



Sons of Norway Information Banks

#232:

B.O. DRAXTEN- SONS OF NORWAY'S FIRST SUPREME PRESIDENT

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INTRODUCTION

Norway's wave of immigration to the United States boomed in the mid-19th century. It all started in 1825 when Norwegian pioneer Cleng Peerson led a group of Quakers to America on a ship called Restauration. They were pursuing religious freedom. Those who followed were seeking farmland and a better life. Among those who immigrated was a young Bersvend Ole Draxten (1866-1946), the first supreme president of Sons of Norway.

By the 1860's Norwegians were coming across the Atlantic in droves. Young Bersvend Ole (B.O.) Draxten and his parents, Karen and Ole, arrived to Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1867 after initially landing in Canada with many others from Selbu, Norway, a small town near Trondheim. Because of where they came from (Selbu) they were called *Selbyggen*. Among those immigrants who arrived in Minneapolis were those who would eventually start Sons of Norway.

OLE DRAGSTEN

Bersvend's father, Ole Dragsten (spelling changed to Draxten after immigration) was born on the Dragsten family farm near *Selbusjøen* (Selbu Lake) in 1843. His family had settled and lived on the land since the 14th century. They had survived the Black Death which wiped out nearly half of Norway's population.

By the 19th century Norway was in a rebuilding period following years of Danish rule. The dissolution of their union with Denmark and the writing of their constitution in 1814 sparked a newfound national identity. Although Norway was forced into a union with Sweden, the country was on the brink of independence. Thanks to a movement that supported the arts, called the Norwegian Romantic Nationalist Movement, Norwegians were finally proud of their country, their roots and their culture.

With confidence comes population growth and by the mid-19th century Norway's was growing quickly. Second, third and fourth born sons in Norwegian farm families who were not getting a share of the family land were finding it increasingly harder to make a living. (Ole was the third child of ten.) Fertile farmland was extremely hard to come by in Norway.

Immigration fever was spreading in the Selbu area with rumors about the possibilities of a better life "over there" in America. Norwegian immigration soared when the American Civil War came to an end in 1865 and Ole Dragsten was one such young Norwegian who was enticed to make the journey.

Before leaving for America alone, Dragsten married a local woman in 1866. Karen Olsdatter Renå was from Renå, a small town on the other side of *Selbusjøen* from where Ole grew up. The newly married couple quickly welcomed their first born son, Bersvend Ole into the world on October 26, 1866. After contemplating their future the couple agreed to leave for America the next summer. It was a risky voyage with such a young child but Ole knew the decision would be worthwhile. On Christmas Day Bersvend was baptized at the 800 year old family church, *Selbuskogen kirke* (Selbu forest church). Bersvend would never return to Norway.



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FROM NORWAY TO AMERICA



Ole and Karen Draxten and their son Bersvend shortly after arriving in America.

By the time spring arrived in 1867, the young family was ready to make their voyage. They packed what valuables and clothes they could carry and said their bittersweet goodbyes. Ole, Karen and Bersvend boarded the ship in Trondheim on May 2nd and headed for Quebec, Canada. The goal was to get to Atwater, Minnesota, just west of Minneapolis, to stay with a family friend who had immigrated a year earlier.

Their ship, the *Neptunus* was built in 1847 and belonged to Hans Hoven of Skien, Norway. She sailed Norwegian emigrants from the Trondheim region on several previous voyages, with Hermann Ludvigsen as her captain. For her voyage on May 2, 1867 she carried 347 passengers; 124 adult men, 111 adult women, 97 children between age 1-14 and 15 children under age 1 including young Bersvend. Most of these passengers were from Selbu and the neighboring towns around Trondheim.

The ship arrived in Quebec, Canada, on June 19th, a harbor city that flourished following the repeal of the British Navigational Laws in 1850. This repealed law allowed ships from all nations to move freely in and out of Canadian ports. Before then, immigrants from Norway were arriving in New York. Since most Norwegian immigrants settled in the Midwest region it became more convenient to bypass New York and come straight to Quebec where emigrants could make their way to Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois via the Great Lakes.

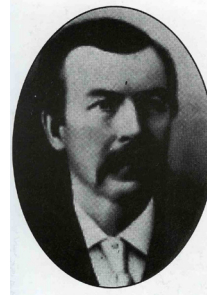
NEW HOME IN MINNEAPOLIS

Ole and his family arrived just outside of Minneapolis and settled down with other Selbyggen (Norwegians from Selbu). Ole had experience working with wood so he quickly found a job working in the timber industry as a logger on the Mississippi River. He was fortunate that he arrived in the Midwest when he did. The logging industry had depleted the timber supply on the east coast during the 17th and 18th centuries, so lumber companies started moving west to find more resources. By the 1830's the lumber industry reached the Upper Great Lakes region just as homesteaders began arriving in Minnesota. Because of the homesteaders and a steady influx of immigrants, the population in Minnesota grew from 172,000 in 1860 to 1.3 million in 1890.

