

Everyday Life and Norwegian Immigration

An Exploration of Cultural Identity

Silje Johansen



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Everyday Life & Norwegian Immigration

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By Silje Johansen

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Silje Johansen

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Abstract

The making of America is a theme often apotheosized in histories, novels and motion pictures: Millions of European immigrants who poured into the country in the 19th and beginning of the 20th century in order to fulfil the American Dream. This thesis seeks to put a human face on this part of American and Norwegian history by exploring through their letters how a family of Norwegian immigrants, the Gilbertsons, found and understood their new home in Minnesota. The Gilbertsons were part of the “chain migration” that relied on personal communication, predominantly through letters, and led so many people in the later part of the 19th century to leave their familiar homes and try their luck on the other side of the ocean. By studying the collection of letters sent by the Gilbertson family (and now part of *the American Letters Collection* at the Norwegian Emigrant Museum) we see how the family members developed complementary identities. What this examination suggests is that the common immigrant was eager to become part of the country they had chosen though they still felt, to various degrees, loyalties to the country and people they had left behind.

Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have been written without the help of several individuals whose name will most likely not go down in history but who have contributed to the grand narrative of my life.

First of all, I wish to thank my supervisor Mark Luccarelli who inspired this topic and helped me turn my ideas into a proper thesis. Without his guidance and invaluable advice this thesis could not have been written.

I also wish to thank Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger for his help in finding credible sources for this project and offering whatever help he could, as well as Kari Fuglesang and the Norwegian Emigrant Museum for allowing me access to their America Letters collection and encouraging my project.

The topic of the thesis first originated in my exchange year at the University of Minnesota and all the Norwegian-Americans I met there. This Great Event in my life could not have happened had it not been for my supportive family who let me cross the Atlantic Ocean on my own and get a trial of the American Dream. It was here that I was introduced to the theory concerning immigrants' ethnic and cultural identity and the traces Norwegians have left on the other side of the earth.

Lastly, life is apparently more than thesis-writing. A huge thanks goes to the Great Individuals Ania Raszowska, Silje Panzer and Øystein Gulbrandsen who kept me sane through my studies and who let me disturb them when I needed to procrastinate (which was all the time). To Liam Westlake who made this semester a truly memorable one and one which will certainly go down in my history book. I hope we get to fill many more pages together.

Silje Johansen,
Brighton, May 2019

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I hope that you are getting along alright in the “Land of the Vikings’ pride”. Although we live thousands of miles from each other, and separated by the vast Atlantic, we must thank modern science and inventions that we can communicate with each other so often.

Albert N. Gilbertson,
Willmar, 27 April, 1901
Letter A401

Introduction

History is often seen as a series of Grand Narratives; in school you are taught about Great Individuals like Columbus, Napoleon and Washington, and Great Events like the World Wars, the Cold War, the Industrial Revolution, but history is much more than this. It is easy to forget the everyday people, the individuals whose name will not go down in history but who nonetheless made up the society and contributed to the world we know today. In the great history of the United States individuals often become mere numbers; out of the million immigrants who arrived in the United States in the 19th century, who remembers Albert Gilbertson?

There has been all too often an air of impersonality in accounts of American immigration. The coming of thirty millions of people was a movement of such magnitude that, to many, it has seemed futile to try to disengage personalities from the mass. Many writers have forgotten the individual man in the surging complex of international circumstances.¹

With this thesis I wish to put the focus back on the everyday people who uprooted their lives in Norway to seek a better future in the United States of America. Through examining a collection of “America letters” written by a family of Norwegian immigrants in Minnesota, I aspire to get a better understanding of this period of U.S. and Norwegian history as it was experienced by the people who lived through it. I wish to see how some of these individuals who participated in one of the greatest human migrations in history experienced the time, how they found a life on the other side of the world, and how they built a new cultural identity.

¹ Theodore C. Blegen, *Land of Their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 7.

Microhistory and Historicism

The everyday life and experiences of the everyman, his daily struggles, emotions and aspirations, are not given much attention in the historic narrative as it would be an impossible task to collect and process all this information. History is in many ways a generalisation of individuals, a tendency to group people together based on larger identities such as ethnicity, class or religion. It is these larger identities that confer significance on them as social beings, as group activities usually has a far greater historical impact than anything accomplished by a single individual.²

One should, however, not completely forget the everyman and the micro perspectives. Individuals should be seen as more than tendencies, and even though history should be concerned with the larger picture, we cannot forget the micro perspective of it. Microhistory “fills out in small-scale and human detail some of the social and cultural features that are otherwise known only as generalization”.³ Focusing on the life experiences of individuals not only validates such generalisations, but breathes life into what are otherwise abstractions. It enables historians to focus on every aspect of life and how they are linked together as a whole experience.

History is important, but the past should also be valued for its own sake, and its autonomy must be respected. Modern ideas and customs cannot be transferred to and imposed on past ages. Each age should be valued on its own terms with its own ideals and priorities. Historicism is tasked with bringing the past back to life, and in order to do so it is necessary to understand why people acted as they did. To do so involves stepping into their shoes and seeing their world through their eyes and according to their standards.⁴

A micro perspective on the Great Atlantic Migration allows us to do exactly this, and by focusing on the individuals’ own accounts through letters sent home to their dear ones, we get to step into their shoes and see the world as they saw it. We can see if, and to what degree, existing theories and generalisations are accurate and bring together several historical fields to look at how these interact and affect each other. Such a micro perspective brings to life what would otherwise just be numbers and statistics and gives a human face to history.

² John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*. 6th ed (New York: Routledge, 2015), 187.

³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Structure and Delimitations

This thesis is divided into three chapters: the first chapter provides background information on the great migration and seeks to contextualise this Great Event. It examines the push and pull factors which led European and Norwegians to cross the Atlantic Ocean in order to seek a better life for themselves, and the migration pattern which contributed to creating Norwegian settlements in Minnesota which in turn created a space in which a Norwegian cultural identity could be preserved.

The second chapter presents a theory on the different responses among immigrants to making a new home in the United States, as well as how immigrants were received in their new country. The aim of this section is to look at the homemaking process among immigrants, and particularly Norwegian immigrants, and to produce a framework in which an analysis of a Norwegian immigrant family can be made. Moreover, it seeks to further contextualise the immigrants' situation at a more local level, though still in general terms.

The third chapter takes on a micro perspective with the focus being on a family of Norwegian immigrants who emigrated to Minnesota: The Gilbertsons. The primary source for such an analysis is a collection of letters from various members of the Gilbertson family which can be found in the Norwegian Emigrant Museum's archives. Through the framework and context presented in the two previous chapters, this chapter is concerned with the Gilbertsons' homemaking process and how they established an identity in the New World. The chapter gives a human face to the numbers and information given in the previous chapters, and provides a more in-depth understanding of how the adaption to a new society must have been for many immigrants.

Finally, a short summary and conclusion is given and I suggest possible areas for further research. Because of the length of this paper many interesting aspects of the immigrants' everyday life that was frequently mentioned in the letters could not be examined, such as their take the Prohibition movement and the importance given to religion, to mention but a few. Moreover, it would be beneficial to look at more families' experiences both in Minnesota as well as the in the nation at large. I do believe, however, that this thesis provides a micro perspective on the everyday life of Norwegians immigrants in Minnesota and how and to what extent they formed a new cultural identity in the New World.

Chapter 1:

The Great Migration: 19th and 20th Century Immigration in Context

Norwegian immigration to the United States of America is commonly dated to have begun July 4th, 1825 when *Restaurationen*, “the Norwegian Mayflower”, left Stavanger with fifty-two hopeful Norwegians aboard heading for New York.⁵ It would still be some years until annual emigration from Norway started in 1836 and we can talk about an initial phase to the immigration.⁶ The mass exodus did not begin until the mid-1860s, after the American Civil War; it increased until it peaked in the 1880s, and came to an end by 1924.⁷ By 1980, around 900,000 Norwegians had emigrated and as many as 87% - 780,000 – left during the period 1865-1930.⁸

The underlying reasons for why so many chose to emigrate vary from person to person. Emigration is a personal and highly individual choice based on various factors which differ from emigrant to emigrant. One popular theory which aims at explaining the motives of emigrants is the “Push and Pull theory”. The theory focuses on which factors “push” the emigrant to move away from his country, and which “pull” him to the new one. In many ways the theory suggests the decision to be similar to an equation: if the positive pull factors are greater than the negative push factors then there’s reason to consider emigration.

