



Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS



IdeaBank#19

**"AMERICA FEVER" (AN AUDIENCE
PARTICIPATION PLAY)**

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Amerika Feber

The following production notes and stage directions will facilitate preparation and presentation of this original 45-minute audience participation activity expressly created for member lodges of Sons of Norway.

Included in this packet are.

A master SCRIPT.

A master QUESTIONNAIRE FORM to be duplicated by lodges.

Additional PRODUCTION NOTES and resources.

Set

A NEWS CAST AREA is set up in front of the AUDIENCE SEATS. It may consist of a podium or a desk, on which is a sign reading: WSON-TV (or KSON-TV in the eastern states).

The stage area may also include: A back-drop consisting of a MAP of Norway, a world globe or map, or some simple display of immigration photos, etc. The FLAGS of the U.S.A. and of Norway (as well as Canada, if appropriate) flank the set.

Hidden from audience view at the podium, a VIKING HELMET and a WIDE-BRIMMED LADY'S HAT.

Cast

HENRIK IBSEN, a be-spectacled gentleman wearing some form of historical vest and suit jacket, or a *bunad*, is the news anchor man for WSON-TV.

NORA HELMER, wearing a period-style suit or dress, or a *bunad*, is his sometimes-flighty co-anchor.

Audience

Chairs are set up audience-fashion, facing the set to represent OLD NORWAY. (If a dinner is served, audience members may remain at tables throughout, rising in place when called.)

Across from this audience area wait the STATE TABLES of the New World, to which audience members will cross when their ancestor's name is called, taking a seat at the state of destination, as indicated by STATE FLAG MINIATURE and STATE NAME SIGN. (See questionnaire for states.)

Questionnaire

Before the performance, members of the audience have filled out their immigration QUESTIONNAIRE, giving information as designated about their one selected Norwegian-born ancestor or, if themselves Norwegian born, about their own history. A non-Norwegian can “borrow” a Norwegian’s ancestor.

These forms are collected, either in advance of the show or the night of the performance, by a program director or member of the cast. The years and state destinations are indicated on a graph BEFORE THE PERFORMANCE. This is very important, as it allows for adjustments to be made in the reading of the script (some decades may be omitted, etc.) and in the designation of the state tables.

The resultant graph and the collection of QUESTIONNAIRES make a valuable record of immigration patterns in any lodge. Additional forms may be filled out after the production so that all sides of a member’s family are included in the record.

In many lodges, the “homework” of filling out a QUESTIONNAIRE has led to family discoveries, and becomes a source of interest and a jumping-off point for further research.

Musical Accompaniment

A live musician (Hardanger fiddler) or recorded Norwegian folk music may be used to accompany the crossing of audience participants, particularly if there are a large number of them, or if they must cross a large area to get from the audience seats to the states tables.

Adaptability

“Amerika Feber” can be adapted to varying requirements of space, set-up, audience size, etc.

Due to the spontaneous nature of the “newscast” format, the two newscasters may interject necessary directions or comments as they see fit. In fact, such ad-libbing adds to the tone.

With a well thought-out set-up and some read-through rehearsing on the part of the newscasters, this production can be presented as an entertaining, informative theater piece.

But it is basically an activity designed to maximize the participation of an audience which is honoring and learning about its immigrant parents and grandparents.

America Fever

Ibsen: Good evening. My name is Henrik Ibsen, and this is my co-anchor, Nora Helmer.

Helmer: Good evening.

Ibsen: Tonight, Station WSON-TV brings you live coverage of one of the greatest migrations in the history of the world—that of the Norwegians, who are crossing the Atlantic Ocean in record numbers to make a new home in America.

Helmer: It's been almost 1,000 years since Norseman Leif Erikson made his historic discovery of the North American continent, and it's been centuries since the Norwegian people gathered into groups to sail toward the west.

Ibsen: America is southwest of Norway. To reach it, the Norwegians have to sail across 4,000 miles of ocean. With good winds and a good ship, we've heard they can make it in as little as five weeks, but there are reports indicating the wind often blows straight across the ships, making the journey last as long as eight or nine weeks— even three months.

Helmer: The current cost of fare is only about 12 dollars, but eyewitnesses say the trip is no pleasure cruise, with many accounts of starvation, sickness, and unbearable conditions aboard ship. Many have reportedly died during passage.

Ibsen: Norwegians are calling the emigrants daredevils and fools. But the emigrants are writing letters home, full of glowing reports of life in the New World. We suspect, however, that many of these letters contain embellishment and downright exaggeration. But you can't blame them—they're not about to be called fools.

