



Sons of Norway Mini Presentations

## #312: SYTTENDE MAI

### SYTTENDE MAI

**Syttende Mai!** The name sounds like a fanfare. The celebration is associated with flags, parades and marching bands—hoorays, ice-cream and balloons—salutes, parties, fireworks and patriotism. This description brings to mind the 4th of July celebration in the U.S., but most of these parade participants are children, the hoorays sound more like hurrahs, and people in the crowd wear colorful folk costumes. The scene is Norway, the date May 17, and the event: the Norwegian Constitution Day.

The Norwegians have reason to celebrate. For more than 400 years their country was the weaker partner in a union with Denmark. Norway became an insignificant state on the European map, exploited by autocratic Danish kings. Then came “The Year of Miracles”—1813—when the outcome of the Napoleonic wars broke up the established power structure in Europe. The Danish king, who had sided with Napoleon, was forced to cede Norway to Sweden. No one asked the Norwegians, who were outraged at the thought of their country being given away like a piece of Danish property.

Equally outraged was the heir to the Danish throne, who at that time was governor of Norway. He sided with Norwegian leaders and a constituent assembly was called. With the constitution establishing Norway as a sovereign state, European politicians would have to be more respectful in their dealings with the country.

**The constituent assembly met at Eidsvoll (Ides-vohl) in April–May, 1814.** It was a young crowd—most of the leaders were in their thirties. Conservatives or liberals, they were all nationalists, well-informed about the ideals of the revolutionary French and American constitutions.

It took the assembly of 112 one month to give Norway a constitution. The country was establishing as a sovereign state and a constitutional monarchy ruled by the principles of liberty and democracy. It was the most liberal constitution in Europe at that time, and was clearly inspired by the ideals which were defended in America.

The document was signed on May 17—Syttende Mai—1814, and Norway finally had the fundamental law that later would carry the nation safely through all times of crisis.

The outcome of the swift Norwegian action early in 1814 was that Norway entered a union with Sweden in the fall of the same year—but not as a piece of land given away by the Danish king. Thanks to the constitution, Norway had now become a sovereign state and an equal partner in the union. When this union was dissolved in 1905, Norway was well on the way to being re-established on the European scene. The Constitution of 1814 is the foundation of the growth of a society which today has one of the highest standards of living in the world. Syttende Mai is certainly worth celebrating!



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