

# Living the Past in the Present

## *An Ethnographic Study of Norwegian Americans’ Expression of Identity in Minneapolis*

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Master's Thesis

Department of Social Anthropology

University of Oslo

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Expressions of Norwegian identity in America (Photo by author).

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# Abstract

The study of American identity has generally been concerned with the concept of hyphenated identity, a dual identity of sorts. The Norwegian-American identity is a clear example of a hyphenated identity. This thesis will offer some perspectives on the American identity construction in general and the Norwegian-American in particular. A focal point is how the Norwegian-American identity is maintained in contemporary USA. This thesis is based on five and a half months ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Minneapolis, Minnesota, among Norwegian Americans. Moreover, this thesis explores how Norwegian Americans express their heritage in a public setting. This performance is first and foremost observed at public events such as club meetings, luncheons, functions and church coffee, but also other social settings. Norwegians are an old immigrant group to the US, but despite how they are several generations removed from the Norwegian immigrants they still hold on to their Norwegian heritage and traditions today. Minneapolis is home to a plethora of different Norwegian-American clubs and organizations, and this is predominantly where the fieldwork was conducted. The Norwegian-American identity is often conveyed through cultural elements such as food or clothing, which are essential elements in expressing a hyphenated identity. These cultural elements are often perceived to be traditionally Norwegian, although they may in reality not be, as they become affected by the American culture. The main focal point of this thesis is concerned with how preserving and maintaining a Norwegian identity is key in reinforcing their bonds and identities as Americans. The methods that they use to express their Norwegian heritage are inherently American, as is their ways of thinking about a Norwegian-American identity.

Keywords: Norwegian-American, Minneapolis, Minnesota, identity, ethnicity, hyphenated identities, urban anthropology, food.



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# Chapter 1 - Introduction to the field

“We are Norwegians, we like our coffee extra strong you know!” Tracy said grinningly to the caretaker as he was preparing the brew for the small group. As the familiar scent of coffee filled the room, Tracy took her homemade cookies out of a jar and laid them on a tray for the helpers to enjoy with the coffee. Although we had only been working for an hour or so, the coffee break was a necessity. Tracy, together with her husband Jim, had organized this button assembly on behalf of the May 17<sup>th</sup> committee<sup>1</sup> (Constitution Day committee). They were both retired from their professional career, which allowed them to be more engaged in the Norwegian-American community. As there were thousands of buttons to prepare for the annual Constitution Day celebration, there was plenty of work to be done. Tracy had brought different types of cookies with her, but it was clear that the Norwegian one was the most popular among the little group. She called these particular cookies “*brunkake*” (brown cake) albeit with a heavy American accent. It was not until I laid eyes on the brown, rectangular Christmas cookies that I understood what she had said. “Oh, these are my favorite Norwegian cookies!” exclaimed one of the other women happily as she helped herself to the cookies. As we sat down with our coffee, one of the women had a sudden coughing fit. “Uff da!”<sup>2</sup> exclaimed George, one of the men in the group, “You should get some *aquavit*<sup>3</sup> for that cough!” , the little group chuckled. George, also a senior, was permanently in a good mood and always had a joke up his sleeve.

This extract from my very first meeting with the field took place in the basement at the Sons of Norway building which the May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee had reserved for the morning. The Sons of Norway building was located in the trendy Uptown part of Minneapolis. The building was fairly easy to spot when walking down the street as it had “Sons of Norway” printed in big letters on the very top of it. It had also been adorned with a touch of Scandinavian decor, with a border of the iconic *rosemaling*<sup>4</sup> pattern, covering all four walls on top of the building.

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<sup>1</sup> May 17<sup>th</sup> is Norway’s Constitution Day and an important national holiday that is properly celebrated. All of my informants referred to the day (and the committee) as *Syttende mai* (17<sup>th</sup> of

<sup>2</sup> Uff da can loosely be translated with the English expression “oh dear”.

<sup>3</sup> Aquavit is a Scandinavian potato or grain spirit.

<sup>4</sup> Translated directly as “decorative painting”, a rococo decorative style which draws inspiration from flower ranks. Referred to in the field by its Norwegian word *rosemaling*.

However, the Norwegian or Scandinavian impression quickly subsided upon entering the building, discovering that a branch of the bank Wells Fargo was occupying the entire first floor. Down in the basement however the Norwegian connection became visible once more. The basement was decorated with a gigantic mural of Norwegian landscape with tall mountains and green hillsides covering one of the four walls in the room. In one corner there were placed two flags, the Norwegian and the American, together representing the old and the new country. George pointed out that the blue color on the Norwegian flag was off as it was a shade too light, disappointment tinting the tone of his voice. The room was furnished with a kitchen and a great number of tables, which made it clear that its original purpose was meant for much larger meetings.

This meeting was however of a different kind. I had received an e-mail from a Sons of Norway lodge president about how the May 17<sup>th</sup> committee was hosting a button assembly workshop and was looking for volunteers to help them. I quickly sent an e-mail to those in charge of the workshop, and they replied that I was most welcome to join them. The May 17<sup>th</sup> committee turned out to be made up of representatives from other Norwegian-based clubs and organizations in the area. The workshop consisted of putting ribbons on to May 17<sup>th</sup> buttons which were to be sold for the big celebration a couple of months later.

Looking back on this day, I believe I could not have asked for a better introduction to the Norwegian Minneapolis. The other volunteers came from groups I would later go on to get better acquainted with, such as the international organization Norwegians Worldwide, the Norwegian church Mindekirken, the Norwegian consulate in Minneapolis as well as the Norwegian Glee Club among others. They informed me that they were about 20-25 members in the committee, however only a large handful of them were present at the workshop. Most of the attendees were retirees with two exceptions, a perfect reflection of the composition of my informants during the rest of my fieldwork.

### **Initial interest in the field**

This master's thesis is based on five and a half months' fieldwork conducted in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the spring of 2015 from the middle of January to the beginning of July. My initial aim of the study was to explore Norwegian-American identity and the way it was explored in a public setting by joining meetings and events concerned with Norwegian heritage.

My decision to do my fieldwork in the Norwegian-American community was heavily influenced by the popular Norwegian reality program *Alt for Norge* (TVNorge, 2010). Currently in its seventh season, *Alt for Norge* is a reality show following a group of Norwegian Americans who travel to Norway to experience the country and its culture with the final objective of meeting their Norwegian family<sup>5</sup>. In order to win a family reunion the contestants have to compete in various contests that challenge their knowledge on Norwegian language, culture and history. These challenges and adventures are usually humorous in their execution, often resembling a typical game show. Recurring activities are trying to speak Norwegian, or racing on cross-country skis, all to the general amusement of the, primarily, Norwegian viewers. But what intrigued me the most about this show was how moved the contestants were upon hearing stories of their forefathers, or when visiting the places their ancestors had emigrated from. Learning about their ancestors' lives in the old country generally bring tears to the contestants' eyes and many would speak of how this made them learn more about who they really were. I was curious about whether or not Norwegian Americans really were that passionate about their heritage in person or if it was just an act for the cameras encouraged on by the show's producers.

In addition to *Alt for Norge*, I knew I had several relatives in the US, although I did not know much about them or where they had settled. This was another factor that contributed to me choosing this topic. My curiosity about my family across the ocean had gradually grown over the years. After a little help from close family it turned out that I have third cousins on at least three sides of my family in the US. According to Norwegian relatives some live in North Dakota, some in Chicago and some on the outskirts of Minneapolis, which I only found out towards the end of my fieldwork. I had some help from my own family, who got personally invested in my project. They managed to track a cousin down on Facebook, which eventually led to some of my close family members and I meeting some of our Chicago relatives.

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<sup>5</sup> I found out that there was a decent cash prize of \$50.000 for the winner. Although the money had never once been brought up in the actual TV-show. Thus portraying the contestants as having a profound love of Norway even though that might not have been their initial motive for joining the show.

## **Research question**

I went to Minneapolis, Minnesota with the intention of studying Norwegian-American identity and explore how this identity was maintained in a large, urban environment. I relied on an inductive approach to my original research question, concentrating on learning about the community from the inside. I assumed that the Norwegian identity was something that only became recognizable in the public scene. Thus I focused on exploring the Norwegian-American identity in public arenas such as the Norwegian church and civic organizations. However, it was not until I returned from the field that I realized where my focus should lie. I had not expected Norwegian America to be identical to the Norway I had grown up in; neither did it prove to be. However, during my stay I had been fascinated by how the Norwegian Americans seemed to live out their Norwegian identity in such an American way. They were of course first and foremost Americans, but their take on a Norwegian identity was inherently American. The main focal point of this thesis will therefore be to explore how the Norwegian Americans, in the process of identity construction and exploration in the public scene, not only create a Norwegian persona, but also reinforce their identities as Americans.

## **Relevant literature**

Labeling oneself as Norwegian American is an issue of identity. In order to understand more about identity in general and American identity in particular it will be necessary to take a closer look at what identity is and how it is constructed. Discussing this I will draw inspiration from a range of different authors and their perspectives on identity construction, more specifically a national or ethnic identity. I will be first and foremost preoccupied with hyphenated identities, identities composed of two or more different nationalities and heritages. Mary C. Waters argues in her book *Ethnic Options* that Americans today basically have a “dime store ethnicity” where they choose which heritage to identify with (1990: 6). Cornell and Hartmann supplement this aspect of American identity (1998). Their account of identity construction as a process that is affected by inner and outer factors will be relevant for my focus on Norwegian-American identity. As tangible cultural elements such as food, clothing and paraphernalia are important for the Norwegian-American identity construction, accounting for what these symbols signify for my informants will be crucial. Sherry Ortner’s (1973) analysis on key symbols will be useful in this instance. However, one must not forget the importance of social interaction and how it affects the Norwegian-American community

vis-à-vis other hyphenated groups (cf. Barth, 1969; Harrison, 1999). Additionally, in *Bowling Alone*, Putnam explores Americans' engagement in civic and religious institutions (2000). As Norwegian Americans mostly explore their Norwegian identity in the social scene, this resonated well with my research.

Even though literature on Americans' hyphenated identity was easy to find, I struggled with finding current classic, ethnographic studies on European Americans and Norwegian Americans in particular. There is a great deal of work done on the Norwegian immigration to America. However, the majority of these texts are historical works, which primarily focus on the actual immigration or early settler life in America. Current ethnographic studies and writings on the subject of Norwegian Americans were scarce. Although Odd Lovoll's<sup>6</sup> *The Promise Fulfilled* (1998) and Eric Dregni's *Vikings in the Attic* (2011) are fairly recent exceptions to this as they provide a thorough account of Norwegian Americans living out their identity in today's America. Though it is worth noting that these data was not gathered through a qualitative, ethnographic fieldwork. Nonetheless, a preceding Master's Thesis on the subject of Norwegian Americans provided me with some helpful tips before and after fieldwork (Lindblom, 2004).

Studies on white, middle class Americans by foreigners are sparse and not easy to come by. Even if they are ethnographic fieldworks, they are most likely not conducted by foreigners (Watanabe, 2004: 5). In addition to this, studies performed on white Americans are often quantitative surveys, not qualitative neighborhood studies (Waters, 1990: 8) Class in America in general can be considered a non-topic, neither is it given much attention in academic writing, as a rhetoric on ethnicity or 'race' has been favored (Ortner, 2006). Therefore a study on contemporary, white, middle class America, albeit Norwegian Americans, by a non-American will have some relevance for today's anthropological environment. Therefore I believe the topic is relevant and necessary in order to uncover how old traditions are still kept today in one of the leading countries of the world. Doing this by way of a qualitative, ethnographic fieldwork is a method of observation the European-American identity discourse has severely lacked.

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<sup>6</sup> I was also fortunate to meet with Lovoll at my visit to his former teaching institution St. Olaf College in Minnesota.

## Norwegian-American history and demography

Norwegian immigration to America is of great historical and cultural significance to Norway and America, seeing as such a vast number of Norway's population emigrated. In 1825 the sloop *Restauration* left from Stavanger in Norway for New York, marking the advent of the Norwegian mass emigration to America (Lovoll, 1998: 1). From 1825 to 1928 more than 825,000 Norwegians left their home in the hopes of a better life across the ocean, most of them ended up in Minnesota (Gjerde & Qualey, 2002: 1). The emigration did not stop in 1928; I met several in Minneapolis who came after this, but this was the era of mass emigration. In the beginning of the mass exodus it was mainly rural peasants, who did not see a prosperous future for themselves, who were the most likely to leave for a better life in the New World. Though other laborers and people of different classes followed not too far behind (Lovoll, 1999: 25). According to Lovoll, the Norwegian immigrants were the most rural of any major immigrant group to the US, and this attachment to the rural and farming culture was what they passed on to the younger generations (1999: 126). Norway's harsh demographic was the main culprit of the emigration, though the economic possibilities the emigrants were promised in America was also a factor (Lovoll, 1999: 31). During the course of the entire mass emigration, Norway had one of the highest rates of emigration to the USA, only exceeded by Ireland (Gjerde & Qualey, 2002: 2; Lovoll, 1999: 33).

In Minneapolis Norwegians tended to move to certain areas of the city where other Norwegians and Scandinavians had settled. As I will go into later in this thesis one of these neighborhoods was where the Norwegian church, Mindekirken lied.<sup>7</sup> Establishing Lutheran churches was important for the immigrants, and it has continued to be a crucial factor in maintaining a Norwegian-American community (Gjerde & Qualey, 2002; Lovoll, 1998). After having first settled in rural areas, the Norwegian immigrants were drawn to the city, and in particular Minneapolis. Minneapolis was at one point considered the major Norwegian metropolis of America (Gjerde & Qualey, 2002: 26). In 1890, Minneapolis had surpassed Chicago as the primary destination of Scandinavian immigrants (Gjerde & Qualey, 2002: 27). In the city there was a continual pull between the church and secular organizations on what direction the Norwegian-American community should take (Gjerde & Qualey: 32). A

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<sup>7</sup> Today, from what I could see, it has very much remained an immigrant neighborhood, however the origin of the immigrants is no longer the same. Somalis seem to be the biggest ethnic group that inhabits the neighborhood now. I was told that the largest groups of Somali immigrants in the world were found in Minneapolis and coincidentally, Oslo, though I cannot assert this for sure. So still today, there are ties between these two countries connected through a new global community.



challenge the Norwegian-Americans community still deals with. In addition to this Gjerde & Qualey asserts that there were differences in the city-dwelling Norwegians as opposed to the ones in the rural areas of Minnesota (2002: 29). Rural Norwegians were more conservative and religious than their urban counterparts who lived more modern lives and engaged with people of other nationalities. Whether this is still reflected in today's Norwegian-American community is hard for me to confirm, as I have primarily focused my research on the urban environment. Although I would assume that city dwellers are more prone to leave the old ways behind.

Today, though hard to confirm, it is loosely said that there are as many Norwegian Americans as there are Norwegians. In 1990, 26 years ago, almost four million Americans claimed to have Norwegian ancestry (Lovoll, 1998: 1). Nevertheless, all of these will not necessarily identify as Norwegian Americans on a personal level. In 1990, 17% of the Minnesotan population claimed to have Norwegian ancestry (Gjerde & Qualey, 2002: 2). Norwegian Americans are characterized as an 'old' immigrant group as the vast majority are third generation immigrants or later (Lovoll, 1998: 2). This is crucial for my project as this means that Norwegian Americans are predominantly Americans and are no longer considered by others or themselves to be immigrants.<sup>8</sup>

Today Minneapolis is the largest city in Minnesota with an estimated population of just over 400.000 citizens (U.S Census Bureau, 2016). Most of my informants did not actually live within Minneapolis' city limits, but resided in one of the suburbs. Therefore, I think it is helpful to take into consideration Minneapolis' closest suburbs as well to get a more accurate picture of the demography of my field site, which I feel is more telling of the sheer size of the city. Minneapolis and its suburbs, together with the neighboring city and state capitol, St. Paul, made up the metropolitan area. Approximately 2.000.000 people resided in the metropolitan area in total (ibid.). St. Paul was only a 15-minute drive from downtown Minneapolis, so the two cities had merged into each other. Minneapolis and St. Paul are often called the Twin Cities due to their proximity, a nickname I will at times adopt when referring to the cities in my thesis.

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that a Norwegian who were to move to America today would be considered an expat and not an immigrant.

## **Location: multi-sited ethnography**

I wanted to travel somewhere in the US where they had a large Norwegian community and where there was a plural of activities dedicated to Norway and Norwegian heritage. Thus, I chose to travel to the Midwest. According to Lovoll, due to Norwegian immigrants having favored the Midwest, this is where “Norwegian Americans know who and what they are.”(1998: 42). I quickly decided upon Minnesota, as it is the state with the largest amount of Norwegian Americans in the US (Lovoll, 1998: 2), though North Dakota is the state with the highest percentage of Norwegian descendants (Lovoll, 1998: 47). I wanted to do fieldwork in an urban setting, as I was curious to explore how the Norwegian identity had been maintained in a progressed and modern environment. At the same time, I wanted to stay somewhere I knew I could get around without having a car, which can at times be challenging in the US, and that it was possible to travel to other cities if need be. I ended up choosing Minneapolis, the largest city in Minnesota as the site of my fieldwork. Based on the information gathered beforehand, I knew there were a multitude of Norwegian-American organizations and clubs located in this city and that there were events devoted to Norway and Scandinavia fairly regularly.

As I was in a fairly big city I had to confine my actual field site. Since my informants moved around and did not stay in one specific area or suburb of the city, my field site was not a bounded geographical area, but rather a temporary, culturally constructed space. The actual field site depended on the people who was present and at what occasion they were there for. Instead I did, as Marcus suggests, “follow the people” (2005: 14). This approach entails following the group of subjects wherever they go, instead of conducting fieldwork in one particular area. My informants did not necessarily travel far, but they did not stay put in one geographical area. Thus I believe I could not have done this fieldwork in Minneapolis with one specific, tangible area as my field site. I did at several times venture into the suburbs and to St. Paul to join events, as they were not all located in Minneapolis.

I did travel out of the metropolitan area a few times when I was invited to come along for an event, a Nordic sightseeing or a visit to an out-of-town College, it was all because I wanted to follow the people of my study. I went out of state twice, once was to visit family, both American and Norwegian, in Chicago. The second time I went on a road trip throughout Minnesota with visits to the Dakotas, Iowa and Wisconsin for an educational vacation, during

the last two weeks of my stay in the US. Evidence of Norwegian settlement was found in all surrounding states I visited, everything from Norwegian town names to Norwegian-inspired restaurants.

There was one constant geographical location though at which I spent a great deal of time, I went to this area as this was also where my informants went. Mindekirken and Norway House were located on the same block and this was the most stable geographical area throughout my fieldwork, as I went there several times a week. This particular field site was limited to these two buildings as the neighborhood in itself was not an area where my informants spent any time.

### **Short Presentation of key field sites**

The following are all places or special events I spent a great deal of time at during my fieldwork and which are mentioned regularly throughout this thesis. I will give a short presentation of them here, but will go deeper into their role in the Norwegian community in Minneapolis in later chapters.

#### **Mindekirken**

I spent a great deal of my research time at *Mindekirken*, Mindekirken was the only church in the Twin Cities that still held services in Norwegian. The church did not only have religious functions, but was also a major cultural institution for Norwegian Americans in the area. The church organized Norwegian luncheons with Norwegian food a few times a year, as well as giving Norwegian language courses, arranging history seminars and other cultural programs on a weekly basis. I also regularly joined what was called Tuesday Open House, which was a cultural seminar and lunch held every Tuesday. After the service there was church coffee in the basement, which enabled the members and I to be a little more social than the quiet service allowed for. The church was where I met the most of my main contacts.

#### **Norway House**

Norway House's main goal was to serve as a bridge between Norwegian America and contemporary Norway and provide a venue where Norwegian events could be held. Though people had been working there for a while, the official opening was set to May of 2015, meaning I did not get to spend quite as much time there as I had hoped for. I did however do

some voluntary work a few times a week at the reception desk for the gallery that was located at Norway House.

### **Sons of Norway lodges**

“The mission of Sons of Norway is to promote and to preserve the heritage and culture of Norway, to celebrate our relationship with other Nordic Countries, and provide quality insurance and financial products to our members.” (Sons of Norway, 2016). Sons of Norway is the biggest Norwegian organization outside of Norway and have an array of lodges spread throughout the US, Canada as well as Norway. I did also attend a meeting at Sons of Norway’s sister organization Daughters of Norway which is a great deal smaller and is reserved for women.

### **Norwegians Worldwide**

This is primarily a Norwegian organization for Norwegians living abroad, with expat members located in a vast amount of countries all over the globe. Minneapolis and St. Paul both had their own chapters of the organization. Interestingly, in the Twin Cities they did not have many, if any at all, Norwegian expats as members, but on the other hand there were many Norwegian Americans who attended these meetings. At the meetings there would be served food, followed by a cultural program where they invited different people to speak. Norwegians Worldwide did not meet as often as once a month, so there was only one meeting at both chapters during my time in the Twin Cities.

### **Ingebretsen’s**

Ingebretsen’s was a store that sold all things Scandinavian. It was also a cultural institution in the sense that it offered different classes, mostly focused on cooking and handcrafting, but most people knew of it as a Scandinavian store. The shop sold mainly Nordic paraphernalia and souvenirs, from mugs with Scandinavian jokes on them to pricy Nordic kitchenware. They sold imported food items from Nordic countries such as chocolate and waffle mix to a fairly steep price. In addition to a deli counter that sold fresh meat and fish, which were also considered Nordic. If you were craving brown cheese, this was where you went to get your fix.