Helmer: Reports from the Norwegian provinces indicate "Amerika Feber" is sweeping the country like a disease. How did it all begin?

Ibsen: Let's go back now to the year 1821, when Cleng Peerson left his home in Stavanger to check out emigration possibilities on behalf of a group of Norwegian Quakers.

Helmer: Rumor has it the group wasn't at all pleased with certain religious restrictions at the time.

Ibsen: As I myself have implied many times, much as I love my country—the Norwegians have too much spirit and enterprise to thrive in a strait-laced society. There was a good deal of social and political discontent in the land. And as for myself, personally, I too ...

Helmer: Let's stay objective, shall we, Mr. Ibsen?

Ibsen: Ya, Ya! Well, now, Cleng found some land in New York, and in 1825, a sloop called "The Restauration" carried the first group of Norwegian immigrants into New York harbor. The captain was immediately fined for squeezing so many passengers aboard in such a small ship. I think there were 51 or 52 of them.

Helmer: During those early years of 1820 to 1830, the crossing was also made by

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Audience members cross to state tables as Hardanger Music accompanies. If no participants during this early decade, omit this speech.

Ibsen: Conditions in the new settlement were far from perfect. It wasn't long before Cleng Peerson set out on foot in search of better land. He walked across four states before he found what he was looking for.

Helmer: And he found it just southwest of Chicago, and there, Fox River became the first permanent Norwegian settlement in America.

Ibsen: Thousands more would follow, this time lured by the news that the rich Illinois valleys and river bottoms were being sold for only \$1.25 an acre.

Helmer: Our first eyewitness coverage of the new land came in the year 1835, when one of the Fox River settlers returned to Norway carrying letters from the new Americans. It was his personal testimony, plus the publishing of many of these letters, which really fanned the flames of the fever. Listen now to one of those letters.

Ibsen: "I am letting you know that I have arrived, happy and well, in America. I am already building a house, 12 by 10 ells. I have bought a stove for \$15 fully equipped with pots and pans, a baking oven, and other things. I have five acres of land ready for planting in the spring. I have a cow which cost me ten bucks...and I also have a few sheep."

Helmer: We have some live coverage now of the Norwegians leaving their homeland in the years from 1830 to 1840.

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Hardanger music accompanies

Ibsen: All these raving reviews on the easy life in America. Someone must have quite an imagination. Sounds like propaganda to me!

Helmer: Some of it sounds pretty nice to me, Mr. Ibsen. Did you know that in America, it's the men who wait on the women. And any woman can wear a hat there, whether she's peasant or noble.

Ibsen: Oh, is that what you call equality?

Helmer: And there are absolutely no unfaithful, untruthful, or deceitful men in America, because they've all been hanged—allegedly.

Ibsen: Uff-da! And the people are falling for such fabrications?

Helmer: Why else are so many Norwegians going to America?

Ibsen: Well, the experts claim it's an economic problem. The old barter system gave way and the peasants got loaded down with mortgages and the like. But even worse was the fact that the country simply was over-populated. During the 1800s, the population grew from 883,000 to 2,240,000, and there was little industry to take up the slack. So what do we have? Acres and acres of land without tillers in America, and in Norway, thousands and thousands of tillers without land. That's what the economists would say.

Helmer: And you... what do you say?

Ibsen: Well, that's part of the answer. But if you ask me, I say it's the search for independence that's behind it all. Anyone who understands the Nordic spirit can understand that!

Helmer: Oh, you must mean good old Viking wanderlust!

Ibsen: I mean good old Norsk stubbornness!

Helmer: Whatever their reasons for going, then, we've got another shipload sailing west between 1840 and 1850.

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Hardanger music accompanies

Ibsen: I hope they've all read the latest traveler's book—there's a good one called "A Pathfinder of Norwegian Emigrants to the United North American States." On the Ibsen Scale of one to 10, I'd give it a seven.

Helmer: Let's check back in the Fox River settlement. In 1850, we see more than 220 families living there, with a steady stream of settlers moving out into the surrounding territories, spreading into Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and the Dakotas.

Ibsen: We'll switch now to more live coverage. We have got camera two on those who cross between 1850 and 1860.

Helmer: *Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival*

Hardanger music accompanies

Helmer: Spring, of course, is the best time to make the journey. The winter storms are over, and it's less cold at sea.

Ibsen: Plus, it's important for the newcomers to arrive early enough to till and sow some crops to meet the needs of their first winter.

