



Sons of Norway Information Banks

## #25: A BRIEF HISTORY OF SONS OF NORWAY

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### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SONS OF NORWAY

The formation of the Sons of Norway as a fraternal benefits society came as the result of several historic events in 19th century America—an intense period of Norwegian emigration to the Upper Midwest in the 1870s and 1880s, the rise of fraternal organizations to address the economic needs of members, and the onset of the economic depression of 1893.

The Norwegian immigrant men responsible for founding the organization lived in the Norwegian colony that had formed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the 1870s. What they created was a merger of a love for their homeland, a fierce loyalty to their new country, and the desire for a degree of financial security for themselves and fellow Norwegian-Americans.

The economic consequences of the 1893 depression were dire for Norwegians. Most were farmers who depended on optimum conditions of health, crop production, and market prices to provide a decent quality of life for their families. Smaller numbers of Norwegian tradesman and craftsmen depended on the financial successes of others in their communities for a livable wage. When local, regional and national economies spiraled downward, all were affected negatively.

Some of the founders might have first met at the home of Ingeborg Levorsdotter Langeberg, an immigrant who had come to the area in the 1840s and married a wealthy Minnesota farmer. After she was widowed, Langeberg's home in north Minneapolis became a welcome center for Norwegian newcomers. One of those new arrivals was Ole Draxten, the first Norwegian immigrant to build a house in the area and the father of Bersvend Draxten, who would become the first Supreme President of Sons of Norway.

Practical, cautious, and driven to find solutions to the financial problems many Norwegian-American families faced, the founders looked to their homeland for answers. Several of them had lived in Trondheim, where for a small weekly fee, members and their families acquired free medical care. Borrowing from that plan, the men designed a mutual assistance organization to provide members with security against financial crisis, a forum to celebrate Norwegian-American nationalism, and a means to preserve the treasured literature, music, art, foods and customs of Norway.



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The founders considered naming their fledgling mutual assistance society Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson after the famous Norwegian nationalist writer, but realizing that the words would be difficult for non-Norwegians to pronounce, they settled on “Sons of Norway” – or “Sønner af Norge” in the Norwegian of the time. Articles of incorporation were drafted and on January 16, 1895 the Sons of Norway organization moved from concept to reality. Membership was limited to men from 20 to 50 years old who were in good health, capable of supporting a family, morally upright, and Norwegian or of Norwegian decent. All requirements but the last were typical of fraternal insurance organizations of the time.

The founding charter describes the foundation of Sons of Norway and also provides a glimpse of what Norwegian newcomers strove for in America at the turn of the 20th century.

*This corporation is organized upon fraternal principles, for the purpose of creating and preserving interest in the Norwegian language by its members insofar as compatible with the loyalty they owe the United States of America, to labor for the development, enlightenment and progress that conduce to honest citizenship, in order that the Norwegian people in their country may be properly recognized and respected; to aid its members and their families in case of sickness and death, by according them financial assistance of such magnitude and upon such conditions, as may be determined by its bylaws.*

The organization began to grow rapidly and in June of 1898, Sons of Norway was officially incorporated. In 1897, a separate organization for women, the Daughters of Norway, was established. As membership expanded throughout the city, leaders began to wonder if they were on the cusp of a new fraternal movement that might expand beyond Minneapolis. And so along with incorporation, they established a framework in which subordinate lodges could be established. The first subordinate lodge, Nidaros #1, was organized on June 28, 1899, while Oslo lodge #2 was founded just a day later. In April, 1900, Dovre Lodge #3 was established. The first three lodges then met and elected executive officers who would oversee the growing organization; these executives were dubbed the Supreme Lodge.

By the end of 1900, 12 Minnesota lodges had been organized. The concept of Sons of Norway also traveled with Norwegian immigrants throughout the Upper Midwest (Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota) and as far as the West Coast. When requests to affiliate with the original organization came from two groups in the state of Washington in 1903, Sons of Norway in Minneapolis faced its first major organizational challenge.