This chapter looks at the reasons and contributing factors why so many choose to emigrate to the United States in the 19th and 20th century. It begins by looking at the conditions in Europe and Norway and which push factors might have affected the numerous emigrants, before it goes on to look at the pull factors which made them choose the U.S. Among these are the spreading of information through the so called “America letters” which

⁵ Orm Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-1930* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 148.

⁶ Nils Olav Østrem, *Norsk utvandringshistorie* (Oslo: Samlaget, 2006), 50.

⁷ Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 148.

⁸ Odd S. Lovoll, *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1984), 8.

facilitated the migration process alongside the chain migration pattern, and the favourable conditions offered to immigrants due to America's growing need for more resources.

1.1 Reasons for Emigrating: The Push Factors

1.1.1 Why Europeans Emigrated

Around 50 million individuals emigrated from Europe between 1815 and 1915; 35 million of these emigrated to the United States.⁹ The unparalleled migration, both in size and probably in significance, was induced by a number of factors: the doubling of populations in all the European nations, economic aspects, political motives such as a desire to leave autocratic forms of governments, escaping religious oppression, the longing for a better life as well as the many personal motives that affected each emigrant's resolution. The rapid changes and improvements following the Industrial Revolution was another important component as it greatly facilitated a mass exodus. Which factors that eventually led each emigrant to make the decision to try their luck in a new country varied from person to person, from place to place and changed over time.

The 19th century witnessed great improvements in technology with the end of the Industrial Revolution in addition to economic growth as a result of the advancement of an economic system tying together Europe and the white colonies. As a result, the necessity grew for improving the system of transportation and communication: railroad constructions expanded rapidly from the 1840s, and steamships began replacing sailing ships. Crossing the Atlantic Ocean had previously taken more than two months and cost many people their lives. Now, the crossing could be done in a matter of weeks and resulted in fewer people dying because of diseases. Furthermore, communication was made more efficient with the telegraph which made it possible to link distant regions and facilitated a unified economic system.¹⁰

1.1.2 Why Norwegians Emigrated

Out of the 50 million Europeans who emigrated between 1815 and 1915, Norwegians made up around 900,000. Seen in relation to the number of inhabitants this makes Norwegian

⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

emigration the second largest exodus per capita in Europe, surpassed only by Ireland.¹¹ Norway, along with every European nation, experienced a population explosion; from a population of 883 487 in 1801, to 1 194 827 in 1835, and 1 702 756 in 1865.¹² Even though Norway at the time experienced a strong economic growth it could not keep up with the growing population, and the wealth was unevenly distributed resulting in a growing working class and rising difficult economic and social conditions.¹³ The agricultural crisis of the 1860s was another important contributor for the Norwegian mass exodus forcing a change away from the self-sufficient farm and resulting in increased poverty.¹⁴

Norway was still very much a rural society in the 19th century and most Norwegians made a living by farming, lumbering or fishing. In 1825, 87% of the population lived outside of cities and urban areas, working in the primary sector and upholding a self-sufficient livelihood.¹⁵ Owning land was regarded as the most significant symbol of wealth¹⁶ and the promise of free land in the United States would have been very alluring for many. The population explosion and changes in society forced many to migrate to urban areas in order to find work, something which for many was seen as a fall in social status as they no longer owned their own land. The people who left were mostly cotters who came from smaller farms and rural areas. Many were younger sons who could not count on inheriting the family farm or find employment outside the cities, and who saw America as a hope of advancement for themselves and an opportunity to own their own land.

¹¹ Jan Eivind Myhre “Utvandring fra Norge”, last modified 5 January, 2018,

<https://www.norgeshistorie.no/industrialisering-og-demokrati/artikler/1537-utvandring-fra-norge.html>.

¹² Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8-9, 16-17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵ Jan Eivind Myhre “Et bonde- og fiskersamfunn”, last modified 18 August, 2016,

<https://www.norgeshistorie.no/bygging-av-stat-og-nasjon/teknologi-og-okonomi/1405-et-bonde-og-fiskersamfunn.html>; Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, 9, claims 91% of the population lived in rural areas and 83% working in the primary sector.

¹⁶ Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, “The Migration of Tradition: Land Tenure and Culture in the U.S. Upper Mid-West” *European Journal of American Studies* 3, no. 3 (2008) [online] DOI : 10.4000/ejas.3252.

1.2 Contributing Factors: The Pull Factors

1.2.1 The Spreading of the “America fever”: “America letters”

As Norway became more and more overpopulated and socio-economic problems were rising, the dream of a new and better life as landowners in America became more and more alluring. The so called “America fever” was spreading across the nation.¹⁷ The fever was fanned by the spreading of information from the United States. One of the most important sources of information were the “America Letters”¹⁸ written by friends and relatives who had emigrated to the United States. These letters enthusiastically told about the abundance of free land, the freedom and social equality, and the opportunities awaiting if you were willing to work for it. The letters were often copied and passed around to friends and family, often reaching the entire village and community, and printed in newspapers. Information was also collected and published in what was often called “America books”, a sort of guiding book which offered more complete and systematic information to anyone who thought about making the journey themselves.¹⁹

The “America letters” offered reliable information from someone the readers could relate to, knew and trusted. They became an important factor in determining the pattern of emigration from Norway as people wrote back to their respective regions, spreading the “America fever” among acquaintances.²⁰ The letters also influenced the settlement patterns in the United States as people who decided to emigrate often went to the settlement from which the letters had been sent. This led to the creation of heavily concentrated Norwegian communities with people who often came from the same region; “A remarkable aspect of the tendency of the Norwegian immigrants to flock together was that it was not enough for them to seek out fellow Norwegians. They went further and associated themselves with people who had come from the very valley”²¹ they had left. Although this might not have been completely unique to the Norwegian immigrants it was characteristic of the Norwegian settlement pattern. This tendency is also known as “chain migration” which Øverland

¹⁷ “America fever” was a term used by people as early as 1837 to refer to the rapidly spreading desire to emigrate to America. See Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, 11; Blegen, *Land of Their Choice*, 2.

¹⁸ Term commonly used in Scandinavia to refer to letters sent from emigrants back to their home country. See Blegen, *Land of Their Choice*, 2, on the common usage. For a practical definition, see: Orm Øverland, and Norwegian-American Historical Association, *From America to Norway: Norwegian-American Immigrant Letters, 1838-1914: I: 1838-1870*. Vol. 1 (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, 13.

²⁰ Jon Gjerde and Carlton C. Qualey, *Norwegians in Minnesota. The People of Minnesota* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 8.

²¹ Blegen, cited in Gjerde and Qualey, *Norwegians in Minnesota*, 8.

explains as the “phenomenon of concentrations of immigrants from the same region and even village in urban and rural immigrant neighborhoods”.²² The system works much like a transmission belt where people already at the destination help newcomers find housing and job in a particular area.²³

1.2.2 Minnesota & Chain Migration: Norwegian Settlements in Minnesota

The Frontier and the West was expanding and chain migration led more and more immigrants further west in order to find land of their own. The Minnesota Territory was opened up for settlement just as Norwegian emigration was picking up and soon became a popular destination among Norwegians. Minnesota attracted more Norwegians than any other state and, thanks to chain migration triggered in large parts by the America Letters, Norwegian-Americans became the third largest ethnic group in Minnesota.²⁴ Today more than 830,000 Minnesotans claim Norwegian ancestry.²⁵ This makes up about 15% of the state’s population²⁶ and is far superior to any other state.²⁷

The Norwegians’ tendency to flock together and create settlements with people from the same villages combined with their preference for rural areas made for excellent conditions to form homogenous areas. In these isolated areas traditions, culture and even regional dialects survived and were passed down to second- and third-generation Norwegian-Americans.²⁸ Since the Norwegians were frequently the earliest and most numerous group to settle in different parts of Minnesota they often dominated the areas’ business and local affairs.²⁹ They also established many of the villages’ churches which served as one of the most significant bridges between the Old Country and the New, and were an essential meeting point in the village and community.