Helmer: Those first winters seem to be the hardest. Conditions are often primitive and desperate. Some of the settlers are disillusioned..over at Ole Bull's spread in Pennsylvania, the place they call "Oleanna", some of the settlers are quitting, things are that bad. Poor Ole Bull—he's playing his violin at concerts to raise money for his people, but his dream can't last much longer. And a lot of our womenfolk are finding out it's just not true—hard as the men have to work, only two of them have been seen actually waiting on the women.

Ibsen: Our man on the prairie says the soil they use to build their homes is too hard; it breaks the ploughs. But it's not breaking the people. They call them the sod-busters.

Helmer: Their weather reports sounds grim—gale velocity winds and blizzards that last for days. I bet they can hardly wait for summer.

Ibsen: Sure. Then they'll only have to worry about dust storms or locust invasions.

Helmer: From the prairies, we see many Norwegians going ever farther west, the victims, perhaps, of another kind of fever—the Gold Rush of 1849, which draws many Norsemen to California.

Ibsen: Including the man who will bring America its first pair of skis, Snowshoe Thompson, they call him. He starts carrying the mail from California over the High Sierras in 1856, wearing a pair of homemade skis.

Helmer: Those Telemark boys always were good on the slopes.

Ibsen: Let's stay objective now, Miss Helmer.

Helmer: The objective is to get to America. See? They've taken their old clothes chest out of the attic and scrubbed it up for the journey. Can you imagine, having to decide on which things to bring along, and which you'd have to leave behind? All those heirlooms.

Ibsen: Poof! They need tools and provisions. Necessary things.

Helmer: Heirlooms are necessary, Mr. Ibsen.

Ibsen: By now, the emigrants knew how cold it was in Minnesota and the Dakotas, where most of the newcomers settled during the 1860s. There were 10,000 Norwegians in Illinois by now, and the smart ones packed warm clothes. Heirlooms indeed.

Helmer: Well, heirlooms or not, during the 1860s we see 98,000 Norwegian clothes chests being shipped to America . . . think of all the people they had to leave behind!

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Hardanger music accompanies

Ibsen: Excuse me—we're getting a live feed from the States. Yes, it's a visiting Norwegian pastor—he says something about madness—yes, these are his very words:

As if to tap earplug

"It is madness that so many emigrate. Thorn and thistle grow as abundantly here as in Norway." Nice turn of phrase there. Thorn and thistle.

Helmer: I knew it! The men don't wait on the women in America.

Ibsen: What makes you say that, Mrs. Helmer?

Helmer: Well, they must be finding out it's not all paradise. There's a decline in the number of emigrants here in the 1870s. But there go

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Hardanger music accompanies

Ibsen: But it's going to be picking up again now that all the railroad agents are in Norway, offering jobs in the Midwest.

Helmer: In 1882 and 1883 alone, there's a total of 186,000 going over. That includes

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Hardanger music accompanies

Ibsen: And they're not all working on the railroad—or tilling the soil. Many Norwegians are settling in the cities, shopkeepers, professionals, tradesmen. The urban communities are becoming centers for news, education, and the preservation of Norwegian culture.

Helmer: Do you think the new dramatic societies in America are translating your plays into English?

Ibsen: It's not an easy language, Mrs. Helmer, but they're all quite busily learning it. They're in America, now, what do you think?

Helmer: They won't forget Norwegian, will they?

Ibsen: Of course not! How else will they gossip?

Helmer: There aren't as many going over during the 1890s. Those who do include

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Hardanger music accompanies

Ibsen: Let's take a look at what's going on now in America. The country is in the depths of a financial crisis. Unemployment is widespread. The newcomers feel the pinch the sharpest.

Helmer: But are the women still wearing hats?

Ibsen: That's inconsequential, Mrs. Helmer. Well, in January of 1895, 18 young Norwegians met in Minneapolis to form Sons of Norway. Their main goal was to provide mutual economic assistance to fellow immigrants.

Helmer: So, the true picture of life in paradise emerges. We see loneliness and isolation, homesickness and insecurity. The Norwegians were still strangers in a strange land. How would they ever see Norway again?

Ibsen: That's the other side of Amerika Feber—the darker side. No one would write about the culture shock, the failures, the trials of assimilation, and minority status. That's why the Sons of Norway had another major goal—to give guidance to the newcomers, and to keep up their cultural heritage.

Helmer: Are they keeping up on your latest ideas, Mr. Ibsen?

Ibsen: I suspect *lutefisk* dinners are just as important a part of the Norwegian cultural heritage as is Hedda Gabler, Peer Gynt, and you, Mrs. Helmer.