Ole quickly realized that he wanted to live closer to town. Since he worked as a logger, he was able to get reasonably priced lumber to

build a house. By 1871, when Bersvend was 5 years old, the family moved into their new home in North Minneapolis. It was the first large home to be built in Minneapolis by a Selbyggen. Other Selbyggen eventually followed and North Minneapolis became rich with Norwegian pride and tradition.

BERSVEND O. DRAXTEN



Bersvend O. Draxten

The family settled down in their new home and Bersvend finally became a big brother to five siblings: Lina was born in 1875, Christian in 1879, Alfred in 1882, Minnie in 1885 and Oscar in 1889. Like his father, Bersvend was a woodworker, so he found a job working at a Minneapolis sawmill. He was a people person and spent much of his spare time hanging out with other Selbyggen and Trønder (people from the Trøndelag region) folk.

In his mid-twenties Bersvend enjoyed discussing the future of the Norwegian people in America with two of his close friends, James Peterson and Lewis Stokke (two other Sons of Norway founding fathers). They were often found deep in discussions at local saloons enjoying a drink or two. They thought it was important to protect the Norwegian culture and language in America's melting pot society. They were eager to start something big.



Residence of Bersvend Draxten

THE EARLY DAYS OF SONS OF NORWAY

The creation of Sons of Norway, or *Sønner af Norge* as it was originally named in Norwegian, was a result of a number of men who were devoted to upholding their heritage and protecting their people. Draxten and the other men who formed the Norwegian community in Minneapolis met often to talk about their future and the future of the Norwegian people in a growing America.

Sons of Norway was officially formed on January 16, 1895 in order to provide mutual assistance to Norwegian families and preserve an interest in Norwegian language and culture. As with most requirements for fraternal societies of the time, membership was limited to men ages 20 to 50, who were in good health, morally upright and capable of supporting a family. The only requirement unique to Sons of Norway was that members needed to be Norwegian or of Norwegian descent.

After the organization's first meeting in January 1895, Bersvend O. Draxten appeared to be a natural leader. He was quickly elected as the organization's first secretary due to his organizational skills and contributions to the constitution and bylaws committee, however many would say it was because he had the best penmanship in the group. He was also on the committee that developed the first laws and rituals required for new members. Needless to say Draxten had a say in just about everything that established Sons of Norway.



Nidaros No. 1 lodge parade in Minneapolis - 1900

SONS OF NORWAY'S "GRAND OLD MAN"

By 1899 Sons of Norway membership had grown rapidly, due largely to Draxten's ability as a recruiter. He was able to connect with the Norwegian-Americans in the community, convincing them to trust and have confidence in the new organization. Two lodges were now up and running, Nidaros No. 1 and Oslo No. 2. After the third lodge, Dovre No. 3, was formed in 1900, the men thought it was time to elect the first Sons of Norway board.

By no surprise, Bersvend O. Draxten was elected as the First Supreme President of Sons of Norway in May 1900, and continued in that capacity until 1902. During his presidency he changed jobs, moving from the timber industry to a position in shipping. In 1900 he married Trondheim native, Julia Torp and together they raised three children in North Minneapolis; Nina (1903-2002), Aspha (1905-?) and Chester (1911-1984).

After his presidency ended in 1902, Draxten's involvement in Sons of Norway continued. He served in several other positions, and was active in committee work and organizational decisions until his death in 1946.

NINA DRAXTEN

His daughter Nina lived in the Minneapolis area her whole life until her death at the age of 98. She had a successful career in teaching and later pursued an acting career. Her big role came in 1988 when she landed a role in "Far North," starring Jessica Lange. Her father never returned to Norway, but Nina visited twice.

Nina first visited Norway in 1931. Her second trip was in response to an invitation to unveil a stone monument in Selbu that honored her father. A ceremony was held and many people came to witness Nina reveal the memorial; a stone engraved with the following:

Bersvend O. Draxten
Born here 1866
Immigrated to America
First Supreme President of Sons of Norway

Draxten's story is one that resonates with many Norwegian immigrants who want to uphold their cultural traditions in a new place. He knew that he wanted to do something that would help Norwegian-Americans stay connected with their heritage and culture as well as thrive in their new country. His work to establish Sons of Norway was his contribution.

His family grew and today the Draxten family can be found on either side of the Atlantic. To honor his role in founding the organization, a new lodge named Draxten Lodge was formed at Sons of Norway Headquarters in Minneapolis in 2003.

Resource: *Sons of Norways Røtter* by: Oddstein Rygg (Pages 33-44)



Nina Draxten unveils the stone marking the birthplace of her father in Selbu during the July ceremony honoring the roots of Sons of Norway.