²² Overland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 28.

²³ Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2003), 17.

²⁴ Gjerde and Qualey, *Norwegians in Minnesota*, 1.

²⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 American Community Survey.

²⁶ Population as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2016.

²⁷ In comparison, the state with the second largest Norwegian identification is Wisconsin which, based on the same United States Census Bureau for 2016, reported 442,033 residents claiming Norwegian ancestry. This makes up about 7% of its residents.

²⁸ Gjerde and Qualey, *Norwegians in Minnesota*, 10-11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

The Norwegians in Minnesota continued to be a rural people and they flocked together to the fertile farmlands of the Midwest. As families continued to have many children the need to keep expanding and acquire new land also increased. Nicolay A. Grevstad estimated that Norwegians by 1916 had acquired approximately 4,450,000 hectares of land in the United States.³⁰ Considering around one-third of Norwegian immigrants lived in Minnesota, this amounts to a substantial mass of Norwegian-owned land within the state. Norwegians highly valued owning their own land and a large number of them followed a rural-to-rural migration pattern settling in agricultural areas.³¹ They soon became the most agriculturally inclined ethnic group in the nation: 52% of the Norwegian born immigrants, and 65.4% of their descendants resided in rural areas.³²

1.2.3 Remigration and Circular Migration

As a consequence of the increasing contact between Norway and the United States the 20th century witnessed a growing number of immigrants who did not settle in the New World. Remigration became a common phenomenon among Norwegians in the 20th century, probably as a result of more young people emigrating. Greater connection between the continents and a greater mobility among Norwegians led to around one-fifth of Norwegian immigrants remigrating back to Norway.³³

Many of the Norwegians who remigrated never went to the United States with the intent to settle down but rather partook in what is known as “circular migration”. Circular migration, as explained by Leslie Page Moch, means that a person returned home after a specified interval of time.³⁴ The emigrants would stay in the U.S. for a while, such as a summer or a year, before returning to their home country where they would often resume their old lives. As with remigration, circular migration became increasingly common in the 20th century and was largely driven by economic motives such as a guarantee for work or higher salaries.

³⁰ Ibid., 22.

³¹ Joranger, “The Migration of Tradition”, 1.

³² Gjerde and Qualey, *Norwegians in Minnesota*, 22.

³³ Dag Sundsvik Bendixen, “Utvandringen fra Time kommune til USA og Canada – 1913 til 1928: ungdomsmigrasjon og migrasjonsmønstre”, 5.

³⁴ Moch, *Moving Europeans*, 17.

1.2.4 The United States' Need for People: Immigration Acts and the Promise of a Better Life

During the 19th century the United States experienced an insatiable need for more citizens in order to keep up with the expansions of the frontier and utilisation of its vast resources.

Various people and organisations tried to influence immigrants to come to the United States: several states in the Middle West published and distributed pamphlets and guide books in various languages, including Norwegian, to tempt the immigrants to settle in their respective states.³⁵ Railroad companies who were eager to sell off land at inflated prices also joined in the publicity effort as well as transatlantic steam ship companies fighting for passengers.³⁶

In order to fill the pressing need in the West, the federal government of the United States introduced the Homestead Act of 1862. The Homestead Act offered 160 acres of public land to any adult who was, or intended to become, a citizen provided they had never taken up arms against the US, paid a small fee, cultivated the land and had resided there for five years. The Act was a great contributor to the mass exodus and hastened the settlement of the West. Additionally, it was easy for European immigrants to get a citizenship thanks to the Naturalization Law of 1802 which qualified free white people to become American citizens after five years of residence. The law initially excluded blacks³⁷ and Asians from becoming citizens.³⁸

The massive flow of immigrants was brought to an end with the Immigration Act of 1921 and 1924 which imposed origin quotas on immigrants and completely stopped immigration from Asia.³⁹ The Immigration Acts and particularly the 1924 act, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, reflected the growing concern many Anglo-Americans felt by the vast numbers of immigrants coming to the country and the need they felt to preserve the ideal of U.S. homogeneity.

The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 reduced the 12,000 Norwegians quota established by the Immigration Act of 1921⁴⁰ to 6543 Norwegian immigrants allowed to enter the United

³⁵ See for instance: Joseph Meredith Toner Collection. *The Minnesota guide. A hand book of information for the travelers, pleasure seekers and immigrants, concerning all routes of travel to and in the State; sketches of the towns and cities on the same, etc., etc., etc.* Edited by Williams, J. Fletcher (Saint Paul: E.H. Burritt & Co, 1869), Pdf, <https://www.loc.gov/item/rc01001097/>.

³⁶ Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, 18-22.

³⁷ The Naturalization Act of 1870 opened for naturalisation of “persons of African descent”.

³⁸ See “Page Act of 1875” and “Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882”.

³⁹ “The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act),” Office of the Historian, accessed 12 February, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>.

⁴⁰ Mørkhagen, Sverre, *Farvel Norge: Utvandringen til USA 1825-1975*. (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2009), 511.

States a year.⁴¹ Numbers show, however, that more Norwegians emigrated to the States in the 1920s and 1930s than what the quota allowed for.⁴² Still, the Immigration Acts led to a significant decrease in Norwegian emigration to the U.S. and was probably the reason Norway did not experience another wave of emigration.

1.2 Concluding Remarks on The Great Migration

There were many reasons and contributing factors to why so many Norwegians decided to emigrate to the United States in the 19th and 20th century. Population explosion, unevenly distributed wealth, economic hardship and political movements were some of the factors which pushed Norwegians to emigrate and try their luck in another country. The advancement of technology which facilitated both the flow of information as well as people across countries and continents offered a possibility to act on the desire to emigrate.

At the same time there were several pulling factors which drew Norwegians to the United States: the promise of land, work and higher salary being some of the most obvious and compelling reasons. The pull to the States spread rapidly across the nation, fanned in large part by the “America letters” which served as a communication link between the two continents. Though such letters might easily be discarded as of little importance they have been acknowledged both by international as well as Norwegian migration researchers as important means of communication which in turn played an essential part in the increasing number of emigrants leaving certain areas and the system of chain migration that followed.⁴³

The flow of information to the east resulted in a flow of emigrants to the west. Information contained in the “America letters” and “America books” led groups of Norwegians to settle down in heavily Norwegian dominated areas. One of these areas being Minnesota, which was opened up for settlement at the same time as Norwegian emigration was picking up, became a popular destination for Norwegians. Some emigrants only stayed for a short time before they returned to Norway. Remigration and circular migration are clear illustrations of the pull-factors which attracted many Norwegians to go to America in order to reap the benefits of work and higher salaries before returning to Norway. On these occasions

⁴¹ Bendixen, “Utvandringen fra Time kommune til USA og Canada”, 41.

⁴² Mørkhagen, *Farvel Norge*, 642-643.

⁴³ Jon Gjerde, *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 88-90.

the pull-factors were clearly the dominant factor, and although the push-factors made them leave for a while they were not great enough to make them stay in the United States.

One of the greatest pull-factors for Norwegian immigrants was the promise of land as provided by the Homestead Act of 1862. Norwegians had a particularly far flung and rural character which valued owning their own land. Since Norway at the time experienced a population growth and forced migration to the city, America with its promise of 160 acres of land on which they could build their own self-sufficient farm must have been very attractive. This is seen in the fact that Norwegians largely followed a rural-to-rural migration pattern where they bypassed the big cities and settled in the unclaimed territories on the frontier where they could get land of their own. As a result of this pull to the rural areas and of the related chain migration, there soon sprung up Norwegian communities where whole areas were predominantly Norwegians immigrants from the same areas of Norway. As rural areas offer more cultural isolation, these areas became great places for preserving Norwegian culture and identity.