Helmer: Let's not forget Knute Nelson...the first Norwegian to be elected governor of Minnesota.

Ibsen: That's no surprise. In 1893, there were more than 110,000 Norwegians in the state to vote for him.

Helmer: Speaking of impressive numbers—in the next 10 years, from 1900 to 1910, more than 190,000 Norwegians came to America.

Hardanger music accompanies

Ibsen: There are big changes going on in Norway during this decade. The monarchy is reinstated in 1905—after a lapse of 600 years.

Ibsen: The emigration seems to be cooling down a bit during the years 1910 to 1920. Oh, a few Norwegian seamen jumping ship in New York, all those ship brokers setting up a strict quota system, and from that year until 1965, Norway will never once fill its annual quota.

Helmer: The quotas are partially filled by those who came from 1930 to 1940.

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Hardanger music accompanies

Ibsen: After World War II, only 2,000 emigrate each year.

Helmer: Those who came during the 40s include

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Hardanger music accompanies

Helmer: And those who came during the 1950s...the 1960s

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Hardanger music accompanies

Ibsen: By the 1970s, less than 400 Norwegians arrive each year.

Helmer: They include

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Hardanger music accompanies

Helmer: And here we are in the 1980s, and all the great-great-grandchildren of the first emigrants are coming down with Norske Feber.

Ibsen: You mean they're all going back to Norway?

Helmer: Uff-da! I mean they're re-discovering their roots, learning the Norwegian language again, making *lefse*...Norske Feber.

Ibsen: So Sons of Norway really started something!

Helmer: And the Norwegians are still coming to America! So far, in the 1980s, the crossing has been made by

Calls out: Name, Departure, Year, Arrival

Hardanger music accompanies

Ibsen: I presume they're not coming over in a crowded sloop these days! Not since the son of a Norwegian immigrant became the first man to fly alone across the Atlantic in an airplane. Charles August Lindbergh. Son of the Vikings!

Helmer: Did you know that the Viking women were considered very independent?

Ibsen: I'm sure of that, Mrs. Helmer. It's the old Nordic spirit. Even the men have it! That's what brought more than 855,000 Norwegians to America in just 100 years—855,000! That's as many people as lived in the whole of Norway in the year 1820 back when America Fever started.

Helmer: And today, more than three million Americans claim at least partial Norwegian ancestry.

Ibsen: Including Conrad Hilton, Andrew Furuseth, Hubert Humphrey, Earl Warren, Eric Sevareid, Ole Rolvaag, Jimmy Cagney, Knute Rockne, James Arness, Robert Mitchum, Peter Graves, Armand Hammer, Fernando Lamas...

Helmer: Don't forget Kirsten Flagstad, Celeste Holm, Judith Blegen, Linda Evans, Arlene Dahl, Sally Struthers, Sonia Henie, and many others. Do any of them wear hats?

Ibsen: Well, I think that about wraps up our news for tonight. Stay tuned for...

Helmer: Just one thing, Mr. Ibsen. I get confused. Is it "feed a fever and starve a cold", or "feed a cold and starve a fever?"

Ibsen: You coming down with something?

Helmer: No, I was just wondering...if there hadn't been some cure for Amerika Feber.

Ibsen: You know what I think? It wasn't a fever at all. It was just a matter of...destiny.

Helmer: And that's the way it is.

Ibsen: Women always want the last word.

Helmer: *Putting on hat*— Goodnight, Henrik Ibsen.

Ibsen: *Putting on a Viking helmet*— Goodnight, Nora Helmer.

Hardange music up and out

The End

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PRODUCTION GUIDELINES

Before the Show:

Duplicate questionnaire forms and distribute to membership. Some lodges hand them out a meeting in advance and collect them before event. Others have questionnaires available at night of event. Some have had their program director get as many as possible filled out in advance, and also circulated them at night of event. ALWAYS HAVE QUESTIONNAIRES ON HAND NIGHT OF EVENT for guests, those who have not filled out before, etc.

Night of Show Before Members Arrive:

1. Set “stage” area: a podium or “news” desk or some form of stand with microphone if possible. Flanked by American and Norwegian flag (and Canadian if appropriate.) A world map, map of Norway, or display of photos of immigration, etc. in front.

2. Set up “states” area: if business meeting takes place in large hall, set up chairs for audience: then set up tables for social gathering. Using miniature stage flags and cards with names of states (see chart) mark off tables. The marking of states by table can be adjusted after chart is counted.