## **Kontakt**

*Kontakt* (Contact) was purely a social club which original function was to provide Norwegians with a place to keep in touch with each other in the new country. Although it was intended for Norwegian immigrants when it was first established, Norwegian Americans mostly occupied it today, although some first generation immigrants were still there. *Kontakt* was held once a month in the basement of the Danish American Institute. The meeting consisted of a dinner and dessert followed by dancing and singing of Norwegian songs. The members would take turns arranging the meeting.

There were several other clubs and organizations that I have not mentioned so far. Nonetheless, the aforementioned organizations are some of the main actors on the Norwegian scene in the Twin Cities, and the ones I spent the most time with. A plural of these clubs were dedicated to Norwegian music, dance, crafts, language and food, a bit more specific than the aforementioned organizations. There were also other churches in the area, which were considered Norwegian, but none who held Norwegian services.

## **Methodological considerations**

Prior to leaving for Minneapolis I exchanged a couple of e-mails with potential informants from various clubs, though most of my e-mails were unfortunately not responded. Though I believe this was mostly due to lack of Internet knowledge and upkeep than lack of interest in my project, as people seemed very interested when meeting them in person. My initial focus was on the Sons of Norway lodges in the Twin Cities, as I knew this organization was the biggest Norwegian-American organization in the world and plays a big part in keeping Norwegian Americans together, as well as promoting Norway and the Norwegian heritage. I managed to establish contact with one lodge president who invited me to join their meeting. Unfortunately, the meeting was a month away at the time I arrived in Minneapolis. However, he forwarded me an e-mail from the May 17<sup>th</sup> committee, or *Syttende mai* as the members would say in Norwegian and that is how I ended up at the button assembly. As the committee was made up of leaders and representatives from several Norwegian clubs in the area, it snowballed into numerous invitations to other events around the city from there.

My method of choice was first and foremost participant observation. I wanted to not only observe, but also participate in the different activities my informants got up to. I started

fieldwork at the button assembly and from there I was invited to join the Mindekirken service the following Sunday. Later, I also joined Mindekirken's Tuesday Open House event, where an even bigger crowd came together to learn more about Norway. I also fairly regularly visited places connected to Scandinavia in general such as Ingebretsen's and the American Swedish Institute. I joined meetings and gatherings at other clubs as well, in addition to joining special events that did not take place on a regular basis, such as Scandinavian Summer Fest and Vesterheim<sup>9</sup> Market Place, which were annual events. For the most part I observed at these events, and partook as if I was a regular guest joining activities and mingling with other guests. Nonetheless, I did partake in some of them behind the scenes, in the form of helping out the event organizers, by serving food at dinners and working as a volunteer gallery receptionist at Norway House. This enabled me to see what went on backstage of the productions as well.

As mentioned previously most of my data gathering was focused around specific events, therefore I refrained from conducting many formal interviews as it did not fit the situation. Based on experience from the interviews I did conduct, I felt that it created a somewhat tense atmosphere. This also created a more formal mood of the conversation, making the interviewee more conscious of what they were saying. Therefore I resulted to only noting down a few essential things during the actual conversation or an intense writing down of what I could remember from the conversation or the event on the bus back. However, in formal situations, such as a scheduled talk with the Fraternal Director at Sons of Norway or with a Norwegian Professor at one of the local universities, the interview setting was more appropriate, and respondents also seemed more at ease with being asked questions.

After a while I discovered that the most valuable and interesting information was delivered to me as trivial comments during informal conversations either with me or together with other Norwegian Americans. The most fascinating information to me was not necessarily what my informants considered the most interesting, although this was of course not without its value. When I was introduced to new people as a Norwegian they were very eager to tell me where their Norwegian roots hailed from and how many times they had been to Norway. I was of course concerned with this information at first, as it revealed to me what Norwegian Americans themselves were preoccupied with and what was the most interesting aspect of

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<sup>9</sup> A Norwegian museum in Decorah, Iowa.

their heritage. However, after some time I realized that this did not give me much more than anecdotal information on a few people. It was the things they said when they forgot I was there as a researcher and an outsider, that proved to be more valuable for my research, as will become evident later on. Thus I chose not to pursue individual, formal interviews with all of my informants, but rather hold casual conversations (Okely, 2012: 125). Therefore, throughout my fieldwork, I mainly tried to be present at all Norwegian related events and talk casually to as many people I could, in order to get to know people and perhaps establish a deeper connection at a later time. If I was invited to people's homes this was an added bonus. Thus the majority of my data was gathered in public, or from one-on-one informal conversations with my informants.

### **Backstage access**

I had not expected that access to my informants or field site would be an issue, considering the fact that I was Norwegian myself. Neither did it prove to be. A great deal of people were excited that I was there, though they did not quite understand what I was studying or how I was doing it. Nevertheless, the majority was interested in helping me with my research. I got the impression that a lot of people wanted to help me, but did not think they were interesting enough themselves, so they suggested other people or organizations to contact. This happened with quite a few people, I do not think that they really understood what it was that I wanted to do. Several people told me stories of other researchers who had visited them and researched different parts of the Scandinavian-American culture. I got the impression that no one had stayed there for as long as I had or had done anthropological fieldwork by way of participant observation.

Nevertheless, I had anticipated that access to my informants' private sphere would be more difficult. As in the tradition of Goffman, I hardly got to observe anyone "backstage" in a completely relaxed atmosphere, when they did not "perform" their identity (1959). Even though I was invited home to a few people this was either in the context of a dinner party or a personal conversation concerning the project. None of these settings was a normal, relaxed everyday situation for my informants. Only with a handful people in a few situations did I feel as if they behaved the same way they would have as if I was not there as a researcher and an outsider. Thus, most of my data is gathered "front stage" sphere.

During my time in Minneapolis I visited St. Olaf College, which had a heavily Norwegian influence. It was founded by Norwegian men and still taught Norwegian at the college. I was invited by the director of the Norwegian program to join one of the Norwegian classes and meet with students who wanted to learn Norwegian. The College was located in a town one or two hours drive from the city, and while I did not have a car, I was fortunate enough to be invited to stay the night at a Norwegian professor's house. During the day at the College we had been doing and talking all things Norwegian, but as soon as we walked in the doors the focus on being Norwegian and my project went out the door and they got on the couch and watched TV or browsed the Internet on the Ipad. The Norwegian identity was no longer significant. It was apparent that they wanted to unwind in peace from a long day's work and I did not to ask them that many questions regarding my project. Not that this scenario was any different from your typical household in Norway, but this signified that when one is truly backstage, one does not care about keeping up appearances.

## **Position**

Factors such as gender, class background, personality and age, together with my nationality did impact the fieldwork a great deal (Okely, 2012, p. 126). Not only in the way I was accepted into the community, but also in the way I was positioned. Being Norwegian myself was definitely an advantage, people were eager to talk to me purely because I was an alleged "genuine" Norwegian, which opened many doors to me. I believe I was accepted into the community a great deal quicker than a non-Norwegian would have been. It was not unnatural for me to join Norwegian events, thus I was not a complete outsider. I did get a fair amount of attention from the Norwegian-American community, meaning I almost got more questions about myself and Norway than I was able to ask others.

At certain events my young age did set me apart from the vast majority. Particularly at Tuesday Open House, I especially stood out from the crowd as the participants were, almost exclusively, all seniors, due to the event being held during working hours. In general, the majority of my informants were much older than me, so 'hanging out' with my informants did not consist of the same activities as it would have been with my friends back home, neither was it as natural. It is harder to establish close relationships with someone who is not part of your own generation, at least on a friendship basis. Nevertheless, despite of the age difference, I did go to coffee shops, museums and road trips outside of any planned events



with some of my senior informants. Though these informants were mainly women. There were also young people engaged in the Norwegian-American community though they were greatly outnumbered, however I did meet some of them as well and formed friendships with a handful. As mentioned, I did spend the most time with female informants, being a woman myself. When it came to talking with Norwegian Americans at events, gender did not play such a big role. However, I only formed close relationships with women, apart from the planned events, it was women whom I spent time with outside of a Norwegian context.

Although having grown up in different times and in different countries, my informants and I shared a similar class background. I considered them, as well as myself, to be middle class or higher. Therefore I do not believe that class affected my position in the community in such a great deal. Although, being of the same social class as them might have led me to overlook certain things, which I would not have taken for granted if we did not share these similarities.

### **Home away from home**

Towards the end of my stay, I attended a Tuesday Open House seminar, which I usually did every Tuesday. As we had finished eating, I got up to clear the table, but was politely asked to sit down by George. “You’re a guest!” he said sharply with a smile on his mouth, implying that guests should not clean up after themselves. I replied that I could not be a guest forever. “Yes, *you* can” he retorted, adding pressure to the subject, with the intention of being nice and polite. Nevertheless, this proved to me that as long as I was there temporarily as a fieldworker I would always be a guest. I could never be a full-fledged member of the community, unless I had moved there and joined the community for good. There was too big of a difference between me and the rest of the community, for me to be treated as a natural member (Jenkins, 2008: 102). Thus I struggled to escape my classification as a researcher-guest.

As an anthropologist you use yourself as an instrument of observation and your own feelings and prejudices will undoubtedly affect the course of the fieldwork (Archetti, 1984: 46). In this particular study that lies not too far from my own home, it is especially difficult to stay partial. Several data will in some way or other be tainted by my own personal opinions, despite my greatest efforts to stay neutral. Some theorists on our subject discourage doing fieldwork at home and anthropologists are generally inclined on studying “exotic” and less

systematically complex cultures (Klausen, 1984: 8). Although I was a Norwegian studying Norwegian Americans, I do not think this could be compared to home, as I found it to be a quite different culture than what I was grown up with. Archetti who was Argentinian lived in Norway for several years. After all these years he felt as though he was half-native and half-researcher in both countries, not feeling completely at home in either place (Archetti, 1984: 46). Although my fieldwork cannot be compared to living some place for several years, it was sort of the same feeling I had in the field. I was in some considerations a half-native, struggling to fit in. As I was a Norwegian in Norwegian America I was neither an insider nor an outsider (Okely, 2012: 126). Nevertheless, the data I gathered must have been partially influenced by my 'home blindness', which most likely led me to overlook and take for granted situations which I probably would not have if these were not Norwegian Americans. However, I believe this only affected me in a minor way, as it quickly became clear to me that I was not at home, but in a completely different country. The traditions and events were in a sense completely new and foreign to me, it was not what I was accustomed to. Many traditions had survived over a 100 years among the immigrants in America, but might have decreased in popularity in Norway. Not to mention how they undeniably were affected by the American culture and traditions as well, making it easier for me to compare the two cultures. Being Norwegian gave me an advantage as I could for the most part tell when Norwegian-American traditions differed from their current Norwegian counterparts, though this was of course only my subjective view on the matter. Still, this enabled me to see differences and discrepancies that a complete outsider would not have discovered quite as easily. At the same time, this distracted me from staying completely neutral and objective.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This thesis does not deal with a very sensitive subject. Therefore the need for ethical considerations is not as pressing as it might have been under other circumstances. Nevertheless, the last thing I want is to offend anyone, which I have tried my hardest not to do. I find it to be important to respect my informants' privacy and I have therefore attempted to anonymize my informants as best I can and have thus changed their names when possible, so that they could not be recognized. There are no sensitive issues discussed in this paper, but there were at times gossiping and comments made that the senders might not want to share with the entire community.

Drawing on personal identity, this brings up the subject of authenticity. A recurring problem when writing about hyphenated identities is to unknowingly undermine their identity and portraying it to be less authentic than others. Cornell and Hartmann recounts this problem of authenticity and recognizes that writing about an identity as constructed in general can come across as claiming that the identity is less real than others (1998: 92). Especially when doing research such as I have, by trying to establish why the Norwegian-American identity is the way it is, it can come across as me trying to prove that a Norwegian-American identity is less real than a Norwegian identity is, which it is not. Throughout history very few groups have been isolated from other groups, therefore cultures often adopt traits that proved useful to them from other cultures (Cornell, 1998: 94). Hence, no cultural identity will ever be objectively authentic, so the question of authenticity, in a manner of speaking, proves to be invalid as there is either no such thing as an authentic identity or all identities must be authentic. “The key issue is not authenticity, but what kinds of identities in what kinds of situations organize human lives and motivate human action and why.” (Ibid.). How Norwegian Americans choose to preserve their identity is more important, an identity’s origin does not decide whether or not the identity is “real” (Cornell, 1998: 93).

## **Disposition**

In chapter two I will discuss the wide reaching term identity, with a special focus on American identity construction and how this has been affected by the Norwegian heritage. Class and kinship is an important factor when it comes to how hyphenated identities are lived out. In chapter three I will take a deeper look at some of the Norwegian cultural elements which the Norwegian-Americans possess in their cultural repertoire, and how they are used as expressions of an Norwegian-American identity. In Chapter four the way Norwegian Americans employ these cultural symbols in order to distance themselves from other groups will be discussed. Moreover, the public setting in which the Norwegian-American identity is played out will be a focal point. In what ways do the Norwegian-Americans participate in civic as well as religious life, and what this entail for their identity will be crucial perspectives. In the last and concluding chapter, number five, I will sum up the discussions in the previous chapters, as well as look ahead at what the future has in stall for the Norwegian-American community.



## Chapter 2 – Hyphenation at the core of American Identity

In February I attended a Sons of Norway lodge meeting in the basement of the American Swedish Institute (ASI). The president of the lodge was one of very few whom had responded to my e-mails and he had been very helpful in providing me with information on Norwegian events in Minneapolis, as well as inviting me to join their meetings. As I walked into the room where the meeting was held, a constant stream of people came over to greet me. It was clear that my visit was no surprise to the members of the lodge. The president, whom I recognized from his e-mail picture with his dark hair and moustache, approached me to officially introduce himself. We, as conversations with Norwegian Americans often did, got to talking about where his Norwegian roots hailed from, which he to no surprise knew very well. After a few minutes of mingling, the meeting was set to start. It began by the singing of the Norwegian national anthem, followed by the American. Although some members passionately joined in and knew all the words to the Norwegian anthem, the majority sat and listened respectfully. However, when the American anthem started playing, the volume increased dramatically, and those who just minutes earlier had listened in silence, now proudly chanted out the tune.

After the cultural entertainment had finished, Ron, an older gentleman who was on the lodge's board, came over to introduce himself. Ron, in a navy blue blazer had dressed nicer than the majority of the members. A woman at my table, who was also there for the first time, was interested in becoming a member of the lodge and wanted to introduce herself. Her surname was Russian of origin so after having presented herself to Ron he quickly asked skeptically, with not so much as a hint of irony, "is there any Norwegian in there?". Though the surname had no Norwegian in it, she assured him that she came from "a long line of Olsens, Hansens and Andersens". Upon hearing this Ron nodded approvingly, "There's a lot of Norwegian in there." This information from the new member seemed to be sufficient for Ron in determining her claim to a Norwegian identity. He then turned his attention to me, asking whether my surname was Norwegian in origin. Ron was, at the time, well aware that I was born and raised in Norway, although he apparently did not consider this adequate information for establishing the validity of my Norwegian identity.

## **Outlining ethnicity**

Presenting oneself as Norwegian American is making claims to a Norwegian identity, within the larger concept of being an American. As I mentioned in my introduction, my focus is on the public display of a Norwegian-American identity. Thus the following chapter will draw on empirical data from how this identity was performed in a public setting. This chapter will deal with outlining key concepts such as ethnicity and identity, in addition to concepts such as class and kinship, which clearly affects the Norwegian-American identity. I will further argue that this performance of a Norwegian identity reinforced their larger identity as Americans. There are several factors that help determine whether one can legitimately claim a Norwegian identity, for Ron, this was an issue of biology, but for the majority of my informants, this did not seem to be equally significant.

Outlining the concept of ethnicity is essential when talking about a national or rather, ethnic identity. I will rely on Eriksen's understanding of ethnicity "...in social anthropology ethnicity refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive." (2002: 4). According to this statement, stating for certain whether Norwegian Americans is an ethnic group, is a difficult task. An ethnic group can never exist on its own, as it only really exists when confronted with something that is culturally different, by social contact (Eriksen, 2002). Furthermore, Barth's infamous work on ethnic boundaries proposes that it is with social contact between different groups that boundaries emerges and are made evident, and not in the 'cultural stuff' that the groups encompass (1969). As we will explore later in this thesis, we can see from the empirical example of Norwegian Americans' relationships with Swedish Americans, it is social contact that makes the cultural elements apparent in this instance. Though, as I will explore further in the next chapter, for Norwegian Americans, the 'cultural stuff' is decidedly important as well. One could arguably assert that one cannot claim the Norwegian Americans to be culturally distinctive from the greater American body, but rather see the Norwegian ethnicity as a feature that have colored their American ethnicity. Although, several of my informants would probably propose that their Norwegian-American culture precisely is culturally distinctive from other Americans.

Drawing on De Vos' take on ethnicity, it is closely connected to the feeling of nostalgia, "Ethnicity, therefore, is, in its narrowest sense, a feeling of continuity with a real or imagined past, a feeling that is maintained as an essential part of one's self-definition." (De Vos, 1995: 25). Ethnicity in this instance is related to how one would identify oneself with a focus on feeling, more than being. The past is crucial for my informants' understanding of Norwegian culture and plays a much bigger part in their identity than the present.

"You know, some would say that we are more Norwegian than you." Larry said as he was taping the red, white and blue ribbons to the blue button displaying the Norwegian and American flag side by side. The buttons were to be sold for Norway's Constitution Day, which was going to be celebrated a couple of months later. I asked Larry what he meant by this weighty statement and he specified that Norwegian Americans were better at holding on to traditions that today's Norwegians sadly had lost. Larry, who was a senior, was also a very active Mindekirken member whom I frequently ran into at events throughout the twin cities. At Mindekirken he would help the minister out with fetching different things and doing small duties during the service. The only time I did not see him in church was when he had travelled to Norway for a vacation in the middle of May. This particular incident, however, was the first time I met him, but my second time at the assembly. I had been told about Larry at the first button assembly the week before, apparently he had called in sick, which was considered out of his character. They told me how enthusiastic and engaged he was at these events; he was a known character in the community.

Throughout my fieldwork I heard others express similar opinions such as Larry's. This was unquestionably a popular opinion, though not shared by everyone. This made me contemplate what being Norwegian meant, not only to Norwegian Americans, but also to Norwegians, and what Norwegian culture actually is. It was clear that to Larry, Norwegian culture was the traditions his forefathers brought with them to their new country, as if the Norwegian culture was something that was constant and had developed sometime between the 1800s and the early 1900s when the majority of Norwegian immigrants settled in America. Though the way he phrased it showed that he did not want to make such a bold statement himself, at least not in front of me, so he transferred the statement unto others by saying "some", although he did not completely dissociate himself from the opinion. Nevertheless it was clear that he thought Norwegian Americans did maintain traditions far better than contemporary Norwegians.

Nevertheless, Norwegian Americans are first and foremost Americans as that is the culture and nation in which they reside. The Norwegian American culture is an offspring of these two distinctive cultures, the Norwegian and the American.

Norwegians, like other nationalities, are a people divided by migration. As a consequence two separate cultures emerged; one developed among Norwegians in Norway, and one took shape among Norwegians in America. From the time of separation in the mid-1820s, these two cultures over time, from generation to generation, evolved in different directions. This is a major point of this study, which rejects both the idea that the Norwegian-American community and its culture are merely an extension of the homeland and the sense that its cultural manifestations are inferior. They are, of course, simply ethnic, having evolved in historic time in a multicultural American environment (Lovoll, 1998: 36).

Following Lovoll's statement, Norwegian Americans' cultural manifestations are ethnic; they are culturally distinctive from that of the Norwegian culture. Therefore it does not pay off comparing contemporary Norway to contemporary Norwegian America in order to find out which is more objectively Norwegian. Not only are the two cultures not static, an objective Norwegian culture does not exist in theory. Therefore, throughout this thesis the focus will lie on these two cultures as two separate entities, but comparison in order to understand how this culture was formed and how it is maintained today is needed.

Following Anderson's theory on imagined communities, we can consider Norwegian American community to be imagined (1983). It is imagined because, despite of how the members will never meet or know every Norwegian American, they still feel as though they are all part of a larger community. Furthermore, the community holds a "deep, horizontal comradeship" as Anderson holds a nation to be, where everyone is equal and connected to each other (1983: 16). In addition to this, the community is limited, readily equipped with social boundaries to keep members in and outsiders out.

### **American identity with a Norwegian heritage**

Now, before I proceed, it's crucial to briefly discuss and frame the concept of identity. First of all, when I talk about identity in this paper I am mainly referring to a national, ethnic or



cultural identity, related to a particular place, people or heritage. I am further well aware that an identity is also made up of other components that are determined by other factors such as age, gender and social class, which are relevant aspects as well. It will be essential to take a closer look at the exceptional American identity construction, which differs a great deal from how most Europeans create an identity for themselves.

Identity is a term that has been and still is widely discussed in the social sciences. In this thesis I will bring forth a few definitions on identity that I found to work well with my empirical data and draw on these throughout this thesis. There are many ways of looking at identity, though there are some basic traits most scholars seem to agree on. Richard Jenkins states in his book *Social Identity* (2008) how classifying identities is our way of mapping the human world around us (2008: 5). It is our way of ordering our social relationships as well as ourselves, hence making sense of the social world that surrounds us. An identity is fundamental to this understanding. For my informants, as well as in life in general, the importance of portraying the right identity is crucial, especially in an American context.

