contemporary [because it is a similar enough environment/experience]. Whereas with the Victorian interior – they did an exhibit a few years ago where they had used a photo of Delma Donald as a baby in 1899 sleeping in her highchair, and reproduced the entire setting from the room she was in – because the Donald’s had preserved and donated everything – in the museum. It was the most popular exhibit at the time. People were impressed that they could reproduce the entire picture, that the family had preserved everything.

It works two ways and depends on how you present it. Making a fictitious diorama/assemblage with objects from different places isn't as powerful as an authentic recreation. Their general store diorama is unique in that way because all of the objects, including the walls, shelves and counter, were original to that same store. That can be a major storyline in itself, that one family would preserve everything.

1:16:30 (Carolyn asks about the collecting process over the years, and the relationships that he's built with donors over time. Are there any objects, donors or relationships that stand out as significant when developing the collection? Could you talk about the Donald family and how their foresight for documenting and preserving their family objects expanded the possibilities of exhibitions for you?)

1:17:36 With Delma Woodburn it became falling in love with someone who became like a mother figure to him. He got to know their whole family and "that's a whole other story." "On the other end there are the characters, I could write a book on them, they're right out of Gunsmoke, you know, these crazy characters you'd find in a movie, yet they become endearing."

An example of one or two: One of the curators, Marlen Grindy?, had a family member, Myrtle Naves: "And I'm going to try to do this with all great respect, because I have great respect for these people, even though they were quirky. And they would probably admit it if they were here to hear this." But Myrtle Naves lived in a big old beautiful house, the family was early here. "Well Marlen was related to her and she would tell me stories like 'Nobody would eat her meals when she comes to family reunions because she lives with dozens of cats in the house!' and I go, 'Wow, what an eccentric woman, that sounds interesting, geez, is that really true?' And then one day Myrtle called Marlen, she had this butter churn that she wanted to donate to the historical society – you know she was really evaluating her life – and Marlen went to pick it up but made her come to the front porch with it. And Marlen's dear and sweet, it's just, you know...so then Myrtle calls again and says she has some things and I said, 'You know I'd really like to see the inside of that house, and I'd like to meet her.'

So I went, and Myrtle comes to the door and she's literally crippled. She's wearing two of those canes that you wear around your arms. And [she] was very boisterous and outspoken and I thought, 'Wow, this is cool, I like this lady!' and so she invited me in and it was in winter and it was so warm in there that there were flies buzzing all over. And everything was old, everything was period. The carpeting on the floor was covered with about an inch of cat hair but it was there. And there were all the kitties running around and you could hear them off in the distance doing their duty on newspaper that was put down on the kitchen floor, so every now and again you would have to keep talking to Myrtle while you were also hearing that going on. She had 26 cats and her dog buddy in the house with her and she was very proud of all of them and they were her children. So we talked about them and then she showed me what she had, and she kept calling us.

We wanted to do an exhibit of a kitchen from the 1870s and she'd call and say 'Oh, this is Myrtle, you should come one over here!' – I think she was lonely too – [on the phone she tells him] 'My mother and father sealed up the pantry way, way back. Come on over! You'll need a crow bar!' (laughs) So we went in, and she's walking with her walkers, and we're tiptoeing over all the cat doo on the floor, you know on the newspapers, and then she shows me this door and you could see...she said, 'Oh, we put a quilt over it and nailed it shut. 1940 something.' And I said, "Wow, Myrtle, that's a long time ago." And she says 'You've got to get your crow bar!' and I say, 'Stand back, stand back.' And she's real shaky and everything, as I pry, the door pops open and what was

left of quilt fell down and the rest of it had been eaten by mice – because even though there were cats in the house there were all these mice – and she said take what you want. And it was a tomb. All still there. I’ve seen a number of these things. I feel very privileged. It was a tomb of turn of the last century kitchen pantry. With everything still sitting on the shelves, with cobwebs hanging where the kerosene lamp was still sitting on the table. Like it had been left in 1940. So she said, take what you want, bring it out. (Carolyn asks “What was in there?”) Just everything, crockery that held beans, so there were rows of crockery and cookie cutters and kitchen pans and wooden bowls, and flour sifters, and she never (Carolyn asks “And she never wanted to use any of it? Why do you think?”) Because she was an only child, never married, grew up with it all and it was always there and it never meant anything – well, it did, she was ready to start telling her story because I think she knew that she was getting close to the end of her life. And she would read off, ‘Oh this guy came by in a wagon and he turned in on a lathe in the back for my mother.’ And I’m writing all this down as fast as I can.

