



Sons of Norway Information Banks

# #224: NORWEGIANS AND NORWEGIAN- AMERICANS OF IMPORTANCE

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## FAMOUS NORWEGIANS AND NORWEGIAN-AMERICANS

The great Norwegian migration to America lasted from the early 1800's and subsided nearly a century later. Approximately 800,000 Norwegians immigrated to the US during those years and today there are nearly 5 million Americans who claim Norwegian descent in the US and about half of them live in the Midwest. To give you some perspective, there are 5 million inhabitants living in Norway today. Over 100 years ago Norwegians began escaping economic hardships and arriving in America meant the start of their new lives. Since then Norway has attained great success in the oil industry and today they are one of the richest countries in the world.

Norwegians populated America and brought with them their authentic cultural skills, clothing, language and traditions. Those cultural characteristics have defined the Norwegian-American society in the recognizable symbols of traditional rosmaling, Norwegian flags, bunads and lutefisk and lefse. The people who claim Norwegian heritage are proud and passionate. Below are some of the famous Norwegians and Norwegian-Americans who have thrived in arts, politics, sports, exploration and beyond. These well-known descendants are proud to call themselves Norwegians and we recognize them for their achievements.



### Roald Amundsen (1872-1928)

Amundsen was born in Borge, Norway, known today as Fredrikstad. He is famous for his polar explorations, most notably for navigating Canada's Northwest Passage in 1903, discovering the South Pole in 1911, and leading the first expedition to the North Pole in 1926.

**John Anderson (1836-1910)** Anderson was born in Voss, Norway and immigrated to Chicago in 1845. He left his job at the *Chicago Tribune* in 1866 in order to start the Norwegian language newspaper, *Skandinaven* where he was publisher and co-founder. *Skandinaven* was one of the most influential and successful newspapers in the Scandinavian immigrant community from 1866 to 1941.

**Bernt Balchen (1899-1973)** Balchen was born in Tveit near Kristiansand, Norway and later became a US citizen. Balchen was a polar aviator, navigator, U.S. Air Force Military leader and chief pilot of the first flight over the South Pole in 1929.

**Dr. Theodore Blegen (1891-1969)** Blegen was a leading authority on Norwegian immigration and the first editor of the Norwegian-American Historical Association. He was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota to Norwegian immigrant parents and his father, John H. Blegen (1851-1928) was a professor at Augsburg College in Minneapolis and played an important role in the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America.



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**Dr. Norman E. Borlaug (1914-2009)** The “father of the green revolution”, Borlaug was the great-grandchild of Norwegian immigrants and was born and raised in Cresco, Iowa. He was an American agronomist, humanitarian and one of six people to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Presidential Medal of Freedom, and the Congressional Gold Medal.



**Ole Bull (1810-1880)** Bull was born in Bergen, Norway and is most widely recognized as a violinist, composer and colony leader in Pennsylvania. Bull was influenced by Norwegian romantic nationalism in the mid 1800's and co-founded Det Norske Theater in Bergen, known today as Den Nationale Scene. Bull

crossed paths with a young Edvard Grieg and persuaded him to attend the Leipzig Conservatory for music in Germany.

**Peter T. Buschmann** He was a Norwegian pioneer in the late 1890's and his family's homestead grew into what we know today as Petersburg, Alaska. Buschmann and his sons started Ice Straight Packing Company, a salmon cannery in Alaska. Petersburg, Alaska's sister city is Hammerfest, Norway.

**F. Melius Christiansen (1871-1955)** Born in Eidsvold, Norway and emigrated to the US at age 17. He founded the St. Olaf choir at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN and in 1913 he took the choir on a tour to his home country of Norway. After tours of the Midwest and East Coast, the choir's fame began to spread. Christiansen pioneered the introduction of “a cappella” singing in the US.

**C. L. Clausen (1820-1892)** Clausen was one of the founding pastors of the Norwegian Synod when it was organized in 1853. He was a Norwegian Synod chaplain in the Civil War and went into active duty with his regiment in Madison, WI in 1862.

