



**Sons of Norway**  
**HERITAGE PROGRAMS**



## MiniPresentation#55

**THE NORWEGIAN STAVE CHURCH**

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The Norwegian *stave* churches are stately monuments commemorating the religious and cultural background of the country. They were built with love and piety—and superb craftsmanship. Although they are all based on the same principle of construction, the stave construction, each one of the about 20 existing stave churches has its own characteristics. The most extraordinary thing about one of them is that it isn't located in Norway. There is a stave church in Rapid City, South Dakota.

Since the last original stave church was built around 700-800 years ago, the **South Dakota** church is obviously a replica. It was modeled after one of the most picturesque of the Norwegian churches—the Borgund (Borg 'uhn) stave church in western Norway. The American stave church was built as a home for the Lutheran Vespers radio program which aired on approximately 70 radio stations throughout the United States. In the summer, the church also has inter-denominational vespers services every evening.

It is not clear whose idea it was to make the vespers church a replica of a Norwegian stave church, but with a strong Scandinavian community in the area, the idea was easily accepted and supported. Architect **W. C. Benzinger** of Rapid City was sent to Norway to study stave churches and the stave technique. It was Benzinger who chose Borgund as a model based on this church's beauty as well as its classic proportions. He acquired work drawings from the Norwegian Society for the Preservation of Antiquities.

The funding of the "**Chapel in the Hills**", as the stave church replica was called, started as a building fund drive, but the cost of the entire project was soon assumed by Arndt Dahl, a Rapid City banker who wanted the stave church to be a memorial to his parents. The total cost was about \$250,000. The chapel opened in June, 1969 and already during the three first weeks it had an average of 600 visitors a day and guests from approximately 30 foreign countries.

The **Rapid City** stave church is faithful to its model in almost every detail. It has the "leper's window"—through which the lepers of the community could receive communion without entering the church—and it has the sanctuary ring on the front door. Outlaws who could be killed by anyone in those days were immune from harm if they held onto the ring. Legends tell of men who starved to death while still gripping the ring.

The **Vikings** had perfected the art of wood carving and wood construction and built their stave churches without using nails. Only three nails are known in the entire structure of the Borgund stave church. The Rapid City builders did not master the Viking building technique and had to resort to the use of nails when they built the "Chapel in the Hills."

The many roofs of the original church were covered with shingles made with hand-axes. In Rapid City, the shingles are machine-made. Borgund church is made of **Norway pine**, while the Chapel in the Hills is made of Douglas fir. And while a walkway with a wood base encircles the church in Norway, its American counterpart has a walkway built on concrete in order to withstand the South Dakota storms.

These and a few other deviations from the original may not satisfy the absolute purist, but to most people, even the very quality and authenticity-oriented among us, the Chapel in the Hills is a well-done replica and a worthy representation of the **Norwegian heritage and culture** in North America.