Chapter 2:

Making a New Home: Establishing an Identity in the New World

Once in the United States the immigrants had to start making a new life for themselves. As we have seen, many settled in areas populated by immigrants with the same nationality and formed strong communities where they helped each other adapting to their new surroundings and culture while at the same time preserving part of their Old World identity. In his book *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, Orm Øverland looks at the European immigrants' response to coming to America, noting that there are particularly two obvious responses: shedding everything that made one a foreigner and to become a new person, an American, or to affirm one's Old World identity and insist that it too was American.⁴⁴ Jon Gjerde in his book *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural West, 1830-1917*, talks about immigrants' "multiple loyalties" and "Complementary identities" suggesting that there is a third obvious response where the immigrants both can take joy and feel pride in their Old World identity while at the same time embrace their new home's culture and become an American.

This chapter examines the three responses to making a new home in the States as well as how immigrants were received in the United States. It starts by looking at the response of the Anglo-American society to the rush of immigrants arriving to the country in the 19th and beginning of 20th century, and how this in turn prompted many immigrants to feel the need to shed their ties to the Old World in order to prove themselves as Americans. Subsequently it looks at the contrary response and how immigrants used this opportunity to affirm their Old World identity and argue that they too had a right to live in America and even consider themselves Americans. It then examines the third response of uniting the best of both worlds and maintain multiple loyalties claiming to be Hyphenated-Americans. Lastly, a brief conclusion is given.

⁴⁴ Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 1-2.

2.1 Shedding One's Old World Identity: "I am an American"

One obvious response to settling in a new country is to attempt to adopt to that culture and become one of the nation's people. Although the immigrants all had different reasons for emigrating, they all had in common a choice to leave their home country behind and chose to emigrate to the United States of America. For many, it was not as much a feeling of leaving their country as it was leaving the areas they knew and had grown up in as they did not have a clearly defined national identity before emigrating. America offered a fresh start and for most it made more sense to look forward to the possibilities that lay ahead and embrace their new home completely which meant taking on a new fitting identity. In doing so, many felt the need to let go of their past and their old identity and fully become Americans.

However, becoming a "real American" was not an easy thing, and even though the immigrants felt and were encouraged to become Americans, many felt they were never fully accepted as such. Shedding one's Old World identity and surrendering to the Americanisation movement came with the risk of being left in a limbo with no real belonging to any culture. The Americanisation process was in many ways a double-edged sword which promised an American identity at the cost of losing their old ones.

2.1.1 Americanisation

The massive rush of immigrants arriving to the United States in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century led to a growing fear among a large group of Anglo-Americans who had become a minority by the early decades of the 20th century.⁴⁵ They feared that the millions of foreigners, who easily could become American citizens with the right of suffrage after only a few years, brought with them ideas from the Old World which would threaten their nation and the Republic. Thus immigrants who identified as Americans were met with some scepticism. In order to prove themselves as Americans they had to deny their former traditions and customs which in turn led to a lack of pride and often a feeling of shame regarding their backgrounds.

The immigrants were foreigners and being characterized as such was a central experience of many first- and second-generation immigrants. Such an experience is not

⁴⁵ Ibid., 45.

exclusive to those immigrants arriving to the United States, but rather a seemingly universal response to immigration. What is special about the case of the United States however, can be found in the particular meaning in common American usage of the word *foreigner*: namely “an American or a resident in the United States who is not of British origin”.⁴⁶ At the time, *Native-Americans* was a term used about Anglo-Americans, Americans of British decent, illustrating their place at the top of the ethnic hierarchy and as the rightful people of the United States. An immigrant from England could call themselves American regardless of how long they had been in the country, while a second generation immigrant born in America was still considered a foreigner.⁴⁷

The settling pattern of “clannishness” and planned colonies which resulted from chain migration was a contributing factor in what elicited fears among the Anglo-Americans for the future of their great republic and spurred on Americanisation movements. Seeing how groups of immigrants settled down in concentrated settlements where they could preserve their Old World ways of living, they feared a too pluralistic society where the immigrants would not fuse into “American” communities or an “American” way of life.⁴⁸

2.1.2 The Negative Effects of the Americanisation Process

With the millions of immigrants arriving to the country, the Anglo-Americans were in a minority by the early decades of the 20th century. Still, they enjoyed cultural and social dominance, and at the end of the 19th century the history of the United States was rewritten so as to emphasize rather than play down the English origins of the American nation. Non-English immigrants in school were taught that only those of Anglo-Saxon lineage were really American.⁴⁹ The public schools thus held an important role in the Americanisation (or anglicising) of the children of immigrants who in many areas made up the majority of the population.⁵⁰ Being taught in school that they were not real Americans unless they were of British descent and learning nothing about their own heritage contributed to a lack of self-esteem in the young generation of immigrants. This sense of shame of being a foreigner, and

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁷ See Øverlands’ retelling of Michael Musmanno’s story from *The Story of the Italians in America*, in Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 6.

⁴⁸ Gjerde, *The Minds of the West*, 40-43.

⁴⁹ Nina Baym, “Early Histories of American Literature: A Chapter in the Institution of New England,” in *The American Literary History Reader*, ed. Gordon Hunter (New York, 1995). Cited in Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 45-47.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 45, 47.

lack of knowledge of their heritage could be heightened by parents who had rejected their Old World identity in fear of being seen as less of an American.

Americanisation and American nativism contributed to a growing collective inferiority complex clearly seen in the fiction, memories, and historical accounts of the time.⁵¹ Especially second-generation immigrants often felt a lack of pride in their backgrounds which was further enhanced by Americanisation movements like the 1915-1918 campaigns which implied that immigrants could not be American *and* something else. To become American, the movement claimed, you had to forget your past and your foreign language and fully embrace your new cultural identity.

This negative process of Americanisation was not so much concerned with what you acquired as with what you left behind:

The major intent and the general understanding of Americanization is simply that the immigrant is to be denationalized. The taking on of the character of the “new man” is of secondary importance. Discarding the “old man” is by far the more significant issue. From an “American” point of view, the melting pot is thus not for “Americans”. It is its function to denationalize those who are not of English decent.⁵²

The American melting pot could thus be seen as more a form of cultural assimilation where the different immigrant groups were expected to conform to the Anglo-American way than a concept of multiculturalism. A possible aftereffect of succumbing to Americanisation was what Waldemar Ager called “cultural nakedness”: a state where the immigrant had shed their Old World identity without acquiring a new one.⁵³

2.1.3 “We are Americans”

Cultural nakedness was a possible outcome for the immigrants who chose to shed their old world identity, but it was not necessarily the reality. All three responses to cultural assimilation, shedding one’s Old World identity, affirming it, or combining both in a complimentary identity, argued for their belonging in the American society based on different arguments. Many immigrants, especially those who shed their old world identity or combined the two, regarded themselves as Americans although they were not readily viewed as such by

⁵¹ See for instance Waldemar Ager, *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, trans. Harry T. Cleven. (Madison, Wis., 1995).

⁵² Ager, *On the Way to the Melting Pot*. Cited in Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 38.

⁵³ Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 42.

the Anglo-Americans. For many it was far more natural to identify with the country they had chosen rather than to identify with the country they had decided to leave.⁵⁴ Øverland points out how many of the immigrants at this time did not have clearly defined national identities in their old country but rather identified with the particular region or village in which they had lived.⁵⁵ The reason to emigrate to America was also based on the notion of the United States: it was for many not just one of many possible forms of society they could emigrate to in order to make a better living. They had specifically chosen America because they believed it to be the most compelling cultural symbol of the modern era and wished to acquire the inalienable rights that came with a new American identity.

