

Preface

“The welfare of the United States demands that the door should be closed to immigrants for a time. Our country is now in need of 2,000,000 homes to shelter those already here, and there are 1,000,000 workers out of employment... We are being made a dumping ground [for]... the human wreckage of the war... And worst of all, they are coming in such numbers at a time when we are unable adequately to take care of them.”

Does this sound familiar – and to whom is this reference being made? Mexican families flocking towards the U.S. border? Refugees from conflicts in Central and South America, with one goal: A safer and better life. Or perhaps Asian immigrants arriving across the Pacific?

Wrong, wrong, and wrong again. The above quote is from Congressman Albert Johnson of Washington state, taken from a weekly news magazine in the 1920s. Johnson was a sponsor of The Emergency Quota Act, the first immigration law in the United States to establish an immigration quota system based on national origins. It was signed into law by President Warren G. Harding in 1921.

The quote describes how politicians and a section of the local population in America viewed the steady stream of immigrants with ever-growing skepticism.

In the one hundred and fifteen years from 1825, when the little sloop *Restauration* departed from Stavanger with 52 Norwegian immigrants on board, and up until World War II, nearly a million Norwegians crossed the ocean to the United States and Canada. Most of them settled in North America, “The new country” or “The land where the streets are paved with gold,” as they also called it.

Writing this preface for the English edition of “The Letter from Minnesota,” it is close to 200 years since those pioneers in Norwegian emigration left their home country.

Today, over five million citizens of Norwegian descent live in the United States, or about 1.6 percent of its population. That means that nearly every single Norwegian has a distant relative on the other side of the ocean. In the sparsely populated state of North Dakota, 33 percent of the population is of Norwegian descent. In the more densely populated state of Minnesota, 900,000 residents, or 17 percent, have Norwegian roots.

The causes behind the Norwegian transatlantic emigration were many, and they were often complex. Most immigrants wanted to escape want and poverty at home and left primarily to find a better life.

Tens of thousands left for the pure adventure of it, an urge fed by the gold rush of the 1800s. But many, especially in the first decades, went to America because of its freedom of religion and expression. They wanted to be able to breathe freely and liberate themselves from the political and religious oppression of a narrow-minded Norway.

Many Norwegian immigrants and their descendants prospered, and some became very successful in their new country as the years passed and new generations came and went. Several made a name for themselves in sports, entertainment, science, industry, and politics.

In Hollywood, actors like James Arness, Robert Mitchum, and Marilyn Monroe had Norwegian ancestry, as did the Democrats Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale, both vice presidents and later presidential candidates. Conrad Hilton founded a chain of hotels and became a billionaire. Ole Evinrude from Hunndalen in Oppland County became both rich and famous for inventing the outboard motor.

In Arlington, just outside of Washington D.C., the Norwegian-American architect George Bergstrom designed the world's largest office building, the Pentagon, which houses the United States Department of Defense. Priscilla Presley had a Norwegian grandfather, while Knute Rockne, born in Voss, became one of America's greatest football coaches of all time. The Nobel laureate Norman Borlaug was the great-grandchild of a young couple that came to the United States from Feios in the county of Sogn og Fjordane as early as 1854.

And one could go on listing names until it became absurd, for in a group that would eventually run into the millions, you'd be hard pressed not to find any exceptional examples of success.

But this shiny gold medal also had a dark side. Thousands of migrating Norwegians died young, both before and after the previous turn of the century. They died of disease and starvation on the battlefields of the Civil War, in accidents and overdoses, and many took their own lives when life didn't turn out as expected.

The poorhouses in America were full of Norwegians. Tens of thousands wished they were back home in Norway. Some ended their lives under tarps and cardboard boxes among the homeless and alcoholics. Many young women who traveled unaccompanied across the ocean ended up as prostitutes in the big cities after falling into the clutches of "kind helpers."

And then there's the really big group, all of those who lived lives of anonymity and lifelong toil but who got by, in a way: workers in industry and construction, settlers out on the prairies, the maids, the craftsmen and drivers. And all of the others.

What follows is the story of one of them, Eivind Ytterbø, the son of a smallholder from the little village of Tørdal in Telemark, my granduncle who crossed the ocean to the new country in 1904. A man who scarcely looked back, probably because he left behind a life in poverty, but who also may have left in anger, shame, and deep sorrow over a childhood and youth spent in traumatic and disturbing circumstances.

For it is a strange thing when you first start out examining the past and your relations; muck gets dredged up, old family riddles may be solved, and life-changing events that up to now have been passed over in silence by a lingering shame may finally find their rightful place in your family's history.

Did Eivind Ytterbø find happiness? Maybe he did, but that depends on how you measure happiness – and what happiness really is.