Cornell and Hartmann specify that an identity, specifically an ethnic or racial identity, is most often a self-ascribed identity as well as an assigned identity (1998: 77). Therefore it is not enough to be conscious of who you are, others must also approve of your identity. I will argue that Cornell and Hartmann's own view on identity is quite valid for my thesis:

It is, indeed, a “reciprocal fluxion,” and there is nothing absolute about the process or the end product. Ethnic and racial identities on the groups that carry them change over time as the forces that impinge on them change, and as the claims made by both group members and others change as well (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 72).

This way of perceiving an identity as a process which is mutable by oneself as well as by others is what Cornell and Hartmann call the “constructionist approach”, which is at the heart of their way of approaching identity in their book *Ethnicity and Race* (1998). I believe this statement reflects well on how my informants related themselves to their Norwegian identity. A great deal of the senior people I spoke to mentioned that they were not as invested in their Norwegian heritage when they were younger and had lost valuable information concerning their family because of this. They had missed the opportunity to talk to their older relatives about their heritage before they had passed. Margaret seemed especially regretful about this,

and she told me she regretted not having asked her grandmother or her parents more questions about their heritage and traditions before they passed. Margaret was one of my informants whom I spent the most time with. She was also actively involved at Mindekirken, in addition to a couple of other organizations, and was eager to bring me along to whatever she thought would benefit my research. As she was a widowed senior she had some spare time on her hands and seemed to enjoy showing me around the Twin Cities, making sure I did not miss out on any valuable information concerning the cities' cultural heritage. Even though she had grown up as a second-generation immigrant and knew some of her Norwegian relatives quite well, she felt that a big portion of information concerning her heritage was lost due to her previous indifference during her younger years.

Margaret's perception of her identity had changed over the years, both due to external circumstances, but also by choice. People have a tendency to start engaging themselves with civic and social clubs only as they grow older and reach middle age (Putnam, 2000: 18). Not only do they get more spare time on their hands, but as loved ones pass, remembering the old days might bring out feelings of nostalgia and they become more meaningful than before. Thus, people wish to learn more about their relatives and personal history. This can help us to explain why the younger generations did not invest their free time to the same extent as the seniors. Margaret had changed as a person throughout the years and that is mainly why her identity had changed, however different circumstances might also alter the identity of an entire group.

As an immigrant group, Norwegians have previously been suppressed by the American Yankee society and being a proud Norwegian stood in sharp contrast to being a patriotic American (Lovoll, 1998). Therefore a vast amount of the senior generation today were brought up to be full-fledged Americans as their parents did not want to emphasize Norwegian traditions or teach the language. They did not want their children to be discriminated against in the same way they had been as children. Cornell and Hartmann discuss Italian Americans in their book and the two hyphenated groups can to some extent be compared (1998: 74). They have both undergone an identity change from the time they came as immigrants to becoming full members of the great American body. Both groups were discriminated against and found that their ethnic identity kept them from achieving the same goals as say, British migrants (Cornell, 1998: 74; Lovoll, 1998). Though it is worth emphasizing that Italians suffered a great deal more discrimination than Norwegians.

Bakalian argues that an ascribed identity will govern your life and restrict certain options to a greater extent than a voluntary identity will (1993: 7). At this time their Norwegian identity affected nearly every arena of their social lives from where they lived to where they worked, it was ascribed to them. As we can tell from this, an identity's self-ascribed as well as ascribed aspects, can change with time due to internal or external factors.

### **Through thick and thin**

Moreover, Cornell and Hartmann write that identities can be split into a 'thick' or 'thin' category (1998: 73). These two opposites are divided between how comprehensive your ethnic or national identity is, and how it organizes your social life and action (ibid.). In other words, having a thick identity means your ethnic ties shape your everyday life a fair deal, such as in the example above. While having a thin identity entails that your ethnic heritage influences your social life only to a small extent. As Norwegian Americans today are primarily Americans, and more importantly 'white' Americans, their Norwegian heritage is not significant for how they are treated by the society at large. Therefore one could state that the Norwegian identity is thin, as it does not affect their role in the American society when it comes to political, social or economic factors.

Yet, Cornell and Hartmann maintain that what activities an individual preoccupies oneself with can affect the thickness of one's identity and therefore one's identity can once again be at the forefront of the individual's consciousness (1998: 80). As I only got to see most of my informants in a Norwegian context, I cannot account for how their behavior or actions changed in different settings regarding private milieus. Conversely, taken into consideration how often my key informants went to Norwegian events, I will argue that it was at the forefront of their consciousness fairly often from their conversation topics not only with me, but with other Norwegian Americans as well. Thus, I believe my key informants' identities can be considered thick as it covered such a huge part of their social life. Though it is worth stressing the fact that this was highly individual. Some of my key informants were extremely dedicated while others only participated at Norwegian related events every once in a while, something I will return to in chapter four.

## **Class**

As my informants were able to attend functions and seminars that cost money, being Norwegian in this manner can be considered a “leisure time activity” (Gans, 1979). It was something they were in their spare time. Also entailing that the majority was middle class or higher when it came to social class. Had they not been able to afford these activities I suspect I would not have gotten to know them, even though they were invested in their heritage on a more personal level. Inferring that they had to be middle class in order to keep up with the heritage in the way they did.

Betty did at times remark on how expensive some events were, implying that she was not particularly well off, though at times it seemed as though she was more worried about my financial situation as a student than her own situation. She was retired from her professional career, but she did have a part time job where she took different receptionist jobs around the city every few weeks. This was partly because of her having to earn money, but she also wanted to keep busy during the week, as she was still fully capable of working. Nevertheless, this did not affect her activity in the Norwegian community to a great extent. There were some functions she decided not to be part of as she thought they were too expensive, but she was still one of the more active members of the community. Betty was a second-generation immigrant who had grown up in rural Minnesota. I did not experience any other informants complaining about money, though Betty was also one of my informants whom I got the closest to, which could explain why she might have opened up more to me than others did.

However, talking about class and one’s financial situation is considered a sore subject. Sherry Ortner writes “Although a phrase like “middle class” is used in casual conversations all the time, class as a social phenomenon is almost never talked about” (1995: 259). Class was not something my informants talked about explicitly, at least not regarding their own social position in the society. Class, in general, is not widely recognized in the US, as ethnicity or ‘race’ are most common when talking about social differences (Ortner, 2006: 67). In addition to how maintaining a Norwegian identity in the public cost money, all my informants without exception lived in the suburbs, another aspect which communicates to us that they were middle class or higher. The neighborhood where Mindekirken was erected had once been full of Scandinavian immigrants, it had been one of the most Norwegian neighborhoods in all of

Minneapolis (Lovoll, 1999: 250)<sup>10</sup>. Today, it was still very much an immigrant neighborhood, though the immigrants had changed. As Scandinavians became completely integrated into the American society and in the process, middle class, the majority moved to the suburbs where other middle class families already resided (Bellah et al., 1985: 179). One of the largest immigrant groups in Minneapolis, the Somalis, seemed to make up the majority of the neighborhood's residents today.

The location of the church was a central topic of discussion among the Norwegian-American community and the Mindekirken churchgoers. As the neighborhood did no longer reflect what was going on inside the church's four walls there was a debate whether or not the church should be moved. Margaret told me that this was an issue that had been put to rest a couple of years ago as they had decided not to move the church. Margaret thought this was the right decision not only because the project would have been unnecessarily expensive, but Mindekirken would lose some of its valuable history in the process. Most of the time the members did not linger in the church's neighborhood for longer than what was required when walking to and fro the car. However, on May 17<sup>th</sup> the compulsory Constitution Day parade would make its way around the neighborhood. The *bunad*<sup>11</sup> clothed Norwegian Americans would march happily waving their Norwegian flags to the Somali immigrants who were eager to catch the moment on video on their cellphones. This was a surreal moment, where the old immigrants inadvertently involved the new immigrants in their celebration. Immigrants with whom they probably share more historical similarities than what they assume.

It was also considered dangerous for me to ride the bus around Minneapolis. Riding the bus was in essence beneath them as white middle class Americans. Kari, a second generation immigrant who travelled fairly often to Norway, both for work and pleasure, told me how she had rode the bus in the US only once in her life, though she assured me that she had taken the subway in Oslo several times. Public transportation in Norway could not be compared to America, she thought. Kari, who was slightly younger than the remainder of my informants,

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<sup>10</sup> One of the main avenues in this part of town was at one point dubbed "Snoose Boulevard" because of the large amount of snuff (snus) that its Scandinavian residents consumed (Gjerde & Qualey, 2002: 28).

<sup>11</sup> Norwegian folk costume

was active in a multitude of Norwegian organizations and events. Kari was always in a good mood and had a way of bringing smiles to people's faces. Due to her knowledge and enthusiasm regarding Norwegian organizations, she was a tremendous source of help throughout my stay in Minneapolis. Betty was my only informant who said she occasionally rode the bus if she was going downtown where parking spaces were scarce. In a conversation with other informants she immediately assured them that it was an okay bus and its route was generally safe. Nevertheless, Betty often insisted on picking me up on our way to Mindekirken or other events, despite the fact that driving by my house was a major detour. Taking this into consideration, there were many signs of their middle class affiliation.

Further Ortner writes that our discourse on ethnicity contains what she calls a secret class component (1995: 271). Disputing that ethnicity in America is essentially a question of class in America. Comparing this to how the Norwegian-American identity is to a great extent a voluntary, leisure time activity, where the Norwegian Americans' membership in the middle class is dependent on maintaining this public identity, we could arguably claim this as true. I am sure there were Norwegian Americans who could not keep up with their heritage by joining these different functions that cost money. There were of course plenty of events that were free to the public, but these were either fairs or market places where part of the point was to spend money or they expected a donation at the door. If lack of money was the reason some Norwegian Americans did not pursue their Norwegian heritage in the social club scene, I did not get to know them, thus they will not be included in this thesis.

### **Symbolic ethnicity**

The fourth, fifth and sixth-generation immigrants have become fully American and their ethnicity has been watered out. As Bakalian's Armenian Americans have gone from 'being to feeling' Armenian (1993), this applies well to Norwegian Americans' experience as well. It is no longer an identity that is ascribed to them, but something they personally identify with. Herbert Gans claims that identity is the primary form of being ethnic today (1979). This implies a more personal and individualistic relationship to their heritage than their predecessors had; it is something they choose to pursue on their own. Though, contrary to what Gans communicates, they are still highly concerned with cultural practices and group relationships, as their way of expressing this identity. (1979: 203-4).

Nevertheless, it is not an insignificant identity and I would argue that it does shape their social life and to some degree their behavior as well, the identity can still thicken (cf. Cornell & Hartmann, 1998). Though, in a way they themselves actively choose, it is worth stressing the fact that it is mainly the leisure part of their social life. Gans asserts that ethnicity has become, for third and later generation immigrants, a choice, whereas for the earlier generations it was something they were (1979, p. 8). This is what he refers to as “symbolic ethnicity”:

Symbolic ethnicity can be expressed in a myriad of ways, but above all, I suspect, it is characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior. The feelings can be directed at a generalized tradition, or at specific ones... (1979, p. 9).

At the same time Gans dismisses the fact that being ethnic is purely symbolic, as their personal identity has to hold more substance and value than this (1979). The veracity of my informants’ Norwegian identity at least, was more substantial than purely symbolic. Although, Gans makes some valid points on how the ethnicity today does not have to involve everyday behavior. However, taking this into consideration one can argue against this statement as my informants did incorporate their tradition into their everyday behavior, although by choice. The Norwegian Americans I met went to a Norwegian church every Sunday (with the exception of a few people), had social gatherings outside of the church, joined Norwegian events in addition to being members of other social clubs concerning Norwegian heritage nearly every single week. This does not account for every single member of the Mindekirken congregation, but from conversations I heard in church there seemed to be a fair amount of people who met each other in different settings outside of the church. Although some of course only joined particular events.

### **Hyphenated American identities**

The French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville once called the US an “exceptionalism”, writing that the young republic could not be compared to any other Western nation (1835-40, quoted in Lipset, 1991: 1). It had to be understood on its own terms due to the distinctive way it had been created. 160 years on, Tocqueville’s analysis still has some relevance. Drawing on this,

Americans are unique in the way they perceive national identities and how they are created. As I wrote earlier, being American is therefore grounded in different ideas around nation and ethnicity than in Europe. The majority of Americans are hyphenated Americans. By hyphenated identities I am referring to Americans with a different cultural heritage, people who consider themselves to be Americans with a second or multiple heritage and ethnic identities. Having a hyphenated identity is arguably a dual identity of sorts.

When individuals look alike, speak the same language or dialect, come from the same place, worship God in the same way, or claim the same descent and history, they naturally feel less strange with one another and are more readily able to see themselves reflected in the eyes of the other, a recognition that can bring about some measure of shared meaning and interest (Halter, 1987: 81).

As Halter states above, hyphenated Americans of the same heritage feel connected to each other on the basis of their shared heritage. Most Americans are in theory hyphenated Americans, but not all might consider themselves to be. The issue of hyphenated identities has been much discussed in the US and questions of what side of the hyphen one most identifies with has been greatly debated.

A crucial argument is that one identity does not necessarily cancel out the other. At no point do they stop being American or Norwegian just because they recognize the other. To make it more confusing, it was not uncommon for my informants to claim heritage from other European countries as well, be it Sweden or Germany. A hyphenated identity should not be understood as if the two hyphens are opposing each other, but rather as complementary, and together they merge into one distinct identity, creating a hybrid culture of sorts (Blanck, 1998: 59). Despite my informants' efforts to reinforce and practice an identity as Norwegians and embrace Norwegian culture, they did not feel like this made them less American nor was this something they wanted. While several of them had other heritages as well, the Norwegian heritage is obviously what I focus on in this thesis.

### **Reinforced American identity**

One late night during my time in Minnesota, I watched an episode of the TV-show *3<sup>rd</sup> Rock From the Sun* ("Dick Like Me", 1996). The show is a sit-com about aliens on an



anthropological mission to learn about the ways of the earthlings, more specifically, the Americans. One of the aliens is trying to fit in with his classmates in school and realizes that they are all ethnic, or hyphenated Americans. Upon being asked what his ethnic identity was, he did not have an answer. So in order to fit in with the rest of the Americans, he has to, paradoxically, make up an ethnic identity that is not American. This starts off a pursuit for ethnicity in his family of aliens before choosing one that was in accordance with their last name. Ironically enough, this episode made me realize that my informants, by being Norwegian did not necessarily set them apart from the American society, but rather it was how they fitted in as Americans. Being Norwegian is also a way to legitimize their identity as Americans. The hyphenated identity is at the core of being American and constructing an identity as such.

After having been in the field a couple of weeks I managed to get an interview with a Norwegian woman who worked as a Norwegian teacher at one of the local universities. There were a couple of smaller universities in Minneapolis and the metropolitan area in addition to Minnesota State University, all of them provided Norwegian classes in one form or another. The teacher, Hilde, had moved from Norway to Minnesota as a student in the eighties. Since then she had traveled a bit back and forth, but had eventually settled down in Minneapolis and landing a job at Augsburg College. Hilde told me that the college had a Norwegian heritage and was founded by Norwegians. Augsburg was in fact the first seminary founded by Norwegian Lutherans in America, in 1869, boasting a relatively long history of its Norwegian heritage and Lutheran values (Augsburg College, 2016)<sup>12</sup>. The college was located in downtown Minneapolis, making it one of the more urban colleges in the area, almost merging with the University of Minnesota campus. I asked Hilde some questions concerning her opinion on Norwegian Americans. On the question of whether she thought they tried to set themselves apart from other Americans by actively pursuing the Norwegian identity, she denied this. Hilde felt strongly that by being Norwegian they did not attempt to distance themselves from other Americans. It was rather a way of fitting in with the rest of the hyphenated Americans. Much in the same way the anthropological aliens on earth had to. By becoming “ethnic”, one can argue that one makes a stronger claim to an identity as an American in a multicultural society.

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<sup>12</sup> Several colleges in Minnesota was founded by Norwegian Lutherans and are still very popular today, although the majority of the students are not necessarily Norwegian or Lutheran (Lovoll, 1998).

## **Situation determined identity**

An interesting point Cornell and Hartmann make is how your identity will change depending on the situation you are in at the current time (1998: 95). This is at the core of what fascinated me with my informants as their descriptions of themselves continually changed depending on the context they were in. We saw in the very beginning of this thesis how Tracy referred to all of us present as Norwegians. We were then a group of Norwegians and Norwegian Americans gathered together on a mission to prepare for a Norwegian celebration. In other words, it was a very Norwegian setting. Upon meeting me, the Norwegian Americans would show signs of feeling connected through our mutual Norwegian ancestry, but as they were not fully Norwegian themselves, they saw that, compared to me, they were American. This was also reflected in how they talked about Norwegian-born Americans. Compared to a first-generation Norwegian, the likes of which I never heard referred to as American, the latter generations were American.

I took notice of how they never referred to themselves as Norwegian American unless I had used the term previously in the same conversation. Dregni has also this same experience; the 'American' is always left out (2011: xii). They nearly always called themselves Norwegian, American or less often American Norwegian, depending on the context. Were there Norwegians such as me around they were either Norwegian or American depending on the given context. When discussing themselves with each other they were Norwegian, it was no use stating that they were American, as that was a given in this context. When referring to themselves in relation to me as a group they would occasionally call themselves American Norwegians. I had never thought about turning the two nationalities around before I had heard the term expressed in the field. At first I assumed the reversal of the words had no additional meaning than what I was expressing when saying Norwegian Americans, but as the term was repeated by different people at different times, I began to think what they were adding to the equation by uttering it reversed. When using Norwegian American I referred to them as Americans with a Norwegian heritage, by saying American Norwegians they made themselves Americanized Norwegians, in a way making them ethnically Norwegian, but culturally American. Gjerde & Qualey use the term American-Norwegian culture to describe the shift from being Norwegian immigrants to becoming American, the process of having to adapt to the American culture while still being ethnically Norwegian (2002: 63). Their way of

labeling themselves was confusing at best. It was paradoxical and hard to categorize completely. The expressions were fluid and people often walked in and out of these categories multiple times during a conversation. It was as if in some circumstances Norwegian American was the same as being Norwegian, and in others it was the same as being American. Making a conclusion based on how they categorized themselves was virtually impossible as the modes of reference lacked coherency.

### **Kinship among the Norwegian Americans**

Lisa, a woman I first met at a Daughters of Norway meeting, told me during a conversation at her house, how she would never call herself Norwegian. Lisa, who was still working full time in the food industry, was slightly younger than the majority of my informants. Lisa appeared to be quite updated on the current situation in Norway, and had visited her ancestral farm in Norway not too long ago. She seemed to be somewhat embarrassed by other Norwegian Americans who clung hard to their Norwegian identity, but did not know much about the country or its people today. “It (the contemporary Norwegian culture) is not their culture, it is foreign and it is not relevant for their Norwegian heritage”, she explained. To them their Norwegian heritage was just that, heritage from their forefathers; it was of the past, not the present. They had no interest in pursuing the traditions and values of modern Norway, as that was not part of their heritage. Lisa only had one Norwegian grandmother, which was the main reason why she did not consider herself Norwegian. Two of her grandparents were Swedish, so she knew more about the Swedish side of her family. “My brother would probably say he’s 50% Norwegian and 50% Swedish, even though that’s not right at all. He’s never even been to Norway!” Lisa snickered, her opinion on identity was a rarity among the people I talked to. As she had lived her entire life in America, she did not feel that she was entitled to call herself Norwegian. Most of my informants would not hesitate to call themselves Norwegian, even though their only Norwegian blood came from one ancestor multiple generations removed.

At a community level, kinship appeared to be less important than a shared national identity, a sort of imagined community as written earlier. Nonetheless kinship did continue to matter on a more personal level. However, the way Norwegian Americans experienced kinship differed greatly. On the issue of *American Kinship*, Schneider states that the way we talk of kinship in an American context is based on blood relations, though this is not always reflected in how

actually is (1980). While his study sought to include more categories than the nuclear family, like in-laws, he had less to say about how distant kin and even ancestors are understood. Now, he does note how interest in kinship does decrease based on the kinship distance to ego, and according to Schneider this opens for a certain flexibility for ego to consider them to be kin or not (1980: 73-74). Though for my informants, the distance from ego to the Norwegian ancestor, no matter how large, did not decrease the feeling of kinship with the Norwegian ancestors. However, concerning living Norwegian relatives the majority of my informants did not seem too preoccupied with meeting or reconnecting with them, unless they were close relatives whom they had grown up with or knew of personally. For the ones who were several generations removed from the Norwegians, learning about Norwegian culture and their forefathers' life in the old days, seemed to be of greater importance than learning about or meeting their living relatives in Norway.

Mary C. Waters (1990) explains in her book *Ethnic Options* how Americans often can choose which hyphenation to belong to, or more specifically which ethnicity to feel kinship with, as Americans often have several heritages. She proposes that there are several factors helping to determine which heritage one feels closer to and therefore is more likely to identify with. These factors are knowledge about ancestors, surname, looks and the relative rankings of the group (Waters, 1990: 57). All of these factors were more or less mentioned by my informants during my fieldwork. Even though not all of my informants had several heritages I believe these factors are relevant in legitimizing their claim to a Norwegian identity.

### **Knowledge about ancestors**

When meeting Norwegian Americans for the first time in the field, they were always eager to tell me where in Norway their family originally came from, and several had been to Norway to see what were usually the remnants of their ancestors' farm. Some of my informants knew very well who their Norwegian ancestors were; for a few of them they were only one generation removed from the Norwegians. While others had simply heard from older relatives that they had Norwegian ancestors, but did not know anything about them or how far back they were. Knowing where the heritage came from and seeing the place, made the heritage much more tangible and genuine. According to Richard D. Alba in *Ethnic Identity* the difference between identity or self-image and being aware of your ancestors' origins is crucial for understanding ethnic identity in the US (1990: 49). Knowledge about ones ancestry does not necessarily make an ethnic identity, it is also a personal felt feeling of self.

Experiencing the Norwegian kinship is in a matter of speaking, a choice. Many people in Alba's surveys did not necessarily identify with their ethnic background despite of them being fully aware of their origins.

Nevertheless, this knowledge seemed to be highly valued in the community, when meeting someone who did not possess any knowledge on their family history, this seemed to be what bothered them the most about their Norwegian identity. This was the most personal information on their heritage, other cultural elements and knowledge about Norwegian culture and tradition was not hard to find in Minneapolis. Lacking this personal information made them feel as though they were missing out.

Meeting someone who also had family from the same region was a bonding experience. In Minneapolis there were several *bygdelags* (village organizations) where the members of the organization were all descendants of people who came from the same region or village in Norway (Lovoll, 1998: 46). Whenever I joined Betty at events and she spotted familiar faces in the crowd from her bygdela she was quick to point out to me that they were from the same region as her. She was very connected to her Norwegian roots and family, and tried to visit them once a year. The mountainous, central regions of Norway were overrepresented when it came to the bygdelags in Minneapolis. Probably since these also were the regions that saw a majority of their inhabitants leave for a better life in the new land (Lovoll, 1998: 10). Julian Kramer's view on Norwegian identity, seen from his role as an outsider in the country, is that the identity is rooted in local societies and can be compared to a tribal identity (1984). Kramer argues that Norwegians have strong bonds to their local community, and concludes that the Norwegian identity is closely connected to origins (1984: 95-96). In relation to this, the Norwegian Americans also had a strong sense of local and regional belonging to Norway (Lovoll, 1998: 3).

### **Surname**

Surnames as well were an extra indicator of where your family came from, exemplified by the empirical introduction to this chapter. Surnames could verify Norwegian kinship, enhancing ones claim to a Norwegian identity. A Norwegian surname surely helped legitimizing the Norwegian ancestry and was source for many conversations about the origins of one's family, especially if you did not have one. The majority of my closest informants had Norwegian last names and were very proud of them. Nevertheless, incidents such as the

empirical example in the introduction were not exclusive. A very active member in the Norwegian-American community and in Mindekirken had a German sounding last name. One day at church coffee another woman, who did not come around quite as frequently, asked her where her surname was from. The tone in her voice was very skeptical as if she was discrediting her Norwegian identity because of her non-Norwegian surname. The woman explained that it was her husband's surname, who was not Norwegian, but German. "Oh!" the woman said understandingly and softened her tone a little. Last names have a tendency to change with marriage and are often only inherited from the paternal side of the family (Waters, 1990). Still, a surname corresponding to your ancestry certainly makes it easier claiming a legitimate national identity, not having to explain away a different surname.

### **Rankings of the group**

Mark, one of the younger Norwegian-Americans I met during my stay, had newly gotten interested in his Norwegian heritage. We met through a Sons of Norway lodge when he invited me to speak at their lodge about my research. The lodge was situated outside of Minneapolis in a suburb, where he was the youngest member. He was in his late twenties and had multiple hyphenated identities from all over Europe, though Norwegian was the one that had caught his interest recently. He and his wife Kate, who also had Norwegian ancestry, told me that perhaps the reason for younger Scandinavian Americans becoming interested in their heritage today was because of how the Scandinavian countries were given a great deal more attention in media now than before. Scandinavia was highly featured in popular culture with cooking shows on TV and Nordic noir literature. Though, what was the most significant, the couple believed, is how the Scandinavian countries regularly dominate the top positions on multiple global indexes and rankings when it comes to issues such as quality of life, happiness and personal economy. Rankings which has certainly affected the general rankings of the group inside the US (Hove, 2013: 14). A *Scandinaviana* of sorts has become a far-reaching phenomenon and the three, small countries now have a reputation that supersedes their population numbers. In other words, Scandinavia is more visible to Americans than ever before.

### **Looks**

Looks were also to a certain extent an important factor in determining Norwegian kinship, although if you did not have the stereotypical tall, blonde and blue-eyed Norwegian appearance this did not mean you were considered any less Norwegian. Nevertheless it did

seem to be the ideal, especially when some of my informants were talking about their children or grandchildren wishing they could find a “nice, blonde Norwegian girl”. A woman I briefly met at a Norwegians Worldwide meeting in St. Paul told me proudly how her grandchildren all looked so Norwegian with their blonde hair. “My grandson only dates darker girls, though. I’ve asked him, ‘what’s wrong with a good, Scandinavian girl?’ You know what he answered? He said he wanted to expand the gene pool!” the woman laughed heartily, apparently not too sad about her grandson’s decision. Although Norwegian looks were cherished, this was not a crucial aspect of a Norwegian identity.

## **Bloodline**

Ron, whom I met at the Sons of Norway meeting, was very passionate about his Norwegian heritage. He was a self-professed 100% Norwegian, an expression my informants used to refer to themselves or others if all four of their grandparents were Norwegian or if all their predecessors were of Norwegian origin. 100% was an expression usually reserved for American-born Norwegians, as this was the only incident where one had to legitimize one’s ethnicity with numbers. Although his grandparents had met in America, they were all born in Norway, he proudly told me. Ron was one of the more steadfast and outspoken Norwegian Americans I met. “You know, there’s not much purity left in the Norwegian anymore, the blood is thinning out.” To Ron being a physical “100%’er” was more important than maintaining the cultural part of his heritage, although he was a passionate member of both Sons of Norway and Norwegians Worldwide. He did not hide his feelings about his own grandchildren finding partners of other ethnicities. He said they were interested in listening to his stories about Norway and its culture, but when it came to maintaining the biological part of Norway, they were not as dedicated as him.

Many would talk about how many percent Norwegian they were, but few stated that the percentage determined ‘how Norwegian’ they were. In fact, I hardly heard anyone express any similar ambiguity about their Norwegian kinship, such as Lisa had. In my experience there were no consensus in regards to how you traced kinship. This lack of any unison regarding of a kinship system among my informants is best summed up in the sentence “I discovered my Norwegian heritage”, a statement I heard on some occasions, the Norwegian identity was not something you had to be conscious of from birth in order to identify with it, it could certainly be discovered later in life.

There even appeared to be room for adoption. A few people I met were married to Norwegians and considered themselves to be “Norwegian by proxy”, even though they had no Norwegian relations themselves. A couple of women at Mindekirken were married to Norwegian-born men, but were not Norwegian themselves. However, they were very active members of the church and took part in other Norwegian functions across Minneapolis as well. During a conversation at church coffee two of the women talked about how many times they had been to Norway, one of them wittily remarked that they were almost more Norwegian than most Norwegian-born Norwegians who had not been back to Norway in more than 40 years. Claiming Norwegian ethnicity was unproblematic, although some valued a higher percentage of Norwegian blood more than others.

Ron’s way of talking about kinship and its relation to blood was not uncommon. Van den Berghe discusses the plural uses of blood and kinship as a rhetoric applied when talking about nationalism and how “mystical notions of blood are said to be shared by members of one nation...” as if they were kin (1987: 15). Schneider similarly recognizes how the notion of blood is important when talking about kinship in America (1980). This also resonates with Bakalian’s view on Armenian Americans and how they as well felt as though they were all of the same kin in the Armenian community (1993). This might not be too far fetched as shared ethnicity is frequently seen as having common descent, regardless of whether it is genuine or putative (Van den Berghe, 1987: 16), from here we can draw lines to Anderson’s imagined communities (1983).

In addition to this, blood was often seen as the carrier of particular cultural traits (Schneider, 1980). Kate, who was married to Mark, had ancestors from multiple Nordic countries, and she said that with all this new attention on the well functioning Norwegian state and the other Scandinavian countries, it made her feel as if she was personally part of the success. Norway’s good reputation made them proud, and more notably, conscious of being Norwegian. “It feels like there’s something in our blood that helped create this successful society”, Kate communicated enthusiastically. The way Kate spoke about blood was as if there was some exclusive Norwegian genes making these good things happen, genes that she also shared. It was as if the Norwegians were more biologically adept at creating a, more or less, successful welfare state. This focus on blood shows how the biological factor plays an



important part in Americans' identity construction, as if their personality traits and identity are inherited through blood.

### **Real American**

Most often people were prouder of being closer to the “real” Norwegians than being several generations apart. At church coffee at Mindekirken one Sunday after service, I talked to Jon, the president of Norway House. As he started telling me about his heritage his eyes lit up and his voice grew significantly louder. He was known in the community for being an enthusiastic Norwegian American and was quite the storyteller. He told me that he was a fifth-generation Norwegian and boasted about how long his family had been in the US. To him this was apparently a far more impressive feat than being a second-generation immigrant. Most other people who were many generations removed from the actual Norwegian immigrants did not put this in a way that implied proudness. He repeated this to me a few times, making sure it sank in, clearly wanting me to react with awe and interest to this feat. I also met people who claimed to have had ancestors coming over from England on the Mayflower, and as far as being a “real” American went, the Mayflower was as real as it got. So this might help us to understand why Peter was so proud of his long ancestral ties to the US. His family having been in America for so long, made his identity as a “real” American strong, therefore a source of patriotic pride for him. At the same time, his relatives did come over from Norway, legitimizing his Norwegian identity, and the traditions were still kept so many generations later, which was something that filled him with pride.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter we have dived into different concepts surrounding Norwegian-American identity. Claiming an ethnic identity as a Norwegian American only enhances the bond which the Norwegian Americans share with the greater American body. In such a multicultural society, everyone is ethnic and is therefore more or less expected to have a hyphenated identity. Though this varies greatly in importance from person to person. Due to how history has fared with Norwegian immigrants, this has made them form stronger bonds with each other and to the preservation of their cultural traditions. Being affiliated with the middle-class is a relevant factor when discussing the opportunities that Norwegian Americans have to fulfill their aspirations toward maintaining their Norwegian heritage and tradition in public. Functions often cost money and demand some of the Norwegian Americans spare time.

Being Norwegian has become more of a voluntary identity, where keeping up with one's identity is reserved for the spare time. Being Norwegian American today is more connected to feeling Norwegian, as the identity no longer affects their lives any differently from the general population. They are also part of what we can call an imagined community where they share a fellowship as well as kinship, which is also to a certain extent imagined as if they all share the same blood. Blood is also seen as encompassing inheritable cultural traits.

## Chapter 3 – Consuming identity: Food and Clothes as Symbols of Norwegian Culture

Jim, whom I first met at the button assembly held by the May 17<sup>th</sup> committee, had asked me a few weeks earlier if I wanted to volunteer at the Norwegian Glee Club's biannual lutefisk and meatball dinner. I gladly accepted and thrived over the possibility to discover just how eager Norwegian Americans truly were about lutefisk. *Lutefisk* (lye fish) is codfish or a similar white fish soaked in lye for a couple of days before being soaked in water for a day, making the consistency of the fish slightly gelatinous, as well as giving off a very pungent smell and taste. Its consistency, taste and smell have a tendency to be off-putting to people, which is partly why it is such a debatable dish back in Norway.

The Norwegian Glee Club was a male chorus who sang predominantly Norwegian songs. Although, they would often sing hymns, and songs about Minnesota were also popular. They were a rather large chorus of 40 or so senior men, with the exception of one member who was in his early 30s, though not all members were present at the lutefisk dinner. Jim had told me about the Glee Club the first time we met. He had been active in the chorus for about 12 years, though the club itself was approximately 103 years old, he told me. From their website one could see that there were several men who had been members of the club since the 50s and 60s (Norwegian Glee Club, 2015). The biannual lutefisk dinner was the Club's main source of income and was held twice a year, once in the spring and again in the fall. The dinner cost \$20 per person, which included as much as you could eat of lutefisk and meatballs, a dessert, a raffle ticket and the chance to enjoy a few songs performed by the Glee Club.

Ironically, the event took place in a predominantly Danish church in a suburban neighborhood of Minneapolis. Immediately as I stepped off the bus I could smell the pungent odor that lutefisk is so widely known for, streaming out from the church across the road. Rushing in to the building stressed about being late, I promptly realized that a person less would not have affected preparations much, as the building was already teeming with people and activity, it clearly had been going on for several hours already. There was a large amount of people occupied with preparing the different dishes. They were split into different cooking

stations, from cooking the actual lutefisk and meatballs in the industrial kitchen, to preparing side dishes and dessert in a spare room next to the kitchen, while others again were busy setting up tables and chairs in the dining room. The workers mainly consisted of the Glee Club's members and their wives, though other family members were present as well. In addition to this they were aided by a group of boy scouts and their leaders who helped serve the food. There were some differences in the way the two genders were set to work. Both men and women helped with service, but it was largely men who prepared the proteins, while the women arranged side dishes and dessert.

After searching the premises for familiar faces I finally found Tracy, Jim's wife who told me that they were having lunch at the moment, and instructed me to get a plate of lutefisk. Though lutefisk was the main star of the dinner, the meatballs were the traditional substitution for the lutefisk, as lutefisk was not to everyone's likings. Side dishes such as coleslaw, the traditional American side, and *lefse* were already placed on the table. Lefse can be described as a cross between a soft flatbread and a cake, resembling a French pancake or crepe in appearance. A lefse is usually made with potatoes, though there are varieties without potato as well. I had previously heard that some people ate their lutefisk with lefse like a wrap, so I expected that was what the lefse was there for. However, the lefse came with butter and sugar so it was merely a snack to go along with the dinner.

As I had finished eating I was given an apron that said "Ignore the risk, try Lutefisk" exemplified by the drawing of a codfish below. There were two types of aprons clothing the helpers, the one I wore, and one that read "Real lovers love Lutefisk". Jim paired me up with Inger whom I had previously met at Kontakt and were set to fold lefse. Inger was a first generation Norwegian who had moved to Minnesota with her husband Per in the 60s. Inger, who was originally from Oslo, had a tendency to switch between Norwegian and English when talking to me, though she did not take notice of this herself. Our job at the lefse station was to fold and place lefse on a plate in a circular pattern. Firstly one of the workers would cut the lefse in four parts, which we then folded. During our working session several people came up to us, either to pick up a lefse for service or to chat. A few people commented on how lucky I was to have the lefse job, as it was one of the easiest tasks at the dinner. I realized then that Jim had probably wanted to be nice by giving me this job as well as making sure I had someone to talk to the entire time. But, as I was one of the youngest people there, I felt guilty for doing one of the more effortless jobs when I was sure I could have been more

useful elsewhere. Nonetheless, as service started I was also set to help out an older lady with plating up coleslaw, a job that was heavy in the long run as one had to ‘dig up’ several kilos of coleslaw with a large ladle transferring it from a massive plastic bin to a slightly smaller, plastic container before distributing the coleslaw on to service plates. I was told she had been responsible for this task at the lutefisk dinner for several years. She kept telling me she was tired, although she did not particularly seem to enjoy having help seeing as whenever I tried to help her she appeared to work even faster. So I struggled to maintain a middle way of trying to do the heaviest lifting while not stepping on her toes too much. I tried to strike up a conversation with her, she was a first generation Norwegian so she spoke Norwegian, but she did not seem to respond to my Norwegian or English. At the end of the night she and her husband had a rather loud conversation in Norwegian about her shoulders being sore after the heavy lifting and him shaking his head and telling her off for doing more than she was capable of. In response to this, Inger, who also overheard the conversation, chuckled and exclaimed “Those stubborn Norwegians!”. Being stubborn was a cultural trait Norwegians were known for in the community.

There were three dinner services that day, one at 2 pm, the second at 4 pm and the last at 6 pm. At each serving there were approximately 200 seats divided by 25 tables. The 4 pm service was the only one that was fully booked. The servings were fast and effective, as soon as the diners had sat down, the servers would bring large bowls of lutefisk, meatballs, potatoes and gravy to each table and the diners would serve themselves family style. A couple of servers walked amongst the tables with gravy offering the diners a choice between white gravy and melted butter to go with the lutefisk. Coleslaw, lefse, butter and sugar had already been placed at the tables before the diners had arrived. If anyone wanted seconds, which they often did, the servers would make sure the bowls were refilled. When they had finished the food, the empty bowls were removed and each diner was given a piece of cake for dessert.

During the dinner some members of the Glee Club who were not preoccupied by chores would climb the stage that was located at one end of the dining room and sing for the diners. They started by singing a song about Minnesota, “the land of Norwegians and Vikings”, a great deal of the diners joined in, very familiar with the lyrics. It was hard to catch every word of the songs, but for the second one I managed to catch the word ‘cod’ being repeated quite often. Jim later told me that it was originally a song from the Pacific, but instead of

singing that they were longing for a girl, they were longing for cod. In addition to this they also sang a song dedicated to lefse, but other than hearing the words a few times I could not quite grasp the lyrics. After the singing there was a raffle where the diners had the opportunity to win prizes to take home with them, though I never got to see the actual prizes. After this, the diners did not linger longer than they had to, and the dining room was cleared pretty quickly and preparations for the next seating started. Between the servings we at the lefse station had about an hour's break, as there was not much to do during this time. We could not place lefse on the trays too early, as the lefse would quickly dry up when exposed to air.

For the last seating, one of the servers had to go home so Jim asked if I would like to help on the floor. This job enabled me to watch the actual event take place and got to see first hand just how much lutefisk the diners consumed. Together with a boy scout, we had the responsibility of putting food onto two of the tables in the dining room and we had to refill the lutefisk tray a few times. By the end of the day we had fed almost 600 people lutefisk and meatballs in total. Prior to the event I did not imagine it being such a huge production, I realized that lutefisk and Norwegian events were high in demand in these parts.

### **Outlining cultural repertoire**

This excerpt from my field was not an uncommon setting in which Norwegian Americans chose to express and celebrate their ethnicity and heritage. The lutefisk dinner exemplified how enthusiastic Norwegian Americans are regarding lutefisk and gives us an example of how this was played out in the public scene. Lutefisk dinners, as well as codfish dinners where they served 'plain' cod, were hosted by a plethora of churches in Minneapolis, including Mindekirken. It was usually arranged closer to the Christmas season, but it was not uncommon to happen upon a lutefisk dinner in the springtime.

In this chapter I will take a deeper look the Norwegian-American cultural repertoire and the Norwegian demeanor. By cultural repertoire I am referring to what Barth called the 'cultural stuff' which ethnic groups encompass, or rather what cultural elements or ethnic features prove to be important for the Norwegian American identity (1969). In order to do so I will account for features of the Norwegian cultural repertoire, which the Norwegian Americans have adopted and adapted. Norwegian Americans consume this cultural repertoire in several

ways, I am not only referring to what one physically consumes through our bodies, but also consumes in the sense of shopping. What knowledge the Norwegian Americans possess on Norwegian culture and their own heritage is important when it comes to how their Norwegian identity is played out as it is these cultural elements that they utilize. Using and consuming this cultural stuff shows others of the same heritage what information and knowledge you, as a Norwegian American, possess on the topic.

According to Harrison in *Cultural Boundaries*, as there in principal no longer are bounded societies, it has become increasingly important to see how these societies “employ representations of boundedness” in order to distance themselves from others (1999: 10). It will be fruitful to account for some of the ‘cultural stuff’ that this society hold in their cultural repertoire (ibid, cf. Barth, 1969). So far I have touched upon lutefisk, but it will be essential to consider other symbols of Norwegian culture as well. Art, food and clothing will be three main aspects of the Norwegian-American cultural repertoire which I will delve into in this chapter. “Cultural boundaries, by contrast, can be viewed as demarcating the bodies of symbolic practices which these collectivities attribute to themselves in seeking to differentiate themselves from each other expressively.” (ibid). In essence, how do Norwegian Americans use their cultural repertoire consisting of certain objects, food, clothing, and language and so on in order to express their ethnic identity and at the same time distance themselves from other groups? An important aspect of their identity is how it materializes through the cultural repertoire, without which the identity would not be as easily recognized.

Not only is it possible for Norwegian Americans to be selective about their hyphenated identities depending on the situation. But they are also to a certain extent selective about what parts of the Norwegian culture and tradition they choose to identify with. Some identify more with the ‘traditional’ part of Norwegian culture, with lutefisk and rosemaling, while some, though less common, are more concerned about the contemporary. The majority of Norwegian Americans are in general more concerned with the so-called ‘old’ Norwegian culture and what their ancestors brought with them. There are also some aspects of the Norwegian-American culture that are not genuinely Norwegian, but are meshed with or have taken inspiration from other Nordic countries, Sweden in particular. I will show how alleged ‘traditional’ Norwegian culture are usually favored over contemporary Norway and in this chapter this trend will materialize in other parts of their cultural repertoire as well.

## **Norwegian national culture**

“Is this Norwegian art?” one of the women exclaimed loudly in disbelief. “Yeah, I much prefer proper paintings to this.” Said the woman standing next to her, critically examining the painting in front of them. We were all standing in the gallery at the newly opened Norway House, appraising its very first exhibition. The artworks were supposed to reflect the Norwegian constitution’s 200 years anniversary and they were all done by contemporary Norwegian artists. Though my untrained eye had difficulty grasping the principal theme of the paintings. Apparently, I was not the only one to be confused as the two ladies standing next to me had clearly anticipated art of a different nature. They had expected the exhibition to feature paintings of a national romantic character, depicting idyllic Norwegian nature and farmer life. Which is what they had assumed a Norwegian-American cultural institution would feature. However, the artworks were all quite modern and abstract. One of the paintings that stuck with me was a recreation of a screenshot of what looked like a fight from a computer game. It was clear however, that these women did not consider this art Norwegian. Norwegian art was supposed to be old, traditional and romantic. Not abstract and provoking.