Immigrants came to America predisposed to glorify American citizenship. Many were eager to integrate into American society and, says Gjerde, “tended to observe their new home through rose-colored glasses”.⁵⁶ They celebrated the natural freedom and equality as well as the economic opportunities and readily accepted the American political and social system.⁵⁷ Most immigrants gladly accepted, and indeed hastened, the Americanisation process as this had been the purpose of their emigration and gladly took on a new American identity.

2.2 Affirming One’s Old World Identity: “We belong here too”

On the other end of the scale from the assimilationists, you have those immigrants who firmly held on to their Old World identity and who continued to affirm this in the New World. In response to the growing anti-immigration sentiment and nativism, and witnessing immigrant groups rejecting their heritage in order to be accepted by the Anglo-Americans, a minority retorted by preserving and cultivating their Old World languages, values and traditions. The immigrants which responded in this way believed that a nation could never be built on shame of one’s heritage; “Pride, they thought, was essential to the creation of a strong group identity that again would be the basis for a collective entry of the group into

⁵⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁶ Gjerde, *The Minds of the West*, 59.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 57.

American society”.⁵⁸ This point of view considered their heritage as an enrichment and a gift offered to America, adding to the melting pot and creating a new and superior American type.⁵⁹ It is not a view born of nostalgia but rather it was a way to ensure a future for an immigrant group in the New World: “We are ashamed of the age-old speech of our forefathers. And we find it embarrassing to admit our Norwegian ancestry. Such an attitude can never, I tell you, *never* build a nation”.⁶⁰

2.2.1 Homemaking Myths

The immigrants who maintained their old ethnic identities and believed it to be an enrichment for American culture established their right to live in America without assimilating through what Øverland calls “homemaking myths”. The homemaking myths were spread by leaders within the ethnic immigrant groups who played significant roles in how the immigrants viewed themselves and to what extent they integrated into the American society. Of importance to such leaders were achieving a collective entry into their chosen country where they could take with them their heritage and contribute to the culture of America. They feared shame and a lack of pride in their roots would lead to a disappearance in the great melting pot without leaving their marks.⁶¹

Homemaking myths were one of the common tactics employed by such immigrant leaders in order to build up their group’s collective pride and justify their right to live in America. Øverland classifies these into three different types: myths of foundation, myths of blood sacrifice, and myths of ideological gifts or relationships. Norwegians had, according to these homemaking myths, a right to be in America because they discovered it through Leif Erikson (myth of foundation), had fought and given their lives for the USA in different American wars (myths of blood sacrifice), and brought with them, through the Vikings to England and later to the U.S., the ideas on which America would be built (myths of ideological gifts).⁶²

Although most of these myths were disputed and far-fetched, they contributed to a sense of pride in one’s roots and created a sense of natural belonging to America. Such

⁵⁸ Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 40.

⁵⁹ Ibid.; Gjerde & Qualey, *Norwegians in Minnesota*, 32.

⁶⁰ Ole E. Rølvaag, *Their Fathers’ God* (New York, 1931), 208.

⁶¹ Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*.

⁶² Ibid., 19.

homemaking myths are so commonly found throughout European immigrant groups in the U.S. that they can be seen as an essential feature of American ethnicity at the end of the 19th century and early decades of the 20th.⁶³ They are based on the belief that immigrants “would become Americans not by losing their cultural identity and attributes but by contributing these very identities and attributes to their new country” and that in this process “these identities and attributes would be transformed to American qualities”.⁶⁴

2.2.2 Transplanted Communities

The high concentration of immigrants from the same region, and the dominant position they often held in the new communities, provided an excellent environment for preserving Old World traditions, language and culture. Spring Grove, Minnesota is a prime example of such a Norwegian settlement. The area was settled mostly by a group of immigrants from Hallingdal, Norway, and it retained traces of the Hallingdal subculture well into the 1930s.⁶⁵ Thanks to the isolated rural location and a dominant group of immigrants from Hallingdal, the language, and even the Halling dialect survived for three to four generations.⁶⁶ Being surrounded by likeminded people with the same background and traditions also made the necessity to interact and conform to the new world less pressing and facilitated a response where one’s Old World identity could live on.

These “transplanted communities”, where cultural patterns from the Old World were carried over and re-established in the West, could even become more Norwegian than communities in Norway, as noted by Waldemar Ager who said his Norwegian countrymen were in some ways “more Norwegian here than they are in Norway”.⁶⁷ By this he referred to how these isolated and highly ethnically concentrated communities along with the freedom experienced in the West allowed for preservation of their old faiths which, when challenged by an alien culture, was re-established and solidified. The memory of the country they had left behind was religiously preserved and recreated as to allow the old cultural identity to endure. Of course, these transplanted communities were not unaffected by what was

⁶³ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁵ Gjerde & Qualey, *Norwegians in Minnesota*, 10.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Waldemar Ager, “Vore Kulturelle Muligheter,” in *Cultural Pluralism vs. Assimilation*, ed. Odd S. Lovoll (Northfield, Minnesota: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1981), 49.

happening outside of them, and ethnocultural traditions were eventually forced to blend with their societal future.⁶⁸

2.3 Complementary Identities: “We are Americans *and* something else”

The choice did not have to be either or; the immigrants did not have to discard their old identity completely, nor did they have to reject an American identity. As we have seen, immigrants who shed their Old World identity in order to become “real Americans” were still often not accepted as such. Immigrants who chose the opposite response and preferred to live in isolated communities with people from the same country, and even the same village, were also exposed to Americanism and had to interact both with other immigrant groups as well as with the Anglo-Americans. The response most immigrants thus opted for was one of a complementary identity: they pledged allegiance to their ethnic adherence as well as to their new American citizenship.⁶⁹ Old World traditions and culture were not something of which they had to be ashamed, nor was it something that could not be improved by their new country.

“To be an American is an ideal” wrote Carl J. Friedrich in 1935.⁷⁰ This had always been a part of the American liberal ideology, apparent even in the Naturalization Law of 1802 which made it easy for immigrants to legally become American citizens. To be an American means to subscribe to the ideals of freedom, equality and self-rule, and it is these ideals which allowed for immigrants to develop complementary identities.⁷¹ Although many American nativists objected, there was no law stating that immigrants had to forsake their Old World identities and customs. They had only to renounce loyalties to foreign governments.⁷² The immigrants, being equals and with the unalienable rights of liberty, were free to maintain their old ways and choose different patterns of life from that of the Anglo-Americans. They were at liberty to maintain religious and ethnic allegiances carried over

⁶⁸ Gjerde, *The Minds of the West*, 75.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁰ Carl J. Friedrich et al., *Problems of the American Public Service* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1935), 12, cited in *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 55.

from Europe should they desire to. For many immigrants, “Americanisation” was a process of amalgamation and embracement of American ideology while maintaining a complementary identity. To them, pluralism was embedded within the ideologically based national loyalty.⁷³

2.3.1 Hyphenated-Americans

Immigrants with a complementary identity showed this by identifying as Hyphenated-Americans: a Norwegian immigrant with a complementary identity would refer to himself as “Norwegian-American”. Hyphenated-Americans have become a common occurrence in the United States and is still frequently used today to proudly demonstrate one’s ethnic heritage. The hyphen was, and still is, used as a sign of ethnic pride and so there is small wonder that at the height of the Americanisation movement there came into existence an “antihyphen” campaign. The campaign, spurred on by among others Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, insisted that “real Americans” could not have multiple loyalties, they could not be American *and* something else.⁷⁴ If the immigrants wanted to become Americans, the campaign said, they had to renounce their old languages, traditions and customs and they would be accepted as such.

For the immigrants who chose to use a hyphenated ethnic identity however, “The much abused hyphen is not a sign of cleavage, but a sign of unity. It is an indication that those who are using it, while not unmindful of their origin, cling firmly to this country [USA], the country they have chosen as their new home”.⁷⁵ Several prominent immigrant leaders encouraged their groups to use hyphens: “both native-born Americans and immigrants prefer to place a nationality indicator followed by a hyphen in front of the noun when speaking of naturalized Americans. (...) Norwegian-Americans should do the same and follow the others in cultivating their national heritage”.⁷⁶

⁷³ Ibid., 60.

⁷⁴ See for instance Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 62.

⁷⁵ *Denni Hlasatel* [Czech newspaper] (1915). Cited in Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 137.

⁷⁶ *Decorah-Posten* [Norwegian-American newspaper in Decorah]. Cited in Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 221.

2.4 Concluding Remarks on Cultural Identity

The massive rush of immigrants that arrived to the United States of America in the 19th and beginning of the 20th century spurred on an Americanisation movement with the aim of acculturating the mass. The movement elicited three different responses from the mass of immigrants: some wholeheartedly embraced their new American identity and shed their Old World loyalties, others met the movement with defiance and felt the need to protect and reaffirm their Old World identity, while others again became Hyphenated-Americans with multiple loyalties.

The conflict over the Americanisation process was a prominent part of making a new home in the United States as the immigrants were faced with the decision of who they wanted to be in their new home. Norwegian immigrants' tendency to settle down in rural and thus more isolated communities with fellow Norwegians, and even people from the same area in Norway ,suggests that Norwegians to a great extent maintained their Norwegian identity in the United States. The heavily concentrated Norwegian settlements in Minnesota, combined with large groups of Swedes and Danes, led to the area being called "The Glorious New Scandinavia".⁷⁷ Such a nickname indicates that the immigrants brought with them cultural baggage which they nurtured and kept alive in their new country.

In order to understand homemaking, and especially Norwegian homemaking, in America we need to look at a more intimate understanding provided by letters. The America letters gives us a first-hand account of the homemaking process as it was experienced by the immigrants themselves and can provide us with their own explanation for why they made the choices they did as well as their reaction to the Americanisation process. Going directly to the source and hearing from the people who lived through it can validate the theory and modes used to explore the Great Migration and culture identity while additionally giving us an understanding beyond these. Through the letters we can further answer the question of how the Norwegian-Americans made themselves at home in the U.S. while entertaining dual identities, or what made them reject one or the other. The next chapter will look at a collection of letters written by a Norwegian family who immigrated to Minnesota at the end of the 19th century and explore their process of homemaking and how they established an identity in the New World.

⁷⁷ See Blegen, *The Land of Their Choice*.

Chapter 3

America Letters: An Exploration into the Life of the Gilbertson Family

From the Great Narrative and abstract theories, this chapter seeks to bring the focus down to a micro perspective and explore the everyday aspect of immigrants' lives in the New World. Through examining a collection of original letters found in the archives of the Norwegian Emigrant Museum I will look at one particular family's experience of emigrating to the United States and Minnesota at the end of the 19th century, and the life they created there. The letters I have found are written by five individuals in the Gilbertson family: Albert, Trygve, Mina, Ole and Marthe. They are all written to a relative called Petter who appears to have resided in Minnesota between 1893 and 1897 before returning to Norway. Through these letters we get a valuable look at what it was like to be an immigrant in Minnesota at the time; we see how they created a home for themselves, what their daily life was like, what occupied them and the (Norwegian) community they lived in.

The immigrants' experiences are individual and vary greatly from person to person. The experience of the Gilbertson family cannot be assumed to represent all immigrants' experiences nor give an exact representation of life in the United States or Minnesota at the time. It can, however, give us insight into one of the experiences and how they underwent the process of adapting to their new home. This experience in turn, though not completely identical as other immigrants' experiences, can serve to give us as a more general understanding of the emigration process for other immigrants and how they responded to having to make a new home for themselves in a new country.

The chapter starts with a brief note on letters as a source of information and what we can take from them before it introduces the various Gilbertson members. The information about each family member is based on the letters as well as what can be found in parish registers, state censuses and old newspapers. The main section of this chapter focuses on examining what the letters can tell us about the everyday life of the Gilbertsons, whether they

all managed to find a new home in the U.S., and how this in turn affected their cultural identity. At the end of the chapter, a brief conclusion is provided.

3.1 Method: Letters as a source of information

An essential figure in the circle of Norwegian-American immigration study, historian Theodore C. Blegen, regards the America letters as an important source which shines light on American history. Blegen referred to them as “America’s voice”, and especially the “voice of the immigrants”, due to their personal character and proximity to everyday life and American society.⁷⁸ It was thanks to these letters, he says, that America was rediscovered in the 19th century.⁷⁹ The letters are also an important source for the study of Norwegian history as we have seen the information contained in these letters contributed to an increase in emigration to the United States. They offer us a first-hand comparison of the conditions in Norway and the United States by someone who lived and experienced them personally.

As a source, letters provide insights of the life world of both the sender and the receiver. As John Tosh puts it, “Such material [as letters] gives a human face to a story more often presented in dry statistics”.⁸⁰ Since letters are often sent to someone whom the sender knows and with whom they have a close relationship, they typically include the sender’s thoughts and feelings about his or her life. They give details about events that closely affect them as well as greater, more distant events happening in the society in which they live. Letters alone are a limited source of information, however, and should be used in conjunction with other sources such as census reports, church records, local newspapers, and records of birth, death and landownership, in order to obtain anything approximating a full picture.⁸¹

One cannot read letters uncritically.⁸² Letters are naturally subjective, reflecting the world as the sender sees it and often tailored to the recipients. This means that what the

⁷⁸ Blegen, *Land of Their Choice*, viii.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁰ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 86.

Something similar is also said by Øverland, *From America to Norway*, 42: “For the historian letters may perhaps give some information that is not available in other sources, but for the most part the limited role of letters may be to give life and color to an account heavy with facts and figures”.

⁸¹ See Øverland, *From America to Norway*, 42.

⁸² Due to of the length of this thesis a longer discussion of the importance and use of letters as a historical source cannot be provided. Readers are advised to see Øverland’s preface to *From America to Norway* for a more extensive guide to reading America letters.

sender regards as truth does not necessarily have to be so. It also means that the sender might write something they do not necessarily believe in order to please the recipient, fulfil their agenda,⁸³ appear polite, or because they feel it is expected of them. Øverland points out how a superficial reading of immigrant letters might render an impression of immigrants as a dominantly nostalgic and backward-looking group with a “divided heart” when this is not really the case.⁸⁴ Immigrants writing home to friends and relatives might have deemed it unseemly to show their shifted loyalty, or did not want to offend anyone by not seeming to miss their home country and the people they had left behind. Furthermore, the action of writing home to their near ones might provoke what Øverland calls “situational nostalgia”, where it puts them in a nostalgic mood and brings up feelings not necessarily present in their everyday lives. When used critically, and with an understanding of the context in which the letter was written, “immigrant letters are indeed invaluable for a historian who wishes to understand how the immigrants themselves experienced their migration”.⁸⁵

3.2 The Gilbertson Portraits

The Gilbertson family emigrated during the second wave of emigration, presumably in the year 1884.⁸⁶ The family consisted of Ole Gulbrandsen and Marthe Tobiasdatter and their eight children Maria, Thilla, Gulborg, Olava, Ragna, Gulbrand, Trygve and Albert. The family settled down on a farm near Ellsworth, Nobles County, Minnesota. They lived there for twelve years until they relocated to the Jacobsen farm in Willmar, Kandiyohi Country, Minnesota at the end of 1896.⁸⁷

Before 1923, Norwegians used patronymics rather than family names, meaning they took their last name from their father’s given name or, in some instances, from the farm they

⁸³ For instance making their near ones emigrate as well so they can see them again.

⁸⁴ Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 26.

⁸⁵ Øverland, *From America to Norway*, 43.

⁸⁶ Both Ole’s and Marthe’s obituaries in the Willmar Tribune say they emigrated in 1884. This is supported by the 1905 Minnesota State Census which have the Gilbertson recorded as residents of the state for 21 years and 0 months, meaning they would have moved to Minnesota around June, 1884. Another indicator is the fact that Trygve was the last child recorded to have been born in Norway in 1878 and Albert is registered as born in Minnesota and been a resident since around March, 1885, meaning they must have emigrated between those years.