So then I went back to visit with her different times and we went through all the stacks of photos and I’m thinking we need to get these identified, and she kept trying to offer them and I thought don’t be greedy, don’t take everything, you know, just take a few, “Myrtle, oh no, these are your family photographs, you hang on to them until you’re ready and I will take them, [now] we’ll just take a few, and I put tape on the back of those.

Well, I got a phone call from Marlen, panicked in February – the last time I saw Myrtle she said, ‘Oh, come back in March.’ And I said, “I’ll come back when it’s warmer Myrtle.” And she said ‘But you’ve got to get through this whole area here...’ so it was one after the other, and it was like “Oh my God, another call from Myrtle.’ And then Marlen calls and says ‘You won’t believe what happened. Last night Myrtle’s house burned to the ground with her in it.’ And I just went into shock and hung up the phone and started crying. This was in the 1980s. I was so shocked I didn’t believe it. I drove out and saw the smoldering pit. It had burned right to the ground. And all I could think of was that hopefully she was overcome by smoke and she went out the way anyone would want to, with all of her pets, some of them were ill and old. Hopefully she felt no pain and she took everything with her, she took everything she loved with her. So that was the most profound.”

1:24:18 There was Don [last name?], from town. His father was a photographer and he had saved all his photos. These people were eccentrics, and a lot of people in town didn’t like them and I thought they have a story. There are several of these. In his case, he called Brian over on the hottest day of summer and made him go in the attic of the apartment – it must have been 100 degrees – and they pulled out all sorts of glass negatives. He was “hard up” and asked for \$125 for a computer. So Brian went to the board, explained the situation and asked if they could reimburse Don for his donation. It was out of the ordinary to do that (purchasing things) but they did. Shortly after, he passed away.

1:25:48 There was one man they talked to when doing the exhibition on German sedition. Someone had been doing radio broadcasts (a ham radio operator) in Swiss German so the war board came out knocking on doors. Everyone knew it was Mr. Egham, who wasn’t doing anything wrong, just speaking in German. Brian thought it would be good to include in the exhibit and went out to visit Mr. Egham to see if it was true and to learn more about it. “I went to visit him on a rainy day with a friend who was scared to death, the trees were all hanging down in the driveway. And the big square farmhouse had hardly anything in it and there he is sitting in a chair and he had just soiled his pants, he was so old, and I felt like we were intruding, and I thought, how are



we going to be received here? How were we going to ask, were you interrogated by the war board? How do I approach it? So I very gingerly got around to it, talked about the HS, and asked During WWII did anyone come around while you were operating your ham radio? And he said 'Oh yes!' and he told us the whole story. And I said, would you be able to share any tangible stuff that goes with this story? [Mr. Egham] Go upstairs to the room on the left." So we went up and there's the microphone, so I thought that. And his license and such, I didn't know what to do, and with David going look all the antique radios... I'd love to have them but they don't really tell the story, no we'll just take what we need here. And then on the way down, I said well we've got these items and he told us what they were and then he took out of his pocket and unfolded a document he had carried all of his life, that was being immunized for I think measles in Switzerland, that allowed you to pass to the United States. All hand written. [And he said,] 'Here.' And you're driving away going, 'What just happened?' And then we hear two weeks later, he died. I could go on and on, you know the lady with the chickens living in her kitchen. And they're all wonderful people, and yeah, there are some who don't want to give it right now. Then you find out [other times] there's an auction and there's all this stuff in the yard and nobody cares and you think, 'Well, I'm saving history I guess.' In some cases I've purchased things myself and just given them because I know we don't have the money here to do that."

1:29:00 Recalls how hard it was not being able to save the entire collection of Little Norway, but they did get a nice collection and the UW-Madison students were already able to come out and use it. [Destinee stopped by, chats a bit.]