Den Norske Forening in Everett, Washington, and Grand Lodge, Leif Erikson Lodge #1 in Seattle petitioned for affiliation with the Midwestern organization within months of each other. Both were rejected because they had chosen to exclude some of the conditions that the founding organization considered necessary for membership. In the case of the Seattle group, it was compulsory insurance. A compromise was finally reached in June 1909 at the Sons of Norway conven-

tion in Wisconsin and the two western groups were welcomed to the Midwestern organization.

Since that time, the number of lodges worldwide has grown to nearly 400 in three countries. Organizational changes have also taken place. In 1913, the first Canadian lodge was formed in Edmonton, Alberta. Later in the 19-teens, women were first allowed to join Sons of Norway lodges in places where no Daughters of Norway auxiliary was available. This was the beginning of a process through which the barriers between the Sons and Daughters organizations eventually dissolved, culminating in 1950 when most Daughters lodges were folded into Sons of Norway. The first lodge in Norway was founded in 1981.

Sons of Norway programs have also changed over time. Some were introduced and later discontinued, while others have remained active and have expanded. The Sons of Norway Foundation was established in 1966 “to preserve the best of the Norwegian heritage and culture for all people . . .” by promoting improved international relationships, providing people-to-people enrichment programs, promoting and implementing health sports and improved lifestyle concepts and supporting humanitarian causes. The Foundation established five scholarship funds: the King Olav V Norwegian-American Heritage Fund, the Astrid G. Cates / Myrtle Beinhauer Fund, the Nancy Lorraine Jensen Memorial Scholarship Fund, Scholarship to Oslo International Summer School, and the Helen Tronvold Norwegian Folk High School Scholarship. Additional grants are now available to assist youth, lodges and communities in showcasing Norwegian culture.

Sons of Norway’s essential purposes have remained the same throughout the years, while learning and social opportunities for members have grown. A variety of financial products and planning assistance is offered to members to provide them with economic security. In addition to the fellowship and traditional activities experienced at local lodges, members receive the monthly *Viking*, which covers Norwegian culture, history, travel, news, and personalities as well as information on Sons of Norway operations, programs, and activities. Materials in the lending library, Heritage and Cultural Skills publications, online language and reading comprehension lessons, the Norwegian Cultural Skills program, and language and heritage camps provide members with extensive opportunities to explore and celebrate Norwegian arts, literature, music, and crafts.

The organization’s current mission statement, reads somewhat differently than the one put forth by its founders, but it retains the intent and spirit of the original statement:

*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.*

Building on past traditions, Sons of Norway focuses on contemporary Norwegian and Norwegian-American lifestyles and interests. The introduction of Internet and digital technology enables it to reach people worldwide through its web site, [www.sonsofnorway.com](http://www.sonsofnorway.com).

## WHO WERE THE FOUNDERS?

When Sons of Norway was officially founded on January 16, 1895, 18 individuals signed the charter. Of these 18, 11 were elected to posts as officers. Soon after, many other people joined Sons of Norway and helped shape it in those early years. Therefore, exactly who gets called a “founder” can be a complex matter. Historically, Sons of Norway has considered these 18 men to be the founding fathers of the organization, but some charter members did not stay involved very long, while some non-charter members came to have great influence.

Here is some basic information about the 18 founders. For more information about the organization’s history, check out the books *An American Saga* by Sverre Norborg (Sons of Norway, Minneapolis, 1970) or the older *History of Sons of Norway* by Carl G.O. Hansen (Sons of Norway, Minneapolis, 1945).

### **Peter G. Balstad (1865-1939)**

Born on the Balstad farm in Selbu, he arrived in the US in 1886. A lifelong resident of the city of Minneapolis, he served as Sons of Norway’s first guard.

### **Einar Dramdahl**

A native of Oslo, Norway, he participated in Sons of Norway for a few years before moving permanently to the West Coast.

### **Bersvend O. Draxten (1866-1946)**

A major figure in the early days of the organization, Draxten’s parents brought him to the US at the age of only two from Selbu, Norway. Draxten was the first secretary of the organization at its founding, and was elected president the following year. He eventually became the first Supreme President when the position was created in 1900, serving until 1903. Draxten remained closely involved and became an icon of the organization’s early period.