⁸⁷ Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter Gilbertson, 20 January, 1897, A425, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

lived on.⁸⁸ Thus, Ole Gulbrandsen indicates that Ole was the son of Gulbrand, and Marthe Tobiasdatter was the daughter of Tobias. Their children in turn would be called “Olsen” (Ole’s son) or “Olsdatter” (Ole’s daughter).⁸⁹ Family names were not mandatory by law in Norway until 1923, but they were required in the United States and so many immigrants adopted their patronymic or farm names as a family name.⁹⁰ These Norwegian names could be difficult to pronounce or spell and would then be anglicised. Thus re-naming was often a two-step process. For example, Marthe and her children took on the name Gulbrandsen as a family name in order to adopt to American law, and then the spelling was anglicised as Gilbertson.

3.2.1 Ole and Marthe Gilbertson

Ole Gulbrandsen was born at Watrud, Jevnaker parish, Hadeland, Norway on 2 October, 1843.⁹¹ He married Marthe⁹² Tobiasdatter Klingenberg (born at Vang, Hadeland, Norway, 24/25 April, 1843)⁹³ in 1866 and they soon thereafter moved to Vestre Aker, Christiania.⁹⁴ They emigrated to the United States in 1884. There they lived a rural life where their main occupation was farming. Ole is constantly described as working hard on the farm and he often wrote about its conditions: what kind of livestock they kept, the weather and how it affected the harvest, what they grew on the farm, and the normal salary for farmhands during the harvest each year. Marthe helped out and took care of the house and the children. She was of poor health suffering from rheumatism⁹⁵ and often experienced joint pain and stiffness,

⁸⁸ Øverland, *From America to Norway*, 22.

⁸⁹ Another acceptable spelling would be “Olesen” and “Olesdatter”.

⁹⁰ Øverland, *From America to Norway*, 22.

⁹¹ “Obituary – Ole Gilbertson”. *The Willmar Tribune*, 30 December, 1914. Accessed 16 April, 2019. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/147136734>.

⁹² Spelling was not hugely standardised at the time and Marthe appears in different documents and letters as both “Marthe”, “Martha” and “Marte”. In the state census as well as her obituary in the Willmar Tribune she appears as “Marhta”. She signs one of her letters as “Marte”, a spelling which also appears in two of her children’s birth records. She also appears in the same records as “Marthe”, and since this is the spelling most commonly used in the letters it is what we will adhere to here.

⁹³ Marthe writes in a letter that she will turn 76 years old on 24 April. Her obituary says she was born 25 April. Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 6 April, 1919, A448, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

⁹⁴ “Obituary – Ole Gilbertson”. *The Willmar Tribune*, 30 December, 1914.

⁹⁵ Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 27 April, 1901, A401, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway;

Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson [din tante] to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A423, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

especially when the weather changed.⁹⁶ She got artificial teeth in 1906 which helped some.⁹⁷ Both Ole and Marthe were active members of the Norwegian Free Church.

In 1907 they decided to sell the farm and move to the city. This was a hard decision for them to make but they owed money on it and none of the children wanted it.⁹⁸ Their age was catching up to them and Ole could not manage to keep it up by himself anymore with Marthe's deteriorating health. In the city, Ole worked as a gardener taking care of the parks, which he enjoyed as he was able to be his own boss.⁹⁹ They left Willmar in July, 1916 to live with their son Gulbrand in Roy, Washington.¹⁰⁰ Ole passed away at the hospital in Tacoma, Washington on 17 December, 1914¹⁰¹ and was buried at the Norwegian Free Church in Willmar on 23 December. Marthe lived on with various family members until she passed away after seven weeks of illness on 6 November, 1920 in Minneapolis. She was buried in Willmar 10 November at the Free Church cemetery.¹⁰²

3.2.2 Maria Riley, née Gilbertson

Maria was born in Norway around 1867.¹⁰³ She is only registered as living with her family in the 1885 census, and does not make any appearances in future Minnesota state censuses under Maria Gilbertson. From the letters we gather that she married a man named Ed Riley, and in May, 1897 they had twins: a boy named Rúdfolf Albert and a girl named Ruth Olvilde.¹⁰⁴ They lived in Ellsworth where Ed worked as a car-repairer¹⁰⁵ and later for the Rail

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1906, A402, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

⁹⁸ Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter, July, 1907, A432, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

⁹⁹ "Obituary – Ole Gilbertson". *The Willmar Tribune*, 30 December, 1914.

Correspondence from O & M Gilbertson to Petter, 28 September, 1913, A433, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹⁰⁰ "Obituary – Ole Gilbertson". *Willmar Tribune*, 30 December, 1914.

¹⁰¹ "Ole Gilbertson". *Willmar Tribune*, 23 December, 1914. Accessed 16 April, 2019.

<https://img9.newspapers.com/image/147136719/>.

¹⁰² "Obituary – Mrs Martha Gilbertson". *Willmar Tribune*, 10 November, 1920. Accessed 16 April, 2019.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/147136719>.

¹⁰³ 1885 Minnesota State Census. Nobles County, Minnesota, census records. Gilbertson, Maria, census ID: 1786792; digital image, MNHS.org. Accessed 22 January, 2019. <http://people.mnhs.org/finder/census/1786792>.

From the census it is not clear whether or not Maria has had her birthday yet so we cannot be completely sure of her birth year. Since Thilla was born October, 1868, and Marthe would have had to be pregnant for around nine months it seems safe to conclude that she must have been born in the latter half of 1867.

¹⁰⁴ Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter, 30 June, 1897, A426, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

Road.¹⁰⁶ They had two more kids: Leonard and Esther who were both married before April, 1919.¹⁰⁷ Their son Rúdolf enlisted in the Navy and returned after a year, in 1919.¹⁰⁸

3.2.3 Thilla McGarry, née Gilbertson

Mathilde Birgitte, referred to as “Thilla”, was born in Vestre Aker, Norway on 13 October, 1868.¹⁰⁹ She is registered as living with her family in Ellsworth, Grand Prairie in 1885¹¹⁰ but must have moved out before the next census in 1895. Thilla was married to William McGarry who worked for the Rail Road as a “yard-master”.¹¹¹ They had five children: Mabel who was born around 1880 and who later married and had a son around 1913, Túlla who died as a child on 16 January, 1897 and was buried in Ellsworth, two unnamed girls born before 1906, and a baby boy born in 1905. They lived a while in St James, Minnesota until they moved to Worthington for a few years before settling down in Oelwein, Iowa around 1906. A letter dated April, 1919 mentions that she had become a widow and lived on in St. Paul, Minnesota.¹¹²

3.2.4 Gulborg Grimlund, née Gilbertson

Gulborg Elise was born in Vestre Aker, Norway on 2 September, 1870.¹¹³ Like Maria she only appears with her family in the 1885 census.¹¹⁴ She married Carl Grimlund and they

¹⁰⁵ Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 27 April, 1901, A401.

¹⁰⁶ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A438, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹⁰⁷ Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 6 April, 1919, A448.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ SAO Vestre Aker prestekontor Kirkebøker, F/Fa/L0004: Ministerialbok nr. 4, 1857-1877. Vestre Aker, Norway. Parish register. “Mathilde Birgitte”, 101. Digital image, digitalarkivet.no. Accessed 5 March, 2019. <https://www.digitalarkivet.no/kb20060208030717>.

Because of her age in the 1885 census she must have been born in 1869 and not 1868 as one might think from seeing the registry.

¹¹⁰ 1885 Minnesota State Census. Nobles County, Minnesota, census records. Gilbertson, Matilda, census ID: 1786984; digital image, MNHS.org. Accessed 22 January, 2019. <http://people.mnhs.org/finder/census/1786984>.

¹¹¹ Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 9 December, 1900, A437, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹¹² Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 6 April, 1919, A448.

¹¹³ SAO Vestre Aker prestekontor Kirkebøker, F/Fa/L0004: Ministerialbok nr. 4, 1857-1877. Vestre Aker, Norway. Parish register. “Gulborg Elise”, 158. Digital image, digitalarkivet.no. Accessed 5 March, 2019, <https://www.digitalarkivet.no/kb20060208030775>.