The women had joined the opening of Norway House after attending a cultural session at the Mindekirken’s weekly Tuesday Open House program. The opening of Norway House was cleverly scheduled to start right after that day’s Tuesday Open House was finished. This had resulted in a massive turnout at the basement of Mindekirken that particular morning, although Tuesdays were known to be quite crowded already, I was told there was a handful more people in the basement than the fire safety regulations allowed. At Norway House they had been running business for some time, but this was the day it was finally open to the general public. It was the ground floor that had been opened for the audience. In addition to the gallery, there was a small gift shop called *also Ingebretsen’s* run by the larger Ingebretsen’s store in Minneapolis, which featured souvenirs and collectibles of all things Norwegian, from books to fridge magnets. Aligned with the shop there was a makeshift café that served coffee and pastries. The café had not been finished in time, so it lacked a kitchen at the time of the opening, but still managed to please the coffee hungry Norwegians. There were a few tables spread throughout the hall so that people could sit down and enjoy their coffee and company. The Tuesday Open House goers was not the most progressive crowd



and might have expected art of a more national romantic nature. Nonetheless, Norway House's main agenda was to bridge Norwegian America with contemporary Norway.

Bjarne Hodne posits in his book on Norwegian national culture that Norway did not have any national, cultural impulses before the 1800s (1994: 15). What we consider as Norwegian traditions today are essentially local farmer traditions which were brought into light when Norway sought to establish their claim to independence from Denmark. Norway wanted to show the world and themselves that they had a legitimate claim to national sovereignty. In order to do so they needed to point to traditions that were not related to other countries, especially not Denmark (ibid.). The national romanticism surge was started by the city elites, who saw the farmer culture as a culture of the past, and insisted that this must be the true Norwegian culture (Hodne, 1994: 45). In a sense they saw this culture as pure, as if it had not been contaminated by other cultures and was to become a vantage point for a mutual Norwegian culture. This can be compared to Harrison's view on identity pollution (1999). A people that feels threatened by pollution from other cultures will strive to maintain and preserve the traditions that they feel are unique to them, in order to create cultural boundaries between themselves and the others (Harrison, 1999). Therefore in the 1700-1800s many educated Norwegian men became professional folk culture gatherers and focused their gathering of Norwegian culture mainly in rural areas of central Norway. This was also around the same time that the major wave of Norwegians immigrated to America, taking their farmer traditions with them.

### **Invented Traditions**

Hobsbawm consider this aspect of tradition in the book *The Invention of Tradition* (1996). " 'Traditions' which claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented." (1996: 1). Although the traditions in themselves were not invented, it was only the traditions of a small segment of Norway's population. In order to introduce this local culture as a culture which would encompass an entire population, Hobsbawm states that "Inventing traditions, it is assumed here, is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition." (1996: 4). The Norwegian national culture was not accepted overnight, it took time before this culture became acknowledged as a mutual culture by all tiers of the Norwegian society (Hodne, 1994: 32-34).

This process of inventing tradition fits well with how Norwegian Americans view Norwegian traditions, also evident in Larry's statement from last chapter, who claimed to be more Norwegian than Norwegians. Eriksen would refer to this as "traditionalism", which is a modern worshipping of something that is perceived as a tradition (1993: 18). As Billig explores they way people tend to forget one's country's brutal past, not only do the Norwegian Americans forget this aspect, but they have selectively forgotten other aspects of their history and traditions (1995: 38). Stereotyping is an easy way to categorize the different cultural traits. Although, it might be conceived negatively it does not necessarily have to be so (Jenkins, 2008: 152). The Norwegian American community did no doubt stereotype the Norwegian culture, in this instance it is a helpful method to make sense of an entire culture making use of only a few symbols such as lutefisk and lefse. The Norwegian Americans perceive this as the true Norwegian culture as it were these cultural elements their forefathers brought with them 100 or so years ago and it has been continually ritualized and worshipped ever since.

Not only have generations of Norwegian Americans been brought up thinking that specific cultural elements from this era is the true, authentic Norwegian culture, so has Norwegians. Eriksen discredits this specific culture as a true, official Norwegian culture arguing that: "Us Norwegians are neither similar nor unchangeable"<sup>13</sup> (Eriksen, 1993: 10). Reasoning that what was considered Norwegian yesterday might not be considered Norwegian tomorrow, nor do all Norwegians act and live in the same manner. Moreover, he states that there will always be a pull between traditional and modern elements of a culture; a culture will never be static (Eriksen, 1993: 11). The Norwegian culture will always have aspects of old and new elements incorporated, elements that will surely change with time. Considering this, the Norwegian-American culture has never been static either and has changed since the arrival of the first immigrants.

### **Art as an example of Norwegian romanticism**

In the field I got to know a Norwegian art dealer who kept a small gallery/office in the basement of the Sons of Norway building. Sue was a highly educated woman who were now retired and dealt Norwegian art both as a hobby and a profession, something she had been

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<sup>13</sup> Own translation from Norwegian.

doing for several years. I had met her previously at Mindekirken and had been invited to come visit her at her gallery. I knew that her gallery was next to the basement room where I had been helping the May 17<sup>th</sup> committee with assembling buttons. After one of our workshop sessions I saw that there were lights on in the gallery and knocked on the door. Sue welcomed me in and said I was free to look around. The room was smaller than I had expected for a gallery, filled to the brim with different paintings and memorabilia. Some paintings were hanging on the walls, but the plural of them were placed on the floor in clusters of three or four. It was clear that the room was not big enough for her capacity. At one end of the room she had a small desk where she worked, and had placed a couple of couches in the middle of the room, though these were also preoccupied by more art, rendering their original function useless. There were a couple of paintings that I recognized as reproductions of Norwegian classics, all depicting nature in one way or the other.

Sue enthusiastically shared with me that she had just gotten off the phone with a couple from Seattle who was coming to Minneapolis to purchase a painting that she had bought from Norway. She had a few customers from out of state who came to the city with the sole purpose of stopping by her gallery. The majority of her paintings were romantic illustrations of Norwegian scenery or farmer culture; they were the most popular among her customers, she confirmed. Sue had a collection of other works of art as well, among them a few decorative wooden pieces painted in a traditional rosemaling style, which was also very popular among Norwegian Americans. Tracy, who had also joined me in the gallery, was passionately interested in rosemaling. She herself held evening classes teaching others how to do rosemaling. Tracy said her class was very popular, though there had been a decline in number of participants. Tracy was especially enthusiastic about Sue's collection of rosemaling artifacts. She recognized a wooden bowl, which was identical to one she herself owned. There was definitely a certain type of cultural taste that appealed to Norwegian Americans. A difference between Norwegians and Norwegian Americans when it comes to traditional Norwegian art is that, arguably Norwegians do not identify with these national romantic paintings in the same way Norwegian Americans would. Both groups still see it as part of their past and their culture, but I will argue that it is somehow closer to Norwegian Americans in time than it is to Norwegians. Seeing as Norwegian Americans continually reproduce this reality through events and festivities throughout the year, and their bond to Norway most often stem from this era, it can explain why this is the Norway they feel as though they belong to. Which resonates well with Larry's previous comment about

Norwegian Americans being more Norwegian than Norwegians. Norwegian Americans strive to maintain this national romantic culture more than Norwegians do.

Sue showed me a painting that was especially popular among her clients. I did not remember having seen it before, but she asserted that it was an iconic Norwegian painting. The painting displayed a farmer in traditional clothing standing outside a row of wooden houses with a large, grassy mountain in the background. The man had his hands in his pockets and beside him there was a cat lurking in the grass. His toe was playfully touching the cat. The painting was appropriately called *idyll*, it was a good representation of what Norway represented to many Norwegian Americans with its scenery and an unsophisticated farmer lifestyle in the mountains. This was the reality for many of the Norwegian immigrants who came to America. There was a big market for reproductions of iconic paintings for nostalgic Norwegian-Americans, Sue explained to me, but she did have a few original paintings as well. She explicitly marketed herself towards “nostalgic Norwegian Americans” which explains why this particular painting was so popular; it reminded her clients of what they had learnt or assumed was their forefathers’ past.

### **Hard-working as an ideal**

Throughout my stay I heard people talking about how Norwegians were hard-working, wholesome and honest people. Which is partly what they had to be when establishing a home in a new, untouched land, building houses from nothing with scarce supply. Being hard-working seemed to be a quality inherent in Norwegians, which the Americans particularly favored. As we saw from the example of the lutefisk dinner, the woman distributing coleslaw would not take a break or let me do the work despite how she herself said she was tired and her body was aching. Giving up was out of the question. The man in the painting might be the ideal Norwegian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he also held qualities that were held high for Americans both then and now. A hard-working farmer who utilized nature and the few resources he was given, while living a tough, but overall happy life. The Americans not only saw their Norwegian ancestors’ history in this painting, they saw the American history and the ideal American. An individualistic, strong, hard-working man, all characteristics highly valued in America. We could argue that this is why this painting appealed so much to Norwegian Americans, as they subconsciously saw the American ideals together with the Norwegian depicted in the painting. During a Tuesday Open House seminar I had a

conversation with some Norwegian Americans who said they really admired the hard-working spirit of Norwegians. Though this quality applied mostly to the Norwegian immigrants who first came to America, they never explicitly said so.

According to Thorkildsen, keeping to a full day's work is a Lutheran ideal which has been transferred to the working life (1997: 159). Lutheranism has not just impacted religious life, it has also affected the Norwegian society in general. Some of Lutheranism's ideals are still highly valued in the Nordic societies today. Many of my informants talked about how they had grown up reading *Giants In the Earth* written by Norwegian American Ole Edvart Rølvaag (1927). The book is essentially the story of the typical Norwegian settler who came to America during the great exodus. The main protagonist faced many hardships in the New World, as he struggles with the hard Dakotan elements with limited resources. Illustrating the ideal hard-working Norwegian settler to the reader. Giving modern Norwegian Americans the image of the ideal Norwegian's persona and morals. Furthermore, Hove recognizes that the Nordic people are generally thought of as hard-working in the US, though this does not necessarily hold truth. Rather, he proposes that they are "practical thinkers", who through hard work aspire to reach other goals that they might have (2013: 88). The immigrants knew that it was necessary to work harder in the New World in order to reap the benefits. They did not value hard work for its own sake (Hove, 2013: 89).

### **Lutheran by nature**

Lutheran churches were especially prevalent throughout the Midwest due to the region's heavy Scandinavian and German heritage (Lovoll, 1998: 19-20). According to Lovoll, the history of Lutheranism in America is closely linked to the history of Norwegian immigration (1998: 19). "The question of a Nordic Identity also involves the question of the relationship between such an identity and the Nordic churches and the religious history of the Nordic nations." (Thorkildsen, 1997: 138). As Thorkildsen sums up, the Nordic identity is highly influenced by the religious impact the Lutheran church has had on Nordic societies. Although the Norwegian society has lessened its interest in the church and fewer attend church services on a regular basis, the society is still highly impacted by its religious history. Acting in a Lutheran manner is closely knit to the Norwegian demeanor. Comparing Lutheran church services to that of a Baptist, with its joyful and grandiose gospel singing and dancing, shows the contrasts of how one is supposed to act and behave. During the Lutheran service one is

expected to sit quietly and listen to the minister, not drawing attention to oneself. This is quite telling of how one are supposed to act in social settings as well.

The Nordic societies have a strong sense of conformity (Stenius, 1997; Markkola & Naumann, 2014). It is not difficult to relate this to the Scandinavian state of mind, known as the *jantelov* (jante law). The jante law, which encourages conformity, states that you are not supposed to think that you are anything special or better than anyone else (Dregni, 2011: 178). The anti-elitist jante law is still very much evident in Norwegians' behavior today. It is something most Norwegians are familiar with. The jante law exerts a form for social control on the Norwegian people, where one is supposed to act modestly and not show off. In his book on *The Almost Nearly Perfect People* Michael Booth talks about the Danes, who were ranked the happiest people on earth in a similar manner:

The Danes were Lutheran by nature, if not by ritual observance: they shunned ostentation, distrusted exuberant expressions of emotion, and kept themselves to themselves... I would go as far as to say that of the fifty or so nationalities that I had encountered in my travels up to that point, the Danes would probably have ranked in the bottom quarter as among the least demonstrably joyful people on earth, along with the Swedes, the Finns and the Norwegians (Booth, 2014: 2).

Although, the Norwegian Americans were not quite as Lutheran in nature as the Nordic people Booth encountered. There were still some remnants of this mentality lingering in the Mindekirken congregation. Mindekirken rarely held private parties in the Fellowship Hall, but exceptions were sometimes made for trusted, long-time members. During an extensive period of sickness, one Mindekirken member, Bill, had his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday coming up. Some of the other members decided to organize a birthday party in his honor one Sunday after service. They wanted to do something nice for Bill after having been severely ill for such a long period of time. Bill was a beloved figure in the community and was known to be a kind-hearted and resourceful man. He was a dear friend of Margaret and she liked to tell me stories of him, greatly worried about his health. She told me how he was Mindekirken's regular Santa Claus every Christmas, an assignment he treasured. I had trouble seeing the resemblance between him and Santa Claus at the time, but this was due to the illness, she established.

Therefore she and some other members of the church started planning his birthday party. When the day arrived, the church service was more crowded than usual as his family and friends came to celebrate him. During the actual party there were served food, coffee, cakes and a toastmaster ran the entire show. Toasts were made in Bill's honor and people had plenty of nice things to say to him. At the end he was encouraged to get up and speak and by the sound of his voice one could tell that he was deeply touched by all the nice words and the effort put into his party.

One of the women at my table whom I had only just met that day, Brit, did not seem to be enjoying herself as much as the other attendees. She made a snarky comment on how her family would never celebrate their birthdays in such a manner, having the entire congregation's focus on one person. She was one of the oldest women at the church and arguably also the most conservative. She elaborated on this, when her grandmother celebrated her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday she invited the minister over for coffee and cake, but that was as extravagant as it got. "Back in the old days, people would never admit to making anything or achieving anything, because they didn't want to be praised or get attention." Brit explained to me. It was clear that she did not enjoy the party and still cherished her late relatives' humility. Celebrating a birthday party for oneself in this fashion stood in sharp contrast to the jante law, which dictated that you are not supposed to think you are better than anyone else (Booth, 2014; Dregni, 2011). Neither did the party promote modest and humble behavior, which the jante law and Lutheranism did. I did not hear any other member of the congregation remark on this alleged ostentatious celebration in a similar manner, but it was evident that the jante law also had subsisted in America.

### **Symbols on Norwegian Culture**

A Norwegian American's cultural repertoire is obviously personal and differs from person to person, however there are a few common denominators that are known among the majority of Norwegian Americans. This varies from food to decorations from sports to behavior. There are the stereotypical cultural traits such as skiing and a great love and respect for nature, which are also recognized in Norway to be typically Norwegian. However, I would argue that Norwegian Americans have their own repertoire which for my informants might seem completely Norwegian in essence, but what I believe can be categorized into a particular Norwegian-American repertoire. Though these particular things might be Norwegian or

Scandinavian in origin, they might no longer be as significant in present day Norwegian culture, but are still part of the Norwegian heritage in both countries. Lutefisk is a good example of this as this is more culturally important for Norwegian Americans than it is for Norwegians today. I strongly believe a Norwegian American would never eat lutefisk just to satisfy one's hunger. Eating lutefisk is filled with meaning; eating lutefisk is consuming a Norwegian identity. As Døving puts it, food always entails so much more than just its nutritional value (2003: 356). Eating is key in human activity and interaction (Døving, 2003: 358). Though I believe lutefisk is more meaningful, than most meals are for Norwegian Americans. Interaction is central here as lutefisk is not the type of meal one cooks for oneself. It is a meal that is supposed to be relished and devoured in a social setting together with others who possess the same knowledge as oneself and therefore will also fill the dish with meaning. As my apron stated, eating lutefisk was risky, it was not a task one took half-heartedly.

Material culture is important in keeping a Norwegian identity, as it might otherwise be hard to show or manifest one. As Eriksen remarks, culture has become something that can be sold and purchased, by way of commodities (2004: 271) Therefore the 'things' in itself are important as symbols as they are explicit in the message they wish to send. As De Vos puts it "Ethnic features such as language, clothing or food can become emblems, for they show others who one is and to what group one's loyalty belongs." (1995: 24). Projecting a Norwegian identity is important, and the way to do it is with so-called ethnic features (cf. Harrison, 1999). Symbols in its simplest form are things that represent or stand for something else, lutefisk is, arguably a key symbol in the tradition of Ortner (1973). As Ortner states in her article "On Key Symbols", a key symbol is, simply put, an object that is culturally important (1973: 1339). Key symbols are elements of a culture which become apparent to the researcher when it is continually brought up in social settings and it is evident that these are important to the group (ibid). Not all of these symbols I mention here will be considered as key, but some of them are fairly overt in their importance.

Minneapolis' Scandinavian store Ingebretsen's, did not exclusively sell Scandinavian commodities and artifacts, they sold identity. Buying groceries here, such as expensive imported Norwegian chocolate or waffle mix was not only to satisfy a chocolate or waffle craving, but an investment in identity. The chocolate and waffles might taste and look different from their American equivalents, probably also preferable over their cheaper



counterparts one would get at Walmart, nevertheless it was never without meaning. In reference to this, joining lutefisk and *rømmegrøt* (sour cream porridge) luncheons throughout the year was a way to express a Norwegian-American identity. Conversations I had with Norwegian Americans did always touch upon the subject of food, often due to my interest in the subject, but also because food was a significant part of the Norwegian heritage and identity for Norwegian Americans. Asking informants whether they grew up eating any Norwegian food at home, meatballs was the dish most of them had been brought up with. Meatballs was a dish that was considered to be pan Scandinavian, though in Norway it is considered to be mostly Swedish.

### **Lutefisk: A Minnesotan tradition**

“Real Norwegians eat Lutefisk,” says Father.

“You will like Lutefisk,

Smothered in melted butter or white gravy.

You will love Lutefisk.

Real Norwegians love Lutefisk.”

- Extract from the book *Real Norwegians Eat Lutefisk* (Meuwissen, 2009)

Although lutefisk’s primary function is to feed, it is today filled with much more meaning. For my informants it was a dish that gathered all of Norway’s culture into one plate of food. This is what lutefisk symbolizes to Norwegian Americans as a “summarizing symbol” (ibid). If we were to compare lutefisk to a flag, in the same way a flag can portray an entire nation in one symbol, talking about or seeing lutefisk will instinctively remind a Norwegian American of Norwegian culture and his or her identity as such. In some senses, lutefisk is literally used as a flag, for example on the Glee Club’s aprons or as a sculpture. What better way to signal a Norwegian heritage, than with a colossal, fiberglass codfish? A giant codfish sculpture, appropriately called Lou T. Fisk, has been erected in the town of Madison, Minnesota (Dregni, 2011: 255). The town has a profound Norwegian heritage and proclaims itself to be the lutefisk capital of America, stating that their residents eat more lutefisk than any other town in America and Norway (ibid). Lutefisk is, I argue, the most valuable dish for Norwegian Americans and considered the most quintessential Norwegian dish and therefore also a key symbol. The extract on lutefisk above, is taken from the children’s book *Real*

*Norwegians Eat Lutefisk* (2009). This citation gives us an example of how lutefisk is essential for understanding the Norwegian culture in America, as real Norwegians are supposed to not only eat, but love lutefisk. The book was gifted to me from the author whom I met at a Daughters of Norway meeting<sup>14</sup>. Her purpose with the book was to provide children with an “inviting and mind provoking way” of learning about their Norwegian heritage and ancestry (Meuwissen, 2009). ‘You are what you eat’ is a widespread and well-known expression, applying this to the Norwegian-American context one can almost conclude that eating lutefisk makes you Norwegian.

At the Lutefisk dinner I struck up a conversation with one of the guests, Jack, at the table I served. He had Norwegian heritage, though he had more ancestors from Sweden. Therefore, he was more in touch with the Swedish heritage. Jack asked me if I had ever tried lutefisk, upon recognizing that I was Norwegian he enthusiastically told me about his trip to Norway and Sweden. Together with his American family, they had visited some of their Swedish relatives. One of his American relatives had boasted to a Swedish relative about how much they loved lutefisk and told them about the copious amounts of lutefisk they ate back in Minnesota. Their Swedish relative, an older lady, did not seem impressed with this and did not so much as smile, Jack told me. “A little later she revealed that she did not eat lutefisk at all, it was poor people’s food she said.” He leaned back in his chair laughing, clasping his hand on his thigh. Jack was not going to let his Swedish relative put a damper on his love of lutefisk, and he helped himself to the gelatinous fish more than most diners at the table. Lutefisk was not a way to connect with modern day Scandinavia, but to the ancestors who had brought the tradition with them. Although the tradition is not completely invented it has been adapted for new conditions since the first settlers came (Hobsbawm, 1996: 5). The church lutefisk dinners are now a central part of Norwegian Americans’ heritage and tradition. “Lutefisk: A traditional Christmas dish in Scandinavian countries like, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Minnesota etc.” (Norwegian Glee Club, 2015). This depiction of lutefisk I discovered on the Norwegian Glee Club’s website during my fieldwork where they were promoting their biannual fundraiser lutefisk dinner.

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<sup>14</sup> The author had also recently written a book on *rømmegrøt* (sour cream porridge) another Norwegian dish that was very popular in Norwegian America. The *rømmegrøt* book had just been released at the time, and she was planning to write one on *lefse* as well. Additionally, Tracy had been responsible for making a rosemaling border for the book.

