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Reviews

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Reviews

Odd S. Lovoll. *Norwegians on the Prairie: Ethnicity and the Development of a Country Town*. Published in cooperation with the Norwegian-American Historical Association. Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006. Pp. xviii, 324. \$32.95 hardbound.

In the days of "horse culture," farmers needed to have a market town every six to twelve miles in order to get there and back in one day. Towns sprang up like mushrooms as agricultural settlement sped across the Middle West in the half-century 1830-80. Some became county seats, and one of these was Benson, Minnesota.

Ole Corneliusen, a twenty-four-year-old native of Norway, walked to the site in 1866 across boundless prairies and stayed to file a claim. Lars Christensen (Kjørnes) and family arrived the same year in a covered wagon hitched to a yoke of oxen (he later became renowned for his woodcarving in Vesterheim Museum). Four years later, a railroad surveyor laid out a town plan. The Lathrop brothers put up a sod hut for a mercantile store and Thomas Knudsen started a similar saloon, while Theodore Hansen hauled in lumber to build his general store. The railroad arrived that same year of 1870, Swift County was organized, and presto!—Benson was launched. By 1875, the village and surrounding township had 688 inhabitants, including 424 Norwegian immigrants and their children, sixty-two Swedes, fifty-seven "Yankees" (Anglo-Americans), forty-eight French Canadians, six Swiss, five Irish, three English, three Scots. Oh yes, and one Dane.

Lovoll's aim is to follow the history of Norwegians and their neighbors in three country towns in western Minnesota: Benson in Swift County, Starbuck in Pope County, and Madison in Lac qui Parle County. He wants to show how Scandinavian immigrants interacted with others to shape a local community. He picked these prairie towns in order to document changing patterns of community and ethnic identity in an environment where cultural pluralism has been the norm from the ground up.

All three communities were surrounded by extensive Norwegian farming settlements, generally dominated by people from a specific region in the old country: Valdres and Sognefjord around Benson, Gudbrandsdal and Trøndelag around Starbuck, Rogaland and Hordaland around Madison. The farmers continued to speak their regional dialects into the third generation.

Norwegian men in town were mainly blue-collar laborers, carpenters, mechanics, and retail clerks, while the women worked as waitresses and domestics. Religious life tended towards Sabbatarianism, temperance, and pietistic sexual morality, which must have been quite a shift in values for many rough Norwegian immigrants. Although social distinctions were not sharp and there was no working-class mentality, towns like Benson were dominated by a Yankee elite of merchants, bankers, and professionals. All three towns had some Norwegian merchants and pharmacists. Madison also had Norwegian physicians, midwives, lawyers, and Lutheran Normal School teachers, while in Starbuck, the local physician, Carl Rasmus Christenson, was a Dane who built the first hospital in all of western Minnesota. Each small town, Lovoll notes, had its own unique ethnic and social identity.

Norwegian immigrants brought political experience and a strong drive for self-government as a legacy from the old world, and they were very quick to enter American politics. By the 1870's, they were deep into township and county government. By the 1880's, they were a force in Minnesota state politics, and from around 1900, they were virtually dominant. Their political orientation varied. Mainly Republican at first, they leaned towards Populism in the 1890's, then veered to Bull Moose progressivism in 1912. During the 1920's, small towns reverted to the GOP while hard-pressed farmers went with the Farmer-Labor Party, which merged with the Democratic Party in the 1940's.

Norwegian immigrants were quick to become American citizens while also maintaining their native language and culture. They saw U.S. citizenship and ethnic adherence as "mutually supportive" and maintained "strong ethnic loyalties and a coextensive loyalty to American citizenship" (270) throughout the whole period from original settlement until the present.

Ethnicity was constantly redefined. The first shift in self-definition came when immigrants stepped off the ship into a multicultural society. The process continued as immigrants and their children joined other ethnic groups to establish prairie communities and develop a "shared identity based on landscape and place" (124), spiced by ethnic cultural activities like ski-jumping, celebrations of the Seventeenth of May, and the culinary markers featured at church suppers. Norwegian American ethnicity was reinterpreted wholesale by the immensely successful Norse-American Centennial of 1925 at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds, emphasizing "a wholesome rural and religious heritage relating to pioneer days, brave and patriotic American citizenship, and ancient Viking roots" (231). Eventually, Norwegian ethnicity declined to a silly "Chamber of Commerce" stage in the 1980's, when Madison erected a huge codfish monument and claimed to be the "Lutefisk Capital" of America while Starbuck made the world's largest *lefse* (Norwegian unleavened bread) as part of local marketing strategies.

Few have dealt with the role of ethnicity in a multicultural society with more subtlety and insight than Odd Sverre Lovoll. This book is selling like hotcakes. Snap it up while you can.

J. R. Christianson

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Danish American Heritage Society
c/o Grand View College
Third Floor West Old Main
1200 Grandview Avenue
Des Moines, IA 50319-1549