### **Anton Johnson (1867-1922)**

Born in Trondheim, he came to the US in 1891. Residing in Minneapolis until his death, he remained a lifelong member of the organization. In the pioneer days of the organization, he served as a member of the “Sick Committee.”

### **Peter Johnson (1860-1923)**

The brother of Anton, he arrived in Minneapolis in 1887. He remained a member for his entire life.

### **John S. Johnson (1859-1937)**

The only man from Bergen among the founders, he arrived in Chicago in 1884. After a brief time among the Norwegian settlers in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, he settled in North Minneapolis, where he later became the owner of a well-known meat market. He served as one of the inaugural trustees.

### **Edvard Larsen**

Born in Trøndelag, he was one of the charter members and was another one of the three inaugural trustees, but returned to Norway after a brief residency in Minneapolis.

### **Peder Larsen (1866-1946)**

Born in Trondheim, he resided in Minneapolis when Sons of Norway was founded. In 1901, he moved to Mille Lacs, Minnesota to farm, but remained a member of Nidaros Lodge No. 1 until his death.

### **Ole Lodgaard (18??-1898)**

A Trønder and a charter member, he passed away on June 6, 1898.

### **Eskild Pedersen (1866-1944)**

Born in the city of Trondheim, he arrived in Minneapolis in 1887. Eskild is remembered for having sung “Sons of Norway” at the founding meeting on January 16, 1895. Serving as the first regent of the organization, he remained an active member until his death.

### **Ludvig Pedersen (1871-1948)**

Brother of Eskild, he arrived in Minneapolis in 1891. Like his brother, he was an active member for his entire life.

### **James Peterson (1850-1924)**

Born in Selbu, he came with his family to La Crosse, Wisconsin, in 1869. After years of active membership in a Norwegian society there, he moved to Minneapolis in 1887. The records show that his active participation in the preliminary discussions among the founders was of great importance in the organizing period of the Sons of Norway. He presented the laws of the La Crosse society to the North Minneapolis group, which used the La Crosse constitution as a guide for their own organization’s laws. He is also credited with the proposal of the name Sons of Norway. He was the first vice-president.

### **Knute Rasmussen (1856-????)**

Born in the city of Trondheim, he arrived in Minneapolis in 1880. He served as an inaugural trustee, and later became the financial secretary of Nidaros Lodge No. 1 until leaving Minneapolis for the West Coast.

### **Engebret O. Rognaa (1855-1934)**

Born in Valdres, Norway, he arrived as a lad of fourteen in Decorah, Iowa. Sometime around the year 1880, he moved north to Minneapolis, where he established the hardware store destined to become a gathering place for the men who would become the founders of Sons of Norway. He was a gentleman of considerable business ability and a wise counselor. These personal qualities led to his election as the first president of the organization. Like so many Norwegian-Americans, he felt and followed “the pull of the West.” Shortly after the turn of the century, he worked as a private contractor in Grand Forks, North Dakota, until moving on to the state of Washington. Many years later, in Oakland, California, members of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson Lodge No. 14 of that city mourned his death.

**Ole A. Russeth (1872-1942)**

In 1882 at the age of ten, Ole arrived with his widowed mother and brother Peter A. Russeth (1870-1936) at the Selbygg colony in Brooklyn Township. Four years later, the family moved to North Minneapolis. As young men they went into business partnership as owners of a grocery firm, Ruseth Brothers. Ole was Sons of Norway's first judge. Peter Russeth was also an enthusiastic and influential early member, but did not sign the charter.

**John O. Stokke (1860-1954)**

Born to a poor family in Selbu, John Stokke emigrated in 1881. After a year in Windom, Minnesota, he moved to Minneapolis. A charter member and inaugural member of the "Sick Committee" he remained an active member of Nidaros Lodge No. 1 until his death

**Lewis J Stokke (1857-1929)**

Another Selbu native, he settled in Windom, Minnesota in 1879, but moved in 1881 to Minneapolis where he lived the rest of his life. He served as the first treasurer of Sons of Norway.

**Edvard Vold**

A member of the original ritual committee, he served as a trustee on the first board. After moving to Appleton, Minnesota, he transferred his membership to Ivar Aasen lodge No. 56.