During the lutefisk dinner, Per, who had become a little forgetful with age, came up to me several times to marvel at the Norwegian Americans' relationship with lutefisk. Per, a first generation Norwegian immigrant had lived in the US for more than half a century. Per was somewhat of a local celebrity in the community as he had been quite a successful skier back when his hair was a little less gray and his body a little taller. After first meeting him at Kontakt, a couple of women came up to me asking giddily, "Do you know who you just talked to? He is a World Champion Skier!". Although, Per had never been much for skiing back in Norway, he had won several medals skiing in the US I was told. Per, on the other hand, did never mention his skiing to me. He seemed to be more preoccupied talking about the lutefisk hungry Americans. Per said he would not touch lutefisk, he found the fish to be utterly disgusting. "But the Americans, they go crazy for it!" he laughingly bellowed out to me in Norwegian. His Norwegian, although a few English words snuck in here and there, was the best-kept Norwegian accent I heard from a first generation immigrant who had lived for so long in Minneapolis. He was married to Inger and they had both emigrated from Oslo together. "Look at this!" Per said as he gestured towards the dining guests engulfing themselves in lutefisk. "This would never happen in Norway.", he stated smilingly. "You have to go home to Norway and tell people that you served lutefisk to hundreds of crazy Americans!" Per chuckled. Even Per, who had lived in America for more than five decades, still had a hard time believing that lutefisk could attract people in such large numbers.

At Kontakt I struck up a conversation with another first generation Norwegian who came to the US in the 70s. Grete was astounded when she got to Minnesota and discovered that Norwegian Americans ate so much lutefisk. "Before I left, I had never heard of anyone eating lutefisk, but here they all eat it!" Grete said shaking her head. Even though she was from a neighborhood that was only a ten-minute drive from where I grew up, she spoke English to me. Margaret, who was sitting next to us, lamented that the traditions are dying out in Norway as well. Lutefisk had decreased in popularity in Scandinavia (although people still eat it), but lutefisk was, as we can tell from the Glee Club's account, as much a Minnesotan tradition as it was Scandinavian.

## **Lefse and other sweets**

Lefse was also an important dish and symbol used to express the Norwegian-American identity. It is usually served as a sweet treat with butter, sugar and occasionally cinnamon in between two layers of lefse. Lefse can also be enjoyed with savory dishes, most notably with *rakfisk*, fermented fish, in Norway or with lutefisk in America. I tried lefse at several occasions during my fieldwork, but they were all made in the same fashion. The lefse was thin and made into a large round shape, but cut into smaller pieces. It was made out of potatoes and usually served with butter and sugar together with coffee. Marie, who worked at the office at Mindekirken, told me as we were busy preparing the monthly Mindekirken newsletter for postage, how her grandmother had referred to lefse in the US as “Minnesotalefse”. Her grandmother did not consider the American lefse to be ‘proper’ lefse. She was accustomed to a different kind of lefse that was not made with potatoes<sup>15</sup>. There are several regional names on lefse as well as different shapes, thickness, ingredients and ways of eating lefse, so it is difficult to say anything in general about the different traditions of lefse eating in Norway or America. Nonetheless, this was the only time I heard of anyone being skeptical to the authenticity of the American lefse.

## **Hybrid food**

Although all Norwegian-American food can be said to be a hybrid of both cultures, some examples were more explicit than others. There was one variation of lefse that featured a lingonberry jam and cream that I got to try. Lingonberries are considered typically Norwegian and Scandinavian. Though the lefse was served as a sweet treat, this type of jam is most often used as a side to certain savory dishes in Norway as it is not particularly sweet. I tried the lingonberry lefse at Mindekirken church coffee after service one Sunday. It was not common to have lefse at the church coffee though there were always sweet treats in addition to sandwiches to go with the coffee. Thus, the lefse was made a special notice of in the welcome talk to church coffee. The lefse was homemade by one of the members and apparently a special treat at the church seeing as they were Norwegian. Although I was excited to try lefse in a new way, my table partner Margaret did not share my enthusiasm. She exclaimed that she did not particularly like it when they took old, traditional things and gave them an updated version. Therefore she would not even try them even though she

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<sup>15</sup> Personally, I would refer to the American lefse as lompe (also known as potato lefse), as this was not the lefse I was accustomed to.

assured me she enjoyed lefse and lingonberry a great deal, but if it was not authentic, there was no point in eating it.

Though not everyone shared Margaret's opinion. Lisa was in the process of writing an explorative cookbook on the multiple uses of lefse and *krumkake*<sup>16</sup>. She said she had made chocolate lefse, sweet potato lefse as well as savory lefse pizzas and wanted to experiment with different fillings when it came to the *krumkake* book. None of these recipes were considered traditional, either in execution or ingredients. As I told Margaret about Lisa's project she was not very impressed, she much preferred the traditional way of eating lefse. In different neighborhood stores across the Twin Cities one would often happen upon a reference to Norway in one way or other. One of the products that I stumbled upon most frequently was a type of chips that was made of deep fried lefse called "Uff da Chips". Only Americans would ever be as ingenious as deep frying lefse. By calling it "uff da" they simply wanted to signalize that it was Norwegian inspired, although the lefse chips had nothing to do with the original meaning of the phrase.

Just as spring had finally arrived to Minneapolis, Lisa invited me on a roadtrip. We stopped at a café called "Taste of Scandinavia" to have lunch. There were not a plural of Scandinavian eateries in Minneapolis so these cafés were scarce. At the café they served lefse made several ways, with both savory and sweet fillings. I opted for a sweet alternative with strawberries, cream and lingonberry jam while Lisa ordered a Norwegian breakfast lefse stuffed with egg and vegetables. This was definitely not the traditional way of eating lefse, as the lefse functioned more as a continental pancake or wrap which was stuffed with different ingredients. Though tasty, there was not too much about the lefse resembling the Scandinavian cuisine, it was indubitably a hybrid. Even though Lisa enjoyed experimenting with lefse by giving them an updated touch, she was not particularly impressed with the lefse at the café. The café might have strayed too far from the traditional.

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<sup>16</sup> Krumkake is another Norwegian Christmas cookie which was very popular among Norwegian Americans. It is often formed into a cone or cup, making it an ideal cookie to stuff.

## **‘Tis the season to eat**

Norwegian cookies were almost always present at any Norwegian event. Though I knew them as Christmas cookies, which are generally only consumed during the holiday season, they were served during the entire spring in Minnesota and were not referred to as Christmas cookies by any of my informants. Halter discusses the topic of Christmas food (2000). The food that is specifically related to the holiday season is one of the most important markers of an ethnic identity (2000: 107). This helps us to understand why lutefisk, lefse, rømmegrøt and Christmas cookies are the most featured and important food dishes in today's Norwegian America. They are all associated with the Norwegian Christmas celebration. These dishes were what the Norwegian immigrants cherished the most, as they were generally only eaten during the most traditional time of the year, the Christmas season. Christmas is a very important celebration for both Norwegians and Americans, thus, the food one consumes this time of year will be laden with meaning. Hence, these were the most important dishes to pass down to younger generations in order to keep the traditions alive. With time, the dishes the immigrants ate during the week had most likely been replaced by modern, American dishes. Apart from rømmegrøt, lutefisk and occasionally salmon, I did not come across any typical Norwegian savory meals in Minnesota. It was the important dishes that had survived.

Lisa told me that most of the recipes that had been passed down in her family were cookies, the sweet treats were usually what people liked and therefore it was those that were passed down to younger generation, she stated. Still, I do not think that it is a coincidence that they also were Christmas cookies. As a wedding gift for her nephew, Lisa had written a cookbook with old family recipes that had been passed down from earlier generations. As she showed me a copy of the book, I could tell that Scandinavian cookies had been an important part of their family's Norwegian repertoire and their personal food memories. It was Norwegian Christmas cookies or waffles that tended to be served as sweet treats at Norwegian events, thus it was not only in Lisa's family that these recipes were cherished the most.

As they first and foremost ate food that was usually associated with Christmas, these were dishes full of meaning, it was identity on a plate. As Douglas so easily put it, "Food is not feed." (1977: 7). Food consumption is widely agreed to be a product of tradition (Fürst, 1988: 91). Fürst argues that "food calls forth strong and deep-seated emotions." (1988: 95). Because food is associated with our mothers from a young age, this helps to explain why we

connect food and memories from our childhood and makes food such a strong symbolic form of expression (ibid.). Nostalgia is key in keeping up with food traditions in Norwegian America. Many of my informants reminisced about their parents' or grandparents' home cooking of Norwegian meals and dishes. Especially for my informants who were at an age where they had lost most of their older relatives, these memories and feelings of nostalgia were given additional meaning and personal significance. Keeping up with traditions and their Norwegian identity was also a way of keeping in touch with older relatives which they might have lost.

### **Norwegian Sweaters**

Clothing is an essential part of enhancing an identity and for my informants the message they wanted to send was not too subtle. At church it was common to get slightly dressed up, generally in *Norwegian sweaters* if the weather was not too hot. At first I assumed that the churchgoers wore colorful knitted sweaters with decorative patterns with the sole purpose of keeping warm in the harsh Minnesotan winter. Not having considered beforehand that these were considered typical Norwegian clothes. After having gone to church for a few weeks however, Betty commented on how the Tuesday Open House seminars was an opportunity for Norwegian Americans to show off their Norwegian sweaters. She explained that the knitted sweaters were to a large extent considered to be Norwegian sweaters by the community. The wearers of the sweaters also received a great deal of compliments by other Norwegian Americans more than any other regular 'Sunday's best'. The patterns and the colors came in many varieties and did not necessarily have to feature any explicit Norwegian pattern or symbol. After learning this I became more aware of the knitted sweaters, they seemed to be especially popular among the older generation at the church, occasionally worn by men, but more often by women. Nonetheless, Betty did wear these sweaters herself, when complimented on them she made an ironic joke about her just showing off her Norwegian sweaters. The Norwegian Americans did not always take themselves too seriously. Kari told me how she had made arrangements for having someone knit Norwegian *Marius* sweaters for her dogs. Marius sweaters are well known in Norway for its particular pattern in red, white and blue colors. These are to Norwegians considered a typical Norwegian sweater, though the sweaters in Minnesota did not necessarily resemble a Marius sweater, subsequently I did not think of them as Norwegian sweaters when I first saw them. Kari who was closer to contemporary Norway than most, had picked up that these sweaters were what Norwegians

considered to be Norwegian sweaters. When she finally received the sweaters, she proudly showed me a picture of her dogs in their perfectly tailored outfits.

The Norwegian sweaters seemed to be an appropriate alternative to fancy dress clothing, they were nice enough to be worn in church and to other arrangements during the winter nights. I was more surprised when I came across a brochure for Norway House's summer gala, which stated: "Attire - Nordic Gala Finest: Norwegian Sweaters, suits, bunad or black-tie admired. A special night to celebrate individual Scandinavian Formal Style!". Not knowing whether this was meant humorous or not, they certainly indicated that Norwegian sweaters in this case were just as formal as a black-tie. In addition to this, the gala was in the middle of summer so wearing a Norwegian sweater would have been unbearably warm. Sadly, I was unable to attend this gala, so I did not get to see for myself how many actually considered this to be appropriate gala wear. Yet, I got the impression that formal wear when combined with a Norwegian event, was not the same as formal wear in other non-Norwegian circumstances.

On Norway's Constitution Day, Norwegians in Norway are generally expected to dress up, if not in bunads, then in a suit or a formal dress. According to Døving there is a lot of pressure on the Norwegian society to behave in certain ways on May 17<sup>th</sup> (2003: 266). One is supposed to stick to traditions this day, especially when it comes to clothes. A knitted sweater would not be considered formal in this instance. May 17<sup>th</sup> in Norway is quite different from the 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration, where formal wear did not seem to be the norm among the public watching the parade. On July 4<sup>th</sup> there was more of a casual and relaxed atmosphere, especially apparent in clothes. Shorts and t-shirts seemed to be the general outfit. Another aspect worth comparing is the way to watch parades on these two days. In Norway one is supposed to stand on the curb and wave your, compulsory little flag at the people in the parade. While in America one is expected to bring a camping chair or a blanket to sit on the grass so that one can be comfortable while the parade passes by.

May 17<sup>th</sup> in America proved to be a mix of the two when it came to outfits. The majority of my closest informants all wore bunads this day, though some of the men came in suits. A variety of younger Norwegian expats who showed up to celebrate also wore bunads or nice clothing. However, if you did not have a bunad, any Norwegian related clothing item seemed to do. May 17<sup>th</sup> was celebrated in Mindekirken and the regular crowd seemed to have dressed up, but the celebration definitely drew a bigger crowd than it normally would on Sundays. In



fear of sounding patronizing, I was slightly taken aback when I showed up at Mindekirken in high heels and a formal dress, which was not my usual fieldwork attire, to find people in Norwegian soccer jerseys and tourist T-shirts. There were made no remarks about the general public's appearance from my informants, it did not seem to be out of the ordinary. Customarily, at events such as this, people would gossip or comment if there was something they were not too pleased with or had an opinion about. Thus I assumed the majority generally accepted how claiming 'Norwegianness' by use of t-shirts, was the equivalent of being dressed up in the community. From time to time, at different events, people would wear these t-shirts stating that the wearer was Norwegian or a Viking or something else in reference to Norway. Once again confirming their position as first and foremost American by using clothing explicitly claiming Norwegian heritage. This also separated the Norwegian Americans with the most knowledge on Norwegian culture and those who did not have as much. The relaxed t-shirt look was as I mentioned, popular on 4<sup>th</sup> of July, further giving away their true identity as Americans, as this is how they dressed for their national celebration.

### **The sacred bunad**

Bunads are a big part of the national identity in Norway and this has been transferred to Norwegian Americans as well. The concept of bunads was partly "invented" during the national romanticism and many bunads are designed even later, nevertheless, this does not diminish their cultural importance as a traditional pan-Norwegian folk costume (Eriksen, 2004: 275). Bunads are primarily worn at special occasions where May 17<sup>th</sup> is the most notable. The bunads undoubtedly appeal to Norwegian Americans as they are seen to be part of a rural tradition and exclusively Norwegian (though they share similarities with other countries' folk costumes) (Eriksen, 2004: 276). In Norway there are strict rules to what can constitute a bunad (Eriksen, 2004: 277). In America however, according to Lovoll, Norwegian Americans have made their hybrid versions which include American symbols (1998: 238-9). Nevertheless, I did not see any hybrid bunads during the May 17<sup>th</sup> celebrations at Mindekirken. The majority of my informants had either bought their bunads in Norway or had inherited them from relatives. A few had gotten them made in America, though by Norwegian standards. They were, as far as I was told, all from the region where their Norwegian ancestors were from. My informants were just as preoccupied by the bunads' authenticity as Norwegians (Eriksen, 2004). Whether this was related to how Lovoll sees the Midwesterner Norwegians as someone who knows precisely who they are, as opposed to

Norwegian Americans in other parts of the country, is a possibility (1998: 42). Though it is worth mentioning that my key informants were passionate Norwegian Americans as opposed to those who only celebrated their Norwegian heritage once a year on May 17<sup>th</sup>.

Bunads then, were taken more seriously than any other Norwegian garment or food dish. It was okay to make hybrid food dishes and knitted sweaters, but bunads, among my informants at least, were not to be tampered with. According to Eriksen what gives the bunad that “special quality” is “the recipe, not the food” (2004: 283). The bunad as a garment, is not as valuable as what lies behind the process, the way it is crafted and designed is why it differs from other Norwegian elements. Besides, a bunad costs a small fortune in addition to the actual creating of it, which is very time-consuming, and also supposed to be done by hand. It might also be explained by how my informants were deeply connected to their local roots in Norway, as the bunad represented their regions particularly, it was meaningful to the wearers.

### **Vikings – the original Midwesterners**

Americans, and especially Midwesterners have a great fondness for Vikings. Not only did Minnesotans name their state football team after them, there is also the legend of Vikings having not only ‘discovered’ America by Leif Eiriksson, but also the state of Minnesota. The discovery of the Kensington Rune stone, which allegedly states that Norwegians and Swedes made camp in southern Minnesota as early as 1362 ( Lovoll, 1998: 5). Nevertheless, it is the general consensus between experts on the matter that the stone is a fraud (ibid.). Talk of the stone was brought up a few times during my fieldwork and some adamantly believed it to be authentic. Margaret was fully convinced that it was real, and did not want to listen when others ridiculed or criticized it. Although I sense that it was more a wish of wanting to believe it, as it would somehow legitimize Scandinavians’ ‘birthright’ to Minnesota and America as this meant that they ‘discovered’ it first.

Vikings were easy role models to adopt, omitting their infamous cruelty (cf. Billig), they were one of the more successful and noticeable Scandinavians through the ages. Vikings are considered to be strong, clever and are easily caricatured, not to mention how other people were familiar with the Vikings. Being associated with Vikings showed others, especially people of British descent, that they were descendants of a strong, fearless people (Gjerde & Qualey, 2002: 43), and more importantly that they were in America first (Lovoll, 1999: 276).

Americans celebrate the national Leif Eiriksson's Day every October, which in the Norwegian-American community is a big event. As I did not spend fall in America, I did not experience it myself, but there were talk about Mindekirken's celebration of it from time to time. Acknowledging Leif Eiriksson as the true 'discoverer' of America further strengthened their position as Americans. In some ways, they were the true Americans.

## **Paraphernalia**

Previously, I mentioned art and rosemaling as ways to exemplify Norwegian culture. Though as mentioned before, I did not get to visit many Norwegian homes, but the ones I did visit had some form of Norwegian art or paraphernalia covering the walls of their house. Lisa had on a trip to Norway visited the plot where her family's farm had been; it was torn down only a short while before her visit. She had been informed that there might have been old nails and hinges lying around in the field where the house had been. As she came to the plot she had in fact found a few nails and hinges on the ground and had brought them with her back home to Minnesota. She had plans to put them in a see-through box so she could display them on her wall. These items, which was not originally intended as decorative objects, were now nostalgic memorabilia reminding her of her heritage and her own visit to Norway. Lisa had also other Norwegian inspired art on her walls, a rosemaling embroidered wall piece, ceramic plates as well as Norwegian looking gnomes. I found it interesting how she who was so aware of other Norwegian Americans' romanticized view on Norway, was no different when it came to her artistic preferences. Kari as well had plenty of old Norwegian woodworking objects around her house which she or her husband had inherited, who was also of Norwegian heritage. She had a traditional wooden chest, which Norwegians had brought with them, when crossing the Atlantic. I could tell that it was not an original as it had her name as well as the year that it was crafted on the lid.

In addition to these somewhat stereotypical Norwegian artifacts there were also the purely Norwegian-American references. Mugs, aprons, buttons and similar objects that had "uff da" written on them were to be found in small neighborhood stores all over Minneapolis. "Uff da" was the clearest example of a Norwegian-American hybrid. This expression is not given much attention in Norway, and its original meaning had been lost along the way in the US, to much annoyance of my informants. Other phrases, such as the ones featured on the buttons in

the picture at the beginning of this thesis, were also popular to feature on commercial items and very clearly made in America.

### **Concluding remarks**

This chapter illustrates how Norwegian Americans tended to prefer the more national romantic version of Norway. Some symbols on Norwegian culture are given more value and importance in the identity construction, such as lutefisk and lefse. Art has been made an example of the way Norwegian Americans perceive true Norwegian culture. I have showed how food connected to Christmas is predominately the dishes which have survived in America throughout the years. These were dishes that were very meaningful to the immigrants and have therefore been passed down to the younger generations of Norwegian Americans. Some food has gone through a process of hybridization making it a perfect fusion of both Norwegian and American cultures. Where clothes are concerned, they are important tools for displaying a Norwegian-American identity. Although through the eyes of a Norwegian, certain Norwegian outfits claiming a Norwegian heritage, furthermore proves their 'Americanness'.

## Chapter 4 – Social arenas and Events:

### Expressing Identity in the Public Sphere

At the end of June, Norwegian and Swedish Americans came together to celebrate their Scandinavian heritage at the Scandinavian Summer Fest. The festival was held in a park in Minneapolis, the sun was shining and temperatures were high, a stark contrast to the Minnesota that welcomed me in January. The park was filled with a vast variety of stalls where different clubs and organizations promoted their activities. Some authors who had written books on Scandinavian heritage were there to sell their books. The ‘Viking’ lodge of Sons of Norway demonstrated to a curious audience what an authentic sword fight between Vikings would look like, fully equipped with chain mail armor and heavy oak shields, which must have been excruciatingly warm that hot summer day. Other stalls sold food such as lefse sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar, swedish meatballs wrapped in lefse and Norwegian waffles. While some sold handmade knitted clothing or woodwork made by hand, the traditional way. In addition to the fair, as it was a Sunday, the Mindekirken preacher and a preacher from a Swedish church held a service together on a stage in the center of the park. Throughout the afternoon there was entertainment featured on the stage, which mainly consisted of Norwegian and Swedish choirs as well as folk dancing.

When I arrived to the festival, Swedes dressed in their folk costumes were dancing around a Midsummer’s pole, which they had set up in the middle of the fair. This is a Swedish tradition stemming from their annual Midsummer celebration, hence it is not something Norwegians celebrate or are accustomed to. Thus, the Norwegian Americans I talked to had something to say about that particular activity. “This is all strange to me.” George explained to me as he gestured towards the dancing Swedes. “We don’t know anything about that.” he shook his head chuckling, George took it upon himself to talk on behalf of the Norwegian American community gathered there. It was important for him to make me understand that Norwegian Americans had not adopted this Swedish tradition, as he was well aware that this was not connected to Norway in any way.