As Members Arrive:

3. Count chart. As each questionnaire comes in to program director, it is marked according to decade and state on chart. That way, it can readily be determined if more seats are needed at the Minnesota table, for instance; or if none are needed for “other states” designation; or if “overflow” space is needed (because of too many South Dakotas, e.g.)

Many ways to produce the show:

4. Members start out gathered in audience fashion. They will end up at state tables. It is not recommended that refreshments be served until the production is completed, although some may like to have at least coffee on table in thermos pourers. However, this can be distracting. Some have put the play on after a luncheon, and then served dessert at the “states” tables. Some do it as the featured program for a sit-down dinner, in which case members stand when called...and do not actually make the “crossing”. Music can be added, as well as slides, etc. Be creative...and don’t be afraid to discontinue an idea if you see it isn’t working out.

ADAPT “AMERIKA FEBER” TO YOUR MEETING/SPACE NEEDS

Sit-down Dinner or Luncheon in Same Room:

Use state flags as decoration on tables. Set up “set” (podium, flags, displays, etc.) in front area. After dinner, “Amerika Feber” takes place as part of featured program of entertainment.

Or Business Meeting with No Room for State Tables:

When names called out, member stands in place, then resumes seat. NO CROSSING:

Business Meeting Followed by Coffee/Social in Same Room, Separate Section Set Up for State Tables:

Set up “set” (podium, flags, displays, etc.) in front. Chairs set up for regular business meeting or audience gathering.

In another part of the hall are set up tables for coffee/social. State flags and state name cards are set up on tables. For instance, on one table (at least)

Event takes place at conclusion of business meeting (often shortened for the occasion) and members make the “crossing” by walking, when announced, to the appropriate state table that represents the state-destination of their given ancestor. A live fiddler or Norwegian folk music via tape recorder can be played softly during this crossing segment. Refreshments when all have crossed.

Dinner or Luncheon with Presentation in Adjoining Rooms where Members Start Out as Audience and Have Separate Section Set Up for State Tables:

Have luncheon in dining room. Adjourn members to meeting room, where chairs are set up meeting style (or audience style.) Have tables with states’ designations around the periphery of hall. Ibsen and Helmer’s podium at front of meeting area. Members cross from meeting area to tables when called. Dessert may be served when all have been seated at states’ tables.

Additional Logistics on Audience Questionnaires

1. Give your membership advance notice, if possible, so that they can do the research required to fill out the Questionnaire. In itself, this becomes an interesting project.

2. It works best if the questionnaires used in the presentation represent people actually present that night: hence, the advance filling-out of these questionnaires produces the problem of having names called out with no-one there. This is okay if you read out the member's name anyway, but we found the following method worked quite well:

- a. Hand questionnaires to all early arrivals, place questionnaires on all seats.
- b. Have facilitator take a few moments during meeting to make sure everyone has filled out a form and to answer any questions.
- c. Officers can fill their questionnaires out at a board meeting to make sure everyone has filled out a form and to answer any questions.
- d. Members of the refreshment committee should be contacted before the meeting during preparations to make sure they fill out their questionnaires.
- e. Absent members may still have their questionnaire sent in to serve as an assigned ancestor for those members who do not have their own Norwegian ancestor.
- f. Collect all questionnaires as ready and immediately check off year and state on graph, indicating with a check mark on the questionnaire that it has been thus accounted for. Then, sort the questionnaires according to decade, and attach each decade together, in chronological order, with clip.
- g. Immediately before presentation begins, inquire if there are any who have not filled out questionnaire.

3. The questionnaires, then, are ready to be read off during the presentation at the appropriate decade point. We used a Hardangerfele player, which was very effective, who played from the moment we called the name, etc., until they had reached the table. Another way to do this is having a roving microphone, call the name, go to the person, have THEM say the Norwegian origin, date, etc.

4. Altogether, our presentation lasted 45 minutes, and we had a total of 40+ participants.

5. Following the presentation, the questionnaires and chart make a permanent heritage record for your lodge. This can be augmented with all member ancestors.

"Amerika Feber"

Please fill out the following information:

Choose any one of your own Norwegian-born ancestors. If you yourself were born in Norway, use your own.

Name of Emigrant: _____
(please print)

Norwegian Home: _____

Year of Emigration: _____
(approximate, or use decade)

American Home: _____
(City, town or county) (State)

Their Ages (optional): _____
(at the time)

No. of Children who emigrated with them: _____

Your name: _____

Relation to Above: _____

Additional comments or information about your ancestor:
