

#350: AN EMIGRANT STORY

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On Søl'n (Suhln), a peak in Norway's Rondane (RON 'dah 'neh) Mountains stands a memorial. A cast-iron plaque adorns the rock wall with the following inscription:

"This memorial is erected by Mari Lien (MAH'ree LEE'ehn), Inga Ørbeck (EENG'ah UHR'BECK) and Otto Hendrickson (OH'toh HEHN'reek'son) July 22, 1908. "One For All And All For One."

Many a tourist has wondered who this trio was, and what the inscription means. Olav Trøeng (OOH'lahv TRUH'eng) unravels the mystery in the 1984 yearbook of the Norwegian Tourist Association. According to Trøeng, the man named on the memorial, Otto Hendrickson, was born in 1861 in Alvdal (AHLV'dahl), Norway. The local church register shows that he was the first person to be baptized in the then-new Alvdal Church where his father was the sexton or church caretaker. Otto emigrated to America in 1880. He was then 19 years old and he joined three of his siblings who had previously emigrated.

Many years later—in the spring of 1908—Otto Hendrickson returned to Norway. Handsome and well-dressed, he appeared in the township one day. He stayed with his brother, who had a grocery store near the Alvdal train station. His brother's son was terminally ill and the family had a nurse staying with them to help care for the boy. The nurse's name was Inga Ørbeck. She and Otto fell in love and on July 22 that year they climbed Søl'n Mountain to exchange engagement rings. Otto's niece, Mari Lien, accompanied them to witness the ceremony. They brought with them the cast-iron slate commemorating their union.

"One For All And All For One," in Norwegian, "Enighet Gjør Sterk" (literally, "Unity makes you stronger") the slate proclaims. Why did they choose this saying? Perhaps they were thinking about their future. Otto had a farm in Spring Valley, Wisconsin. He was 47 years old in 1908, and until that point hadn't found someone with whom he wanted to share his life. At 30, Inga had a young son to care for, and knew what it was like to work hard to make a living. Mari was young and unattached. All of them had so far been fending for themselves in life. Now they faced a new future together, for Mari had decided to follow her uncle and his wife to America.

Otto returned to Wisconsin that same fall. Inga, her son and Mari followed him the next year. The day Mari was to leave for America, her father went into the woods, taking one of his grandchildren with him for comfort and company. He could not bear to watch his daughter leave home for the last time. But in his thoughts he followed her down the valley to the railway and all the way to the seaport and the ship that would take her away forever. What he experienced that day was an all too familiar feeling of loss and deprivation shared by relatives and friends of more than 800,000 Norwegian emigrants who left the country over approximately 100 years of emigration from Norway.

Otto, Inga and Mari lived good lives in the United States. Inga and Otto had five children. According to one of their daughters, two small, moss-covered rocks remained among their family's most cherished belongings. Those rocks were collected by Otto and Inga up on Søl'n Mountain on that memorable day in July 1908. To the Hendrickson family in Spring Valley, the rocks symbolized their roots in a small country on the edge of the Scandinavian peninsula and a heritage never to be forgotten.