**Roald Dahl (1916-1990)** Born in Wales to Norwegian parents, Dahl was a famous children's author, novelist, poet, fighter pilot and screenwriter. His popular works include *James and the Giant Peach*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Witches*, and *Matilda* among many others.

**Sverre Dahm** Chief engineer with the construction projects of the New York subway system in 1921.

**Dr. Conrad Elvehjem (1901-1962)** Son of Norwegian immigrants and born in Wisconsin, Elvehjem was a biochemist in nutrition. He discovered the molecule niacin which led to the cure of human pellagra. He later became the 13th president of the University of Wisconsin in 1958.

**Leif Erikson (c.970-c.1020)** Erikson was a Norse explorer born to father Erik the Red, famous for founding the first colonies in Greenland. Erikson explored to the west and is regarded as the first European to discover America after he settled on Vinland, which is on the tip of modern day Canada. Leif Erikson Day is celebrated in the US on October 9. That date recognizes the first immigrant ship that sailed from Norway to the US in 1825 called *Restaurationen*.

**Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)** Grieg is remembered as Norway's greatest composer, particularly for his compositions that accompany Henrik Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt*. Born and raised in Bergen, Norway, Grieg's music will forever be characterized as Norway's music. Famous pieces include *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, *Peer Gynt Suite*, *Wedding Day at Trollhaugen* and more.

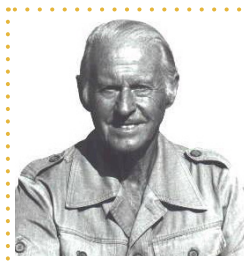
**Dr. Adolph Gundersen (1865-1938)** Gundersen was born in Åsnes, Norway and graduated from the Royal University of Oslo in 1890. He joined a medical practice in La Crosse, WI and started a clinic with his four sons in 1930. In 1944 the Gundersen Medical Foundation, today known as Gundersen Lutheran Medical Foundation is one of the nation's largest multi-specialty group medical practices.

**J. C. M. Hanson (1864-1943)** Hanson was born in Valdres, Norway, and came to the US at age nine to attend a preparatory school at Luther College. He began his library work in Chicago, continued at the University of Wisconsin and later founded the Library of Congress cataloging system.

**Einar Haugen (1906-1994)** Haugen pioneered sociolinguistics and became a leader in the field of Norwegian-American studies. Born in Sioux City, IA to Norwegian immigrant parents, Haugen became a professor at the University of Wisconsin and later at Harvard University where he taught Scandinavian and Linguistics.

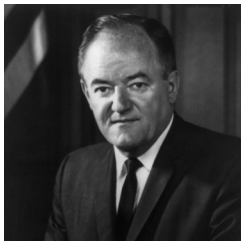
**Col. Hans Christian Heg (1829-1863)** Heg was born in Lier, Buskerud, Norway and became a Norwegian-American politician and soldier in Wisconsin. During the Civil War Heg was appointed Colonel of the 15th Regiment, called the Scandinavian Regiment made up of primarily Norwegian immigrants. Heg's statue stands in front of the Wisconsin State Capitol Building in Madison, Wisconsin.

**Sonja Henie (1912-1969)** Born and raised in Oslo, Norway Henie was born to a wealthy family. Henie was a world famous Norwegian ice skater, three time Olympic champion, and a Hollywood star.



**Thor Heyerdahl (1914-2002)** Remembered mainly for his Kon-Tiki expedition from South America to Polynesia, Heyerdahl was a distinguished Norwegian ethnographer and adventurer. He was born and raised in Larvik, Norway and was passionate about zoology and geography.

**Conrad Hilton (1887-1979)** Born to a Norwegian immigrant father, Hilton was an entrepreneur and the founder of the Hilton Hotels chain.



**Hubert H. Humphrey (1911-1978)** Humphrey was born in Wallace, SD to a Norwegian immigrant mother and later became the 38th Vice President of the United States under President Lyndon B. Johnson. He served as mayor of Minneapolis, MN from 1945-1948 and was the Democratic nominee for president

in the 1968 election.

**Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906)** Ibsen, a famous 19th century Norwegian playwright is referred to around the world as “the father of realism.” Ibsen has been regarded as the most important playwright since Shakespeare and his work introduced modernism to the theater.

**Theodor Kittleson (1857-1914)** Kittleson was born in Kragerø, Norway in Telemark County. He is well known for his nature paintings and for his illustrations of fairy tales, legends and trolls. He is one of the most popular artists in Norway and his most famous painting is *Soria Moria from Norske Folkeeventyr*.

**Walter Mondale (1928)** Born in Minnesota, Mondale served as a State Senator and later became the 42nd Vice President of the United States in 1977 under President Jimmy Carter. Mondale lost the race for president in the 1980 election against Ronald Reagan. He was Honorary Consul-General for Norway in Minnesota from 2008-2010.

**Edvard Munch (1863-1944)** Munch was a Norwegian born painter and graphic artist most well-known for his painting *The Scream*. He greatly influenced German Expressionism in the early 20th century and is remembered for intense, psychologically-themed works of art. The Munch Museum is located in Oslo, Norway.

**Gerhard Naeseth (1913-1994)** Naeseth was an American librarian and genealogist who specialized in Norwegian-American immigration. Naeseth founded the Vesterheim Genealogical Center in 1974 which eventually turned into the Norwegian-American Genealogical Center & Naeseth Library in Madison, WI.



**Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930)** Nansen was a world famous Norwegian explorer, scientist and diplomat born in Christiania, Norway which is now Oslo. He made the first crossing of the Greenland interior in 1888, reached a record distance to the North Pole five years later and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922 for

his work with displaced victims of World War I.

**Knute Nelson (1842-1923)** Nelson was born in Voss, Norway and immigrated to the US in 1849. He served in the Civil War, then studied and practiced law in Madison, Wisconsin. He moved west and served as the 12th governor of Minnesota. He was the first Norwegian to serve in the US Senate from 1895 until his death in 1923.

**Karl Ouren (1882-1943)** Ouren was born in Halden, Norway and studied in Trondheim. He immigrated to Chicago in 1902 and became a US citizen in 1927. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and is remembered for his painting, *Leif Erikson Discovers America* among many others.

**Clell Peerson (1783-1865)** Born in Tysvær, Norway, Peerson led the first Norwegian emigrants west to America on the Norwegian sloop, *Restorationen* in 1825. Peerson moved further west to Iowa and eventually settled in Texas where he remained until his death in 1865. King Olav V of Norway visited his burial place in Norse, Texas in 1982 to celebrate the 200th anniversary of his birth.



**Knute Rockne (1888-1931)** Rockne was born Knut Larsen Rokne in Voss, Norway and immigrated to Chicago, Illinois in 1893. He attended school at Notre Dame and led the Fighting Irish as a football end popularizing the forward pass. Rockne went on to coach the Notre Dame Football team from 1918-1930 and led the team to a 105-12 record. He is considered one of the greatest football coaches of all time.

**O. E. Rølvaag (1876-1931)** Ole Edvart Rølvaag was born in Rølvåg, Norway in Nordland County into a small fishing village. He immigrated to South Dakota in 1896 and became well-known as a Norwegian-American professor and novelist. His award-winning epic *Giants in the Earth* captures the Norwegian immigrant experiences while homesteading the Dakotas.

**Major General Leif J. Sverdrup (1898-1976)** Leif Johan Sverdrup was born into a distinguished family on the southwest coast of Norway and moved to Minnesota to study at the University as a civil engineer. Sverdrup became a distinguished Chief Engineer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and served under General MacArthur.

**Andrew Volstead (1860-1947)** Also known as the Father of Prohibition, Volstead was born in Kenyon, Minnesota to Norwegian immigrant parents. He was a member of the House of Representatives for ten terms and later introduced the Prohibition act of 1919 also called the Volstead Act that banned “the manufacture, sale, or distribution of intoxicating liquors” until the repeal of prohibition in 1933.