1:29:53 (Carolyn asks if he ever got all of Myrtle's photos). No, they had been found in the ruins all melted together.

1:30: 35 (Carolyn asks about the Donald family. Several students are doing object studies on that collection. And it's an incredible story that they had the forethought to collect and record. What was their mindset?)

The women of the family put identifiers on who was making the comments [in the records]. DD = Delma Donald, DDW = Delma Donald Woodburn, DD something for her mother, etc. Brian was hired by Jim Woodburn, Sr. to do research on the history of a minster that came here from Scotland. Brian was able to do this because they brought everything with him. They know what he brought in his covered wagon. And for some reason overtime, the family started labeling everything, with a tag, wrapped in newspaper and stored it in the attic. This labeling seems to go back from when they moved off the farm in 1917. They left somethings on the farm (like the library) and locked it up and rented the farm out. The rest went with them to Madison. The minster kept his sermons and documents going back to 1812. The other stuff, the clothing, they kept and labeled the underwear that the women wore on their wedding nights from the 1850s-1920s. They even kept an outfit that someone was supposed to wear upon their death. Or the suit that John wore on his inaugural of the State Assembly. In the pocket is a napkin and two sugar lumps that he picked up that night.

1:33:58 He didn't think that they did it because they thought that they were doing anything profound. Many of the things they had were repaired with care, he thinks they were thrifty people who go into the mindset of not throwing anything out. The minister, in his letters that he was teaching to his students, the lessons were diligence, thrift, and education.

Also, Delma's father died just two weeks after he married his mother, and was an only child. Then Delma was the eldest and watch two young siblings die. He thinks that had a profound effect

on her – she kept all of her mother’s mourning clothes, etc. – and surviving by only one child for two generations might have affected her as well. Delma has two children and grandchildren who are less into the collecting “understandably as they don’t live around here.” Delma (who lived to be 102) didn’t always know she had the opportunity to donate to a museum. [It seems that wasn’t an initial incentive for her collecting]. In her estate she left everything (from before 1917? to the MHAHS). It took six months to sort the bulk out, and they are still bringing in papers. The records cover the civil war, one son purchased his way from the civil war [they could pay \$300 to have someone else go in their stead]. It is known that this happened, but this is the first documentation of it at MHAHS. They are a Scotch-Yankee family with an incredible long record, which is rare. Hendersons are another such family who have also been working with MHAHS. The Donald donation came with 1000 textiles – in 2000, he doesn’t know if they would be able to accommodate that now. He was there the day he John Steuart Curry painting of their farm that she prized was removed to the house and taken to the Chazen.

“I came down from sorting, there was no one in the house, and I saw that gone and it took the wind out of me. It was hard because I thought, there goes that life. But then I have to say, well, that’s not so, because it’s preserved here now. Everything about them is preserved here and now students from the University are studying their family history so, hey! Yeay for Delma, she’d be very proud.”

1:39:22 (Carolyn asks if there’s anything he’d like to conclude with?)

He finds it very baffling, the day that Destinee announced that they had gotten \$50,000 more for the project, he had to go to a restaurant and sit alone. He almost felt guilty, that he wasn’t doing that much. He was so overwhelmed to think that there was so much interest and community support, and support of these big donors. They feel that this will be good for their business, but people of that generation are also fond of history. Mr. Shlect from Duluth Trading, Co. has a collection of old tools, he’s just fond of that kind of thing. “It’s gone from what some people would call a small town society into the big time.” It’s overwhelming, they used to worry about the cost of a paintbrush and now they don’t have to. They were so meticulous, taking care of every little dollar. Around 2000, Marlen, who was the treasurer at the time, was worried about Y2K, so Brian went with her to the accountant to make sure they were prepared. When the accountant asked to see her (computer) files, she takes out an old antique ledger that they had been keeping accounts in and banged it on his desk. Clearly she was fine. Brian said to the accountant, “Well we are the Historical Society!” A moment Brian will never forget.

1:42:20 When asked how he would like to be referred to [for the project], he said, “As a volunteer.”