This was the first time Norway Day and *Svenskarnas Dag* (The Swedes’ Day) were celebrated at the same time at what was now called Scandinavian Summer Fest. Although the

two festivals appealed to two different hyphenated Americans, the two festivals had been pretty similar in execution I was told. It was due to financial reasons they now had chosen to combine the two. The Danes, although a much smaller group in America (Lovoll, 1999: 32), still had their own day at the Danish American Center. A couple of my informants sat on the Scandinavian Summer Fest committee and seemed to be very pleased with the end result. Tracy, who had been talking about the event for several months, was very happy about the turnout this year. “You know, we were very skeptical at first about arranging this with the Swedes, but it has turned out much better than we feared!”. Celebrating together with the Swedes drew a much bigger crowd. Having one Scandinavian Fest instead of two also meant that out-of-towners who might have both Swedish and Norwegian ancestry were more likely to make the trip into the city, she told me. Even George admitted that the festival was a great success, though he said in a jokingly manner that the festival was not pure anymore, insinuating that the Swedes were polluting the festival. In addition to George, others also made humorous, snarky comments about the Swedes, during the festival. However, this frequent joking did strike me as a way to remind bystanders that the two groups were in fact different from each other.

One of my closest informants, Margaret, wore a t-shirt showing off the Norwegian flag with the title of Norway’s national anthem printed in thick letters below “Ja, vi elsker dette landet.” (Yes, we love this country). This was a representative outfit considering how a great deal of the attendants wore shirts with similar motives this day, however I was a little taken back when I saw her wearing it. I had seen her wear Norwegian outfits such as a bunad and the infamous Norwegian sweater before, but I had never seen her wear a garment that was so explicit in its message. At Norwegian events it was quite evident that the people there were of Norwegian heritage, hence the use of these types of shirts was rendered futile. But seeing as this fest was shared with the Swedes, it became more important to signal which of the two groups one belonged to, and at the same time create a boundary towards the other.

The ways Norwegian Americans mainly express their identity in public is through participation at different events and organizations. From the Scandinavian Summer Fest it becomes apparent that their identity especially becomes relevant when they are in contact with other hyphenated groups. This is part of their expression of identity that I will delve further into in this chapter. Firstly, how they create boundaries towards other groups, and try to avoid identity pollution, as George so incessantly dreaded, will be crucial (cf. Harrison,

1999). Their participation in these events is especially important for maintaining and preserving the Norwegian-American community, without which a Norwegian arena would not exist. Thus secondly, I will look more closely at participation in civic as well as religious activities in order to see how their Norwegian identity is expressed in these contexts (Putnam, 2000). Participation in organizations and events is immensely important for Americans' personal social life as we will see from the forthcoming discussion.

### **All the world's a stage**

You could clearly tell who was Norwegian at the Scandinavian Summer Fest, not only by the way they dressed, but also by the way they spoke about the Swedish activities. From this empirical example we see that the public sphere was the arena where the Norwegian identity properly came into play. Never had I come across an event in Minneapolis where emphasizing your heritage was part of nearly every conversation and action. To draw on Barth's theory on boundaries it is with social contact that ethnic boundaries materialize (1969). When associating with the Swedes, it became more apparent than ever before that Norwegian Americans were Norwegian, as opposed to Swedish. What was more important though was how much they wanted to express and show others that they were Norwegian. A crucial point is how this demonstrates how important the performance of their personal identity was. In the tradition of Erving Goffman one could say that the Norwegian Americans performed their identity as if they were on a stage, as opposed to back stage or off stage (1959). This "front stage" behavior is something everyone will recognize, as we all modify our behavior depending on whom we are with and where we are. As Shakespeare eloquently penned, "All the world's a stage", stating that everyone performs their identity at any given time. This performance might at times be done subconsciously, but that does not make the performance any less real. In order for my informants to be recognized as Norwegians, it was especially important at this festival to project a Norwegian identity, so as not to be confused with the Swedes. "To know what we are doing and who we are, we must have some idea of what we are going to or might do." (Jenkins, 2008: 55). Jenkins states that projection of one's identity is crucial when expressing who you are. Joining events and organizations was one way of projecting an identity, wearing clothing that claimed 'Norwegianness' was another, as we also saw from the previous chapter. Margaret who did not often wear t-shirts expressively stating her love for Norway, had not put on the t-shirt subconsciously, she was projecting her

identity. As the majority of the people at the festival were either Norwegian or Swedish, her message was clear, she was Norwegian.

### **Bitter Swede Symphony**

In *Cultural Boundaries* Harrison explores the subject of identity pollution and how contact between different groups might be in danger of pollution (1999). When George talked condescendingly about the Swedish traditions and said outright that the festival was no longer pure, he feared that the Swedes would pollute his Norwegian identity, as if his Norwegian identity was endangered and had to be protected (Harrison, 1999: 10). In a way the Norwegian ethnic features stood in fear of being contaminated and intruded by the Swedish ones. Margaret by wearing a shirt that stated her love for Norway, repelled the Swedish culture, protecting herself from it (Harrison, 1999: 12). She signaled that she did not want to engage in the Swedish culture. By way of her shirt she excluded the Swedes from her community, "...the collective Self is constructed in opposition to a potentially or actually threatening Other." (ibid.). When the Swedes danced around the Midsummer's Pole I did not see any of my informants step up to the pole and watch, they all looked on from afar. They were staying clear from the dangers of contamination and keeping the Swedish culture out (Harrison, 1999: 11).

This relationship with the Swedes was a special one, as I have stated previously Norway has, compared to their neighbors, been the underdogs. Thus, distancing themselves from the Swedes became even more significant<sup>17</sup>. I believe that the Norwegian Americans would not have been so adamant in distancing themselves from other, more remote hyphenated Americans. As the Swedes share many ethnic features as well as a long history with the Norwegians, marking the cultural boundaries is far significant between close cultures. As the Swedes inadvertently had invaded Norway Day, they feared that their Norwegian activities would be corrupted by the Swedes, which in turn might pollute their Norwegian identity. Having their Norwegian identity contaminated might put the authenticity of their Norwegian traditions at risk.

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<sup>17</sup> Paradoxically, having Swedish meatballs in the Norwegian lefse was not a problem, as no one seemed to be bothered with this or view this as polluting the lefse.



## The participating American

Americans have a history of being active members of different social clubs, as Robert D. Putnam puts it in his acclaimed bestseller *Bowling Alone*, "...Americans are more likely to be involved in voluntary associations than are citizens of most other nations; only the small nations of northern Europe outrank us as joiners." (2000: 48). According to this, Norwegian Americans should be especially adept at being active citizens taken into account both their Norwegian and American influences. Bellah et al. also asserts this in their book *Habits of the Heart*: "The United States is a nation of joiners." (1985: 167), when writing how Americans have a penchant for joining and forming organizations of all kinds. The authors argue that it is generally expected of Americans to get involved in the society one way or another (ibid.). What can be said for certain is that the Americans know how to establish organizations, "The ingenuity of Americans in creating organizations knows no bounds." (Putnam, 2000: 48). Asserting that Americans create associations for whatever they find interesting, be it historical associations primarily interested in Outlaw and Lawman history or a Grand United Order of Antelopes (whatever it is that they do) (ibid.). This also applies to Norwegian Americans in Minneapolis who, amongst others, come together to celebrate the wonders of fish, exemplified by salmon and cod at *Lakselaget* (salmon club) and *Torskeklubben* (cod club)<sup>18</sup> as well as a Sons of Norway Lodge dubbed the Viking lodge, where the members dress up as Vikings. As Dregni puts it "An entire book could be filled with a rundown of Scandinavian Luncheon societies..." (2011: 240). Lovoll agrees with this, declaring that Norwegian Americans were especially eager to join or form voluntary associations (1999: 273). Clubs and associations were places where Norwegians could get together to speak Norwegian and celebrate their culture, and thus combat the fear that a transition to the English language would lead to an eventual loss of their natal culture (Lovoll, 1999: 274). These early immigrants feared that as they lost their language, it would be harder to preserve other traditions as well. Again, we see how Norwegian Americans were afraid of identity pollution, though this time threatened by the American culture and English language. Forming and establishing organizations that set to promote Norwegian heritage and maintain a Norwegian-American community, was a reaction to this fear.

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<sup>18</sup> Torskeklubben is reserved for men and lakselaget for women.

## **Ethnic exception?**

Although Putnam argues that civic participation has both waxed and waned throughout recent history, it has in the last decades or so, seen a major decrease in participation numbers (2000: 64). Contrasting this, the Fraternal Director at the Sons of Norway headquarters assured me that membership numbers had increased and would likely continue to do so. Nevertheless, Putnam elaborates on how most Americans might say they are members of different organizations, but whether they actually spend time going to meetings or working at these organizations is a different story (2000: 63). It is of course a possibility that many members of the Sons of Norway lodge were passive members, or Norwegians might have been an ethnic exception in America. Jon, the president at Norway House certainly seemed to think they were. Jon claimed that Norwegians had not only been suppressed by the American society at large, but also by their Scandinavian neighbors, the Swedes and Danes. That was the reason, Jon explained, Norwegian Americans were more eager to express their heritage today than other Scandinavian Americans, they wanted to make up for what was lost. Lovoll does, argue along the same lines, Norwegians suffered from being the Scandinavian underdogs, having previously been governed by both countries (1998: 3). Norwegians had to a larger degree opted for becoming more American than their neighbors. Therefore Norwegians have had a tendency to distance themselves from other Scandinavians due to their previous inferiority.

This helps us understand why Norwegian Americans are still so preoccupied with keeping their heritage, and the desire for their younger relatives to find partners that share their Norwegian heritage. On the question of whether other immigrant groups, with a special emphasis on Swedes, were as engaged in their heritage as Norwegian Americans, Jon responded resolutely: “Well, there are no Sons of Sweden!”. He repeated his impression that since Norwegians, to a much larger degree than other Scandinavians, had been forced to become Americanized, this had led to a newfound investment in their heritage today. I asked some of my informants who had several hyphenated identities if they kept up with their other identities in the same way as they did with their Norwegian one. Paul, whom I met at Tuesday Open House said his father was 50% Norwegian and 50% Swedish, while his mother was of American Yankee origins dating back all the way to the Mayflower. His mother had suppressed his father’s poor, rural background, making him leave his Scandinavian traditions behind. Growing up, Paul had learnt nothing about his father’s

heritage. Seeing as he had now retired he had more time on his hands and was on a mission to learn more about his father's past. He regularly joined events at the Swedish American Institute in addition to joining Norwegian events and claimed he was devoting equal amounts of time to both heritages. Mark, who had a plethora of hyphenations, was solely preoccupied with the Norwegian part of his heritage. This seemed to be due to his grandfather who often talked about his Norwegian heritage. He did not know anything about his other heritages, so they were not as meaningful to him. There was a tendency among my informants to be more preoccupied with their Norwegian heritage if they had several heritages, except for when they also had a Swedish heritage. If they were Swedish in addition to Norwegian, paradoxically, this was also something they wanted to keep up with. Lisa who had two Swedish grandparents knew more about her Swedish family, and joining Daughters of Norway was a way to connect more with her Norwegian roots. The fear of identity pollution did not seem to affect the Americans who had several hyphenations in the same way as it did with those who had purely Norwegian ancestry. But for the 100%'ers it was important to remain 100%.

As I have not explored other hyphenated group I cannot assert for sure whether or not Norwegian Americans really are an ethnic exception. Nevertheless, civic participation remained important for all of my informants. Most were at least active in one social organization or club, in addition to being active members of the church. Margaret was not only active in Mindekirken, she was also a member of Norwegians Worldwide and Kontakt. Lisa was a member of both Norwegians Worldwide and Daughters of Norway. Lastly, Jim and Tracy, whom I first got to know as board members of the May 17<sup>th</sup> committee, were also active members of their church. In addition to this, Jim was active in the Norwegian Glee Club (though Tracy would also help out with the Glee Club's events) and Tracy had her evening classes in rosemaling. The couple was also engaged in the planning of the Scandinavian Summer Fest and was enthusiastic members of Kontakt. Notwithstanding this, I would run into all of these informants at unrelated Norwegian events in the Twin Cities, including Tuesday Open House at Mindekirken. While I am not claiming that these recurring characters are representative for the entire Norwegian American community in Minneapolis, I daresay it shows how vibrant and alive the Norwegian American community still is after all these years. Additionally, it is worth pointing out that I did meet a myriad of Norwegian Americans who were equally as active as the aforementioned informants.

## **Maintaining a Norwegian community in America**

I would argue that in order for my informants to stay connected with the Norwegian American community one had to be a member of certain social clubs or at least show up for events occasionally. As I discussed in the previous chapter, when Norwegians first arrived in Minneapolis they tended to settle in the same areas of the city. Unfortunately, the result of social mobility was a scattering of the Norwegian American community among the different suburbs of the city. No longer surrounded by other Norwegians they have to, in order to keep in touch with the Norwegian community at large, create spaces where they could continue to practice a Norwegian identity. So to stay active in the Norwegian community, and express your Norwegian American identity one had to get involved in these Norwegian social clubs or churches. As mentioned previously, they formed organizations in fear of being Americanized. Still today, after having been fully Americanized, this is how the community is conserved.

There was talk amongst my informants about whether or not these organizations would dissolve in the near or absent future when the current members were no longer there. The younger generations, at the moment, did not appear too eager to continue the tradition. As mentioned in Chapter one, this might be explained by how younger generations do not tend to engage themselves in civic organizations as often as middle-aged people do (Putnam, 2000: 18). Though as they get older and have more spare time on their hands they will most likely seek to find themselves in different social clubs depending on their interests, such as the current members have. As we saw from Margaret's story, she rediscovered her heritage triggered by nostalgia only when she was older and her relatives had passed. Though according to Putnam there are other reasons for the waning participation among Americans. The general reasons for the decline in civic participation are multiple, but a generational change, work, electronic entertainment such as TV and commuting from suburbs seem to be the major culprits in this instance (Putnam, 2000: 283-284).

## **Norway House: The New Generation**

Across the parking lot from Mindekirken, was Norway House. The building, which had been acquired not too long ago, had been painted bright blue in order to catch the eye of the passers by together with its distinct, white logo facing the busy road. During my time as a volunteer receptionist at the gallery of Norway House, a few visitors had stopped by purely

due having noticed the building as they had driven by. Some were actually of Norwegian heritage, so they had stopped to see what Norway House exactly was. The blue color had not purely been chosen for aesthetic purposes.

As mentioned previously, I was present during its official grand opening to the public in May of 2015. Before the opening, I had a talk with the President of Norway House, Jon, again who presented his grand vision for the institution. Norway House was not only to function as a bridge between Norwegian America to contemporary Norway, as mentioned previously. Norway House also wanted to provide venues for Norwegian events, as well as seek partnership with other Norwegian American organizations and collaborate on educational opportunities to promote Norwegian culture (Norway House, 2016). Jon declared Norway House as the cultural institution the Norwegian community needed, and which they previously had sorely lacked, not only in Minnesota, but in the country at large. When I asked about the existing institutions, he humorously dismissed them, “Sons of Norway are busy selling insurances”, as he so eloquently put it. This particular, established organization was no longer exclusively preoccupied with maintaining a Norwegian heritage or keeping in touch with contemporary Norway, Jon argued. They were more concerned with making mone, a trend Jon hoped to turn. Since Norway House was a nonprofit organization, they would focus more on the cultural preservation of the Norwegian heritage. He and his colleagues had big ambitions on behalf of Norway House. During my time in Minneapolis, they were collecting donations from members in order to buy other buildings on the block, something they will most likely continue to do for many years to come. They envisioned that the entire block be dedicated to Norwegian heritage, and together with Mindekirken, become the cultural center of Norwegian America. For this space, Norway House had made plans to build a larger venue to fit an auditorium in addition to other rooms so that more events could be held there. Still, they had a few years to go before that dream could be realized.

It is too early to say for certain what impact Norway House will have on the Norwegian community, although I doubt it will be anything but great. From the few events I was able to attend, they set out to fulfill their mission with, as far as I know, great success. With its current gallery, café and shop they made Norway House a physical destination for Norwegian Americans to visit any time, which was something the Norwegians needed, as opposed to other Scandinavians who already had the American Swedish Institute, which also functioned as a museum, and the Danish American Center. Norway House was especially successful at

engaging younger members holding their Norway House Young Professionals get-togethers, which was organized and run by young Norwegian-American professionals, as well as throwing a summer party featuring concerts and Norwegian inspired liquor tasting<sup>19</sup>. Though these were exciting times for the Norwegian community, many Mindekirken members were concerned that Norway House would overtake Mindekirken as the cultural center for Norwegian heritage. Especially Kari and Margaret expressed concerns regarding this. They both agreed that this would no doubt benefit the Norwegian community, but they were afraid that this would draw cultural affiliates away from Mindekirken, so they remained ambivalent regarding Norway House. Especially Margaret was skeptical whenever Norway House arranged events, as she did not like their modern take on Norwegian heritage, nor did she want to support Norway House if they would have a negative effect on Mindekirken in the long run. The younger Norwegian Americans, the millennials, who might have other opinion and views than the older generations, might be more drawn towards Norway House. Norway House was modern and secular as opposed to Mindekirken, that in comparison could be considered conventional, and of course religious.

### **Mindekirken - Jesus Christ and Ola Nordmann**

It was not the kind of church that attracted busloads of tourists for its ornate, decorative architecture. Compared to the Catholic basilica located only a few blocks away, which was flaunting excessive, decorative carvings and was an architectural wonder in white stone, Mindekirken had a cleaner look. However, it was not without its charm. It was made from grey-beige, finely polished bricks. The green church spire and doors stood in sharp contrast to the otherwise featureless walls. Above the large set of doors was an equally large and colorful mosaic of a window. Next to the front doors there was an inscription revealing that church had been built in 1929 AD. There was a second inscription above the two, large, tunnel-shaped doors that said “*Den Norske Lutherske Mindekirke*” Norwegian Lutheran Memorial Church. The gate to the church, as well as the two large front doors, was normally

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<sup>19</sup> There was a plethora of distilleries (as well as breweries) in Minnesota drawing inspiration from Norway and Scandinavia when flavoring and marketing their brands. Needless to say, a majority of them made aquavit. One distillery that is worth mentioning was called Får North. They were located close to the Canadian border, so geographically they were far north, however, replacing the a with å slightly altered the meaning of the word. I asked their representative present at the party if he was aware that får, translated from Norwegian, meant sheep. The representative looked somewhat embarrassed, replying that he had received several remarks on the fact, but his boss had wanted the brand to appear more Scandinavian so they had settled on får despite of the actual meaning of the word in Norwegian.

securely locked. There was a different door that served its purpose. During my time in the city the front doors were only open once, on May 17<sup>th</sup>, Norway's Constitution Day. Whether this was a testimony to how important the Norwegian heritage was for the church, or whether this was solely for convenience, seeing as the church was much more crowded on May 17<sup>th</sup>, is uncertain.

Next to the church itself was an annex that held a couple of offices as well as a lunchroom with a small kitchen. The room one first walked into through the front door functioned as a hallway and waiting area. One wall featured a corkboard that was entirely covered by different leaflets and posters. The leaflets and posters advertised cultural events or clubs at the church, though they also promoted other Norwegian organizations. The church was well connected with the Norwegian-American community at large, as Margaret and Kari established, it seemed to be somewhat of a flagship where Norwegian events in Minneapolis were concerned. To get to the sanctuary one had to walk up a short flight of stairs and down a hallway. The walls of the hallway were decorated by an assortment of paintings and pictures. These paintings were mainly non-religious, I recognized a couple of pictures as the younger versions of the present and past Norwegian king and queen, while other paintings were impressive works of Norwegian nature. Demonstrating to the congregation that the church truly was dedicated to its king and country. The king and queen as well as the crown prince, had themselves visited Mindekirken, as pictures in the basement would confirm. What this entailed was that not only was the Norwegian heritage important for the church, the church was also important for the Norwegian heritage. It was significant enough to receive audience from the Norwegian royalty. In addition to the pictures there were other small artifacts, such as a tiny flag and stave church exhibited in a display case outside of the Fellowship Hall in the basement. No member of the congregation went to this church just because it was their local church. They went because it was a Norwegian church, a church that allowed them to express and preserve their Norwegian identity.

Looking into the sanctuary my eyes were drawn straight to the wooden altar. The most eye-catching piece on the altar was a huge painting of an angel looking into Jesus' empty cave. On the left side of the altar the pulpit was looking out through a large tunnel-shaped hole in the wall. The ceiling was high and painted white, it was supported by big, wooden logs, though the logs looked to be there for decoration more than actual support. The wooden pews were equipped with small shelves where Norwegian and English hymnals stood side by side.

On both sides of the altar there were flags placed in the corner, the Norwegian on one side and the American on the other. Flags, both the Norwegian and American, were present at almost every event or organization I participated in, they figured as important symbols of their dual identity. Yet, Americans do tend to exhibit flags more often than people of other countries (Billig, 1995: 39). Except for May 17<sup>th</sup>, the flags were never actually waved. The unwavering flags "...do not demand immediate, obedient attention." (Billig, 1995: 40). They are "banal reminders of nationhood", although they are not noticed consciously, they are subtle reminders of nationality as one goes about engaging oneself in other business (Billig, 1995: 41). The same can be said of Mindekirken's flags, the congregation probably did not notice them or were reminded of their patriotism every Sunday at service, but they were there as a banal reminder of where the church comes from. However, I do not think it was a coincidence that the two flags had earned a front row seat next to Jesus, placing them there was a conscious act. Sidelineing the flags next to Jesus once again confirmed the church's dependence and importance of their heritage. Drawing on George's observation from Chapter one, where he noticed that the blue color in the Norwegian flag was the wrong shade of blue, might signify that the Norwegian flag was less banal to the Norwegian Americans. Americans were used to seeing the unwavering, American flag each day, but they only saw the Norwegian one every once in a while when joining Norwegian events.

### **The Service**

I attended Sunday service, and the following church coffee almost every Sunday for five months. Thus, I was able to get a fairly decent overview of the composition of the congregation. The members were all of Norwegian heritage or married to someone who was, the plurality of these were interested in expressing and promoting their identity outside of the church as well. The majority of the congregation was seniors or mature adults, while the younger attendees only amounted to around 1/5 of the congregation, with only a handful of children. This age demographic was not exclusive to the church, as it repeated itself at other events as well. The ratio between women and men seemed to be close to equal, in all age groups. The first time I attended the service I counted approximately 50-60 people, a number that was pretty stable during my months at the church. However, the weather was apparently a decisive factor in regards to this. When it was incredibly bad, which it was fairly often during the winter, so was the turnout. The minister was Norwegian, as it was customary for the church to have a Norwegian minister who stayed for a few years before being replaced by a new one. The current minister, however, had stayed longer than most. She had lived in the



US before she was appointed to the church and as far as I know, had no desire of moving back home. The service was mostly held in Norwegian with the exception of a few welcoming sentences, in addition to the announcements made by the church president who did not speak Norwegian. The congregation was handed a program upon entering the sanctuary, which had translations of the entire service as well as some key segments written in Norwegian that everyone was expected to read out loud, such as the creed and the Lord's Prayer. During the service a few members of the congregation would sit with their noses in the program, trying to translate the minister's words, while others sat peacefully and listened to the minister. At certain points in the service a reader would get up in front of the congregation and read an evangelical passage in Norwegian. Some of these readers were Norwegian, while others had learned Norwegian as a second language. The service ended with a Norwegian table prayer, which everyone in the congregation knew the words to. This same table prayer would be sung at almost every Norwegian event, regardless of whether the meeting was of a religious character or not. As the crowd started singing, the atmosphere in the sanctuary changed from a respectful silence to a cheerful attentiveness, it was time for church coffee.

### **Church Coffee**

Though the service in itself did not allow for much mingling, it was what came after which opened the most doors for my research. Church coffee was just as important as the actual service. Dregni refers to Norwegians as "Coffee drunkards" and that "the idea of not taking time for a coffee break is obscene." (2011: 244). Exemplified at the very beginning of this thesis, one simply had to have coffee, and it should be strong. Døving refers to church coffee as the place where the congregation forms a community (2003: 17). Coffee is the glue of the Norwegian-American community. Church coffee was where the congregation had the opportunity to mingle and catch up with each other, it was the social aspect of going to church.

Church Coffee was located in the Fellowship Hall in the basement of Mindekirken. The name of the room was printed on a sign that hang above the two baby blue doors decorated with a painted rosemaling pattern. The room was large, filled with several round tables and adjoining chairs. In the opposite end of the room was a window in the wall through to the kitchen where lunch was prepared. At Tuesday Open House one would collect lunch plates from the open window, but this was never or rarely used for church coffee. At church coffee

the food was placed on a long table in the middle of the room and one would serve oneself as one pleased. The lunch usually consisted of open-faced sandwiches, which were also sometimes referred to as Norwegian sandwiches by my informants. In addition to the sandwiches there were served cookies of varying sorts and of course coffee. For the lunch one was expected to donate a small sum of money, the suggested amount was three dollars, though I saw people donating more than this, wanting to contribute more to the church.

The members altered between the tables and their tablemates, and people also walked between the tables catching up with other members. After a while the church president would get up to a podium in one end of the room and update the congregation on different church matters that were relevant each week. She would also ask the congregation whether there were any new people present at the church that day. From time to time there would be visitors to the church who more or less involuntarily had to talk about themselves in front of the congregation. If anyone had a birthday that week one would sing the Norwegian birthday song in honor of that person. The song's lyrics were printed on a sheet of paper and placed on all the tables so that people could keep up with the words. The important and meaningful aspect of church coffee was the mingling, this is where friendships were formed and where the congregation would discuss all things Norwegian, as that was their common denominator.

Although religious matters were the church's primary function, keeping up with the Scandinavian culture had developed into a crucial role as well. As Eric Dregni puts it, "Churches are the saviors of Scandinavian culture in the Midwest..." (2011: 221). Not only were churches an important gathering place for Scandinavian Americans, it was also key in helping the Scandinavians' maintain their heritage, such as arranging a cultural seminar as Tuesday Open House. Not to mention how the Lutheran ideals, as we saw from last chapter, also has influenced the Norwegian-American conduct as well. Today, Mindekirken is important as a cultural institution, as it not only serves as a place where Norwegian Americans can get together and worship God, but also educates them on Norwegian matters. According to Dregni, "Many ministers lament that their Lutheran congregations are more interested in lutefisk than liturgy." (2011: 207). Taking into account how many people showed up for Mindekirken's Tuesday Open House compared to the Sunday Service, one can

only assume these ministers were correct, although most of the Tuesday Open House congregation did belong to churches elsewhere in the Twin Cities.<sup>20</sup>

### **Tuesday Open House**

Tuesday Open House was the church's cultural day, and as the title says open to everyone. It was a lunch seminar where they served food that included a savory and sweet dish as well as coffee and cookies. Norwegian waffles were always present, to much joy for the attendees, though this was the only Norwegian food they served. For the cultural part of the program, there was a new speaker or musical performer every time who would hold a presentation dedicated to or somehow linked to Norway. This varied from a film screening of the documentary of the Norwegian American battalion in World War II<sup>21</sup> to a Grieg recital on piano and to a presentation by the son of the former Norwegian-American ambassador to Iran during the hostage crisis. Tuesday Open House was an arena for Norwegian Americans to get together as well as learn more about Norway or Norwegian-American heritage.

The Tuesday crowd was generally larger and more varied in its attendees than the congregation I met every Sunday. Betty remarked on how when she made new Norwegian American acquaintances at other events around the cities she would tell them that her church was Mindekirken, whereupon they would exclaim "oh, Mindekirken is my church as well, I go there all the time for Tuesday Open House!". Betty was slightly annoyed by how they referred to Mindekirken as their church, despite that they never went to services or attended other events that the church arranged. Despite this, the Mindekirken congregation did agree that Tuesday Open House was beneficial for the church as it drew such a large crowd. It improved the reputation of the church and at the same time it was important for bringing in money for the church, as there was an entry fee of \$7 to the lunch.

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<sup>20</sup> At a Mindekirken's members meeting I attended, the members responsible for Tuesday Open House presented results from a poll taken at a Tuesday Open House seminar. They had asked what religious denomination the crowd belonged to. The majority had answered Lutheran, but there were multiple denominations mentioned, what surprised them the most was that they had visitors who belonged to an Orthodox denomination.

<sup>21</sup> The 99<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion was largely made up of Norwegians and Norwegian Americans, therefore dubbed the Viking battalion. They were especially trained for the Norwegian winter conditions, but never made it to Norway before the war had ended. Additionally, the only military unit in any war in U.S. history that was officially allowed to use a foreign language, was the Fifteenth Wisconsin Infantry during the civil war. The infantry called themselves the Norway Bear Hunters.

## **Examples of Norwegian Americans' religiosity**

In addition to Mindekirken, there were a plethora of churches in the Twin Cities that were considered Norwegian or Scandinavian, though none of them had services in Norwegian. They were either founded by Scandinavian immigrants or had a large Scandinavian congregation. I never got to attend service at any of these, but Mark and Kate told me their church was considered Norwegian and how the members often made lefse for church coffee, in addition to holding lefse baking classes. During my time among Norwegian Americans I did not meet anyone who called themselves atheist, some told me they did not go to church on a regular basis, but no one said they were non-religious. Even my younger informants, although they were a minority, were adamant churchgoers, so it did not seem to be a generational issue either.

Nevertheless, this was not necessarily the case for the entire Norwegian-American community. Marshall, whom I had gotten to know through volunteering at Mindekirken, introduced me to Gary, explaining that I had to meet him as he had been to Norway. Gary told me of his trip to Oslo where he had walked past a beautiful church on a Sunday morning and spontaneously went inside to check out the service. The pews were close to empty despite it being midday on a Sunday. The people who were there seemed to consist of a large group of foreign tourists who seemed to be on the same mission as himself. The rest of the congregation was a couple of elderly people he told me. He was amazed at how few people were present in the church on a Sunday, but he later learned that going to church was not a commonplace activity for most Norwegians anymore. Upon hearing this, Marshall shook his head "It's so sad that Norwegians don't go to church anymore". Apparently this was not the first time he had heard stories concerning this issue. Gary nodded "The same thing is happening here though. My church used to be three different churches, but because no one came to service, they were merged together to one. But still there are only 50 or so people who go to church each Sunday." Gary said disappointedly.

Nevertheless, the religiosity of Norwegian-Americans was still strong on some aspects. Despite that some Norwegian events were not connected to religion, the table prayer or hymns were often sung. I attended a Norwegians Worldwide meeting in Minneapolis, which was not supposed to be connected to religion in any way. The president was about to invite the attendees to help themselves to food at the buffet style tables, but was quickly interrupted

by one of the members saying that they had forgotten to sing the table prayer. The president hesitated a little before giving in, despite the fact that she was a regular churchgoer, she was neither the most eager Christian nor not the most conservative. Not singing the table prayer was not something she had forgotten as it was not meant to be a religious event and though I doubt it did, I am sure she did not want to exclude or offend anyone by this. So even at non-religious events, religion was incorporated. Although, the Norwegians' fondness for the song might be explained by how this was the only song everyone seemed to know all the words to, thus strengthening their ties to the Norwegian-American community as well as to their Norwegian heritage.

### **Religious Participation**

When it comes to participation in churches and other religious arenas this is also an area where Americans are highly dedicated. Churches and other religious institutions are the organizations which Americans contribute the most time and money to (Bellah et al. 1985: 219). Compared to other countries, Americans are significantly more dedicated to religion. "America is one of the most religiously observant countries in the contemporary world... Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America" (Putnam, 2000: 65-66).

Churches are severely important as a place for Norwegian Americans to maintain a sense of community. In addition to providing the community with actual Norwegian events such as lutefisk and rømmegrøt luncheons held a couple of times a year, as well as specific Norwegian events, the churches gave the community a feeling of fellowship. Actual participation in the church though, as we can tell from Gary's personal experience in the empirical example, has dropped (Putnam, 2000: 79). Putnam affirms that Americans personal beliefs have not changed much, the majority of all Americans are still religious (2000: 69). Bellah et al. suggests that religion has become more individual and does not necessarily involve the public realm as much as it used to (1985: 248). However, for those who still go to church, Putnam argues that the members pick up on several civic skills as well as tie stronger bonds with members of other communities:

In part for these reasons, churchgoers are substantially more likely to be involved in secular organizations, to vote and participate politically in other ways, and to have

deeper informal social connections. Regular worshipers and people who say that religion is very important to them are much more likely than other people to visit friends, to entertain at home, to attend club meetings, and belong to.... nationality groups; and other miscellaneous groups (Putnam, 2000: 66-67).

This might clarify why all of my informants mentioned in this thesis, with no exceptions, were unfaltering church members in addition to being members of other Norwegian groups and organizations. People who went to church on a regular basis, proved to be more socially active in other organizations as well. Comparing this to civic participation, as we can tell from Putnam, being active in church is also a very American trend (2000). By continuing the Norwegian traditions through their forefathers' religion and joining Norwegian events and social organizations with the intention of keeping with the Norwegian traditions, the Norwegian Americans also enhance their identity as Americans. To put it simply, once again, by aspiring to be more Norwegian, the Norwegian Americans make themselves more American.

In *Better Together*, though only written three years later than *Bowling Alone*, Putnam and Feldstein had not yet seen a reversal of this general trend, participation in civic and religious life was still decreasing (2003: 4). However, they open up for the possibility that a general decline does not mean a decline in all areas (*ibid.*). Putnam and Feldstein explores in their book ways which new social capital is formed (2003: 5). In other words, even though church and civic participation in the Norwegian-American community might decrease, this does not mean that they will not find other ways of exploring their heritage, as in for example the emergence of new institutions such as Norway House.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter we have considered the ways in which Norwegian Americans participate in social and public settings. From the example at the Scandinavian Summer Fest, the issue of identity pollution reemerged. In order to keep their Norwegian culture clean and pure, they have to shun the Swedish traditions. The unease caused by the uncertainty of the Norwegian-American future further enhances the impression of an endangered Norwegian heritage. No one can tell for sure whether the younger generations will live out the Norwegian-American legacy. What is certain is that Americans are known for being active participants in both

religious and civic life, even though this trend is waning, it is as of yet, not dying. Mindekirken is still a highly important religious, as well as, cultural institution in Minneapolis. Although with Norway House, and its more secular ways of celebrating Norwegian heritage, we might be standing on the threshold of what is to become the new Norwegian America. Maybe with Norway House's help, the Norwegian Americans would discover the peculiar, contemporary Norwegian culture.





## Chapter 5 - Looking Ahead While Looking

### Back

During my last month in the US I went on a road trip around the Midwest. We<sup>22</sup> spent a day in Decorah, Iowa, a town known for its Norwegian heritage. Vesterheim was the country's largest museum dedicated to the Norwegian-American heritage, as well as one of the most comprehensive museums dedicated to a single immigrant group in the US (Vesterheim, 2016). The museum generally featured exhibitions of the lives of the first Norwegian immigrants, showing how life was like back in Norway compared with the settler life in the New World. The museum was for the most part quiet, with only a handful of visitors. Consequently, when we ran into other groups in the different exhibition rooms it was almost expected of us to exchange a few words. One group in particular probably noticed our very stereotypical Nordic looks with our blonde hair and blue eyes and asked us if we were Norwegian, clearly meaning Norwegian American as it took some time before they understood that we were actually Norwegian. This sparked their interest and they proceeded to ask us questions. When talking to this group we were standing in an exhibition area that featured a selection of carved wooden decorations and utility objects decorated with the rosemaling pattern. One person in the group gestured towards some wooden bowls with rosemaling and asked us if this was the kind of decorations we had in our homes back in Norway. I replied that this type of style was probably not common in Norwegian homes anymore, and certainly not among our generation. This reply resulted in a different person confirming my statement a little hesitantly, "Yeah, isn't Norway quite modern now?".

I was not asked these types of questions often, though this situation represented to me how little significance the contemporary played a part in their Norwegian identity as well as how little some Norwegian Americans actually knew about contemporary Norway. Although, it has to be said that the person in question was clearly not a devoted Norwegian American, the group was just passing by Decorah when they happened to spot the museum and as two of them had Norwegian heritage, they decided to stop by. My Minnesotan informants would

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<sup>22</sup> My boyfriend was visiting from Norway at the time

probably blame their lack of knowledge upon them being from Iowa<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, this signifies how Norwegian Americans have a tendency to purposely forget and leave out aspects of Norway and Norwegian culture, which they do not want to identify with. For some, Norway will never be modern, at least not in their memories.

## **Summing up**

Throughout this thesis I have primarily been preoccupied with showing how Norwegian Americans live out and express their Norwegian identity and heritage in America today. I have primarily concentrated on the American identity and how the Norwegian hyphenation compliments this identity. Many factors have to be considered when establishing a Norwegian-American identity. Class, kinship and knowledge about one's ancestry are especially relevant for the people who choose to explore their Norwegian heritage. Food and clothes are important identity markers of Norwegian-American identity. Especially lutefisk, lefse and bunad were popular symbols on Norwegian culture by my informants. Seeing as lutefisk in particular has become a symbol of all things Norwegian, eating lutefisk has become significant for a Norwegian-American identity.

Furthermore, how Norwegian Americans distance themselves from other hyphenated Americans has been relevant for how they manage to maintain their Norwegian activities. In the example with the Swedes whose traditions were seen as a threat to their Norwegian traditions, it was important to keep away from the Swedes and their traditions in order to keep their identity clean. Moreover, civic and religious participation are important to maintain a Norwegian-American identity. Organizations and churches are crucial in providing Norwegian Americans with a venue where they can get together to celebrate their heritage, in addition to creating a social network for the community. All of my informants were members of a congregation, something which Putnam has discovered often leads to participation in other organizations as well (2000).

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<sup>23</sup> Minnesotans and Iowans have a friendly rivaling relationship, sharing many similarities with the joking relationship between Norwegians and Swedes.

## Findings

Although, discovering that Norwegian Americans have a particular fondness for so-called ‘old, traditional’ culture is no revolutionary discovery as is already established by several authors (see Lovoll, 1998; Dregni, 2011; Gjerde & Qualey; 2003). Furthermore, most of my discoveries confirmed what is the general consensus on what a hyphenated identity entails today, although I do believe these texts somewhat undermine the importance the Norwegian-American identity was for some of my informants. Even though Gans claims that what he dubbed ‘symbolic ethnicity’ has to entail more value than purely symbolic (1979). For a handful of my informants at least, it was arguably of much greater value and significance to them on a personal level, rather than just being something one put on for special occasions. Although, for some it was something they put on as some donned a Norwegian soccer jersey for May 17<sup>th</sup>. But for my key informants whom I have mentioned in this thesis, I believe this was not the case. Especially for the ones who were second or third generation, they were in general the ones who were the most invested in their heritage and had personal memories of the Norwegian immigrants. So whether this is a pattern that will fade away as the Norwegian ancestors become farther away on the genealogical line is plausible. However, many of my informants were several generations removed and still very passionate about their heritage. But as the exodus stopped a while ago, the Norwegian identity will as time passes by, get thinner and thinner in general. This question I believe is something worth exploring further in the future.

Despite how the identity was immensely meaningful and valuable to my informants, it was still voluntary. “It is, however, for Americans of European extraction a matter of voluntarism. The decision to be ethnic or not is consequently an individual choice, as is the particular ethnicity.” (Lovoll, 1998: 215). My findings in Norwegian America can only lead me to conclude in a similar manner as Lovoll’s study did. If my informants had no desire to keep up with their Norwegian traditions or had they not been conscious of their heritage in any way they did not have to attend events, it was voluntarily. Drawing on Gans’ discussion on how their ethnicity did not limit or inhibit their social life in any way in the American society, the ethnicity was in his words considered a “leisure time activity” (1979).

## **American at heart**

Despite how they lived out their Norwegian heritage several times a week did not mean that they wanted to live in Norway. No one except one or two of the Norwegian Americans I talked to expressed a wish to live there themselves. Margaret toyed with the idea of moving to Norway, she did love to spend time with her cousins and had a great relationship with her late husband's family in Norway, but when it came down to it, it was not a serious suggestion. Norwegian Americans loved to celebrate Norway and its culture in America or on occasional trips to the old country, but they did not wish to become actual Norwegians. Marshall once asked me during a conversation on Norway if I would rather live in Norway or America. I did not hesitate for long before answering Norway. Marshall looked a little surprised before asking "Don't we at least have nicer buildings here?" Gary, seated at the same table chipped in, "No wonder she wants to live in Norway with all those benefits." Whereupon Marshall replied, "Well they sure pay for it as well!", Marshall shook his head, he had not anticipated my answer to be what it was. He could certainly not imagine himself living in Norway, despite being a proud Norwegian American.

One of my main focal points throughout this dissertation have been to show how the Americans, by living out and exploring their Norwegian identity, have in turn made reinforced their identity as Americans. I will sum up these experiences here. Firstly, solely by being 'ethnic' Americans, as we saw from my interview with the Norwegian professor, was a way for Americans to fit in with the modern, multicultural society that the US is. Furthermore, the way they have created hybrid food and clothing is a process where making the Norwegian traditions fit the American better, as we saw from Lisa and mine's visit to the Scandinavian deli. Not to mention the way they dressed for May 17<sup>th</sup> in t-shirts explicitly telling on-lookers how Norwegian they were, showed that they first and foremost identified themselves as American. Not only because it was the type of clothes Americans are often seen wearing<sup>24</sup>, but also because Norwegians would have no need for declaring their 'Norwegianness' in such a way. The Norwegian identity was, for some, something they donned that particular day. Lastly, the ways in which they participated both religiously as well as in civic organizations is inherently an American cultural trait. Despite the decrease in social participation, Americans join clubs for whatever interests they have, more so, than

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<sup>24</sup> Although not mentioned in this thesis, Americans do have an avid fondness for college sweaters declaring which state you are from or other places one may have visited.

other countries (Bellah et al., 1986; Putnam, 2000). So by celebrating their Norwegian heritage through clothes, food and social clubs, the methods they use in this process are exceedingly American. This aspect of my study has been my humble contribution to the study of Norwegian-American identity in particular and American identities in general.

### **Looking ahead**

As written earlier, many of my informants expressed worry about what might happen to the Norwegian-American community in the future. It is hard to say, though Gans does believe the search for ethnicity will at one point cease for older immigrant groups, such as the Norwegian one (1979), nevertheless I do not believe this will happen in the imminent future and not in our lifetime. At this moment in time, “being ethnic” is still a significant part of the American identity construction. There was also such a vast variety of clubs and events that I do not see these withering as easily. The fact that we served 600 people lutefisk one day in March is quite telling of how popular this is, and this was only one of many Norwegian luncheons. Maybe we will have a change of scenery in the Norwegian-American community. Perhaps the future generations will stray further from Mindekirken and the religious ways and embrace Norway House’s modern approach. The only thing I can say for certain is that real Norwegian Americans love lutefisk.



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