¹¹⁴ 1885 Minnesota State Census. Nobles County, Minnesota, census records. Gilbertson, Gertrude, census ID: 1785779; digital image, MNHS.org. Accessed 22 January, 2019, <http://people.mnhs.org/finder/census/1785779>.

settled in Willmar where Carl worked in the coal-chute at the Northern Railroad yard.¹¹⁵ In 1900, Carl bought a ¾ acre lot outside the city and an apartment in Willmar which they lived in.¹¹⁶ They had a daughter named Alma around 1893,¹¹⁷ and a son in October, 1897.¹¹⁸ The son, along with another daughter, died sometime before 1904 when they had twins: a boy and a girl.¹¹⁹ Alma Grimlund finished her education and started working as a teacher at the school next to Kandiyohi Station in 1913.¹²⁰

3.2.5 Olava Svensen, née Gilbertson

Olava Augusta was born in Vestre Aker, Norway on 15 August, 1872.¹²¹ She is mentioned several times to be of poor health, struggling with nerve weakness and atrial fibrillation in the summer of 1900.¹²² Although she recovered from her seven weeks of bedrest it seems to have followed her for the rest of her life.¹²³ She lived with her parents until she was married in 1912 and became Mrs Svensen.¹²⁴ They moved to Minneapolis where her husband worked for the Ohama Rail Road Company.¹²⁵

¹¹⁵ See for instance, Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1906, A402;

Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A438.

¹¹⁶ Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 12 May, 1900, A400, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹¹⁷ Age is based on information found in letter A438, where Albert says she is about to be confirmed in the Christian faith which Albert himself did at the age of 14.

¹¹⁸ Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter, 16 November, 1897, A427, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹¹⁹ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1906, A402. The letter says the twins are about to turn two years old and that it fit that they had another boy and girl to fill the void left by the girl and boy they lost.

¹²⁰ Correspondence from O & M Gilbertson to Petter, 28 September, 1913, A433.

¹²¹ SAO Vestre Aker prestekontor Kirkebøker, F/Fa/L0004: Ministerialbok nr. 4, 1857-1877. Vestre Aker, Norway. Parish register. "Olava Augusta", 222. Digital image, digitalarkivet.no. Accessed 5 March, 2019. <https://www.digitalarkivet.no/kb20060208030841>.

¹²² Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter, 9 July, 1900, A431, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Correspondence from O & M Gilbertson to Petter, 28 September, 1913, A433.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

3.2.6 Ragna Fitzgerald, née Gilbertson

Ragna Beata was born in Vestre Aker, Norway on 4 June, 1874.¹²⁶ She lived with her family until she married John Fitzgerald on 2 June, 1897 in Ellsworth.¹²⁷ They moved into their own place in Ellsworth which Trygve helped set up. Around 1900, about the same time as Thilla, they moved to Worthington, Minnesota where John worked as a “brake-man” between Worthington and Jasper.¹²⁸ They did not stay long before they moved to Watertown, South Dakota some time before April, 1901.¹²⁹ There John worked as a baggage-master between Watertown and Ellsworth.¹³⁰ Together they had three daughters; Hazel who was born around 1898,¹³¹ Helen who passed away February, 1906 when she was only two years old,¹³² and a daughter whose name is not mentioned.

3.2.7 Gulbrand Gilbertson

Gulbrand was born in Vestre Aker, Norway on 2 June, 1876.¹³³ In the Minnesota state censuses and letters written in English he is referred to as Gilbert indicating that he applied the same changes to his first name as the family did with their last name to better adopt to their new home.¹³⁴ Gulbrand studied at Augsburg where he graduated from the college-department in May, 1901.¹³⁵ After his studies he went on to work as a watchman at the insane asylum in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.¹³⁶ He moved to Seattle around 1907 where he worked as a motorman for the streetcar line.¹³⁷ On 22 July, 1913 he married the Scottish-American

¹²⁶ SAO Vestre Aker prestekontor Kirkebøker, F/Fa/L0004: Ministerialbok nr. 4, 1857-1877. Vestre Aker, Norway. Parish register. “Ragna Beata”, 286; Digital image, digitalarkivet.no. Accessed 5 March, 2019, <https://www.digitalarkivet.no/kb20060208030841>.

¹²⁷ Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter, 30 June, 1897, A426.

¹²⁸ Correspondence from Mina Gilbertson to Petter, 7 April, 1902, A421, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹²⁹ Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 27 April, 1901, A401.

¹³⁰ Correspondence from Mina Gilbertson to Petter, 7 April, 1902, A421.

¹³¹ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1907, A402. from 12 June, 1906 says Hazel is 8 years old at the time.

¹³² Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1907, A402.

¹³³ SAO, Vestre Aker prestekontor Kirkebøker, F/Fa/L0007: Ministerialbok nr. 7, 1875-1886. Vestre Aker, Norway. Parish register. “Gulbrand”, 61; digital image, digitalarkivet.no. Accessed 5 March, 2019, <https://www.digitalarkivet.no/kb20060829070301>.

¹³⁴ See for instance: 1885 Minnesota State Census. Nobles County, Minnesota, census records. Gilbertson, Gilbert, census ID: 1785837; digital image, MNHS.org. Accessed 22 January, 2019, <http://people.mnhs.org/finder/census/1785837>.

¹³⁵ Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 27 April, 1901, A401.

¹³⁶ Correspondence from Mina Gilbertson to Petter, 7 April, 1902, A421.

¹³⁷ Correspondence from O & M Gilbertson to Petter, 28 September, 1913, A433.

widow Mrs Edwards.¹³⁸ After having spent half a year back in Willmar with his family he decided he preferred the East and they moved back to Seattle where he resumed his work for the streetcar line.

3.2.8 Trygve Gilbertson

Trygve was born in Vestre Aker, Norway on 17 August, 1878.¹³⁹ He studied at the Norwegian Lutheran founded Augsburg seminary college in Minnesota where he graduated from the college department in the spring of 1898.¹⁴⁰ Being too young to start his theology studies and lacking the money, he taught at various schools in the Midwest until he returned in 1899 to continue his studies. He married Clara Emelia Johnson on 22 January, 1901 and the couple moved to Minneapolis where they had two boys while Trygve finished his studies.¹⁴¹ In 1902 he decided to give up being a minister and started studying to become a lawyer instead. He was working as a lawyer in Willmar in 1906 and doing well for himself.¹⁴² Sometime later he was elected to town counsel and collector for Kandiyohi County Trade Association,¹⁴³ and around 1919 he became the president of Sons of Norway.¹⁴⁴

3.2.9 Albert N. Gilbertson

Albert N. was born in Minnesota around March, 1885.¹⁴⁵ He spent much of his childhood studying and went to religious school in 1897 and attended Norwegian School that same

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ SAO, Vestre Aker prestekontor Kirkebøker, F/Fa/L0007: Ministerialbok nr. 7, 1875-1886. Vestre Aker, Norway. Parish register. "Trygve", 151; digital image, digitalarkivet.no. Accessed 5 March, 2019, <https://www.digitalarkivet.no/kb20060829070394>.

¹⁴⁰ Correspondence from Trygve Gilbertson to Petter, 20 October, 1897, A449, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹⁴¹ Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 27 April, 1901, A401.

¹⁴² Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1907, A402.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 6 April, 1919, A448.

¹⁴⁵ The Minnesota State Census of 1905 lists Albert as a resident of state for 20 years and 3 months while the rest of his family are listed as 21 years. The 1905 census as well as the 1895 lists him as born in Minnesota meaning his residence period should coincide with his age.

1905 Minnesota State Census. Kandiyohi County, Minnesota, census records. Gilbertson, Albert N, census ID: 1784714; digital image, MNHS.org. Accessed 22 January, 2019. <http://people.mnhs.org/finder/census/1784714>.

summer.¹⁴⁶ He came down with a bad case of pneumonia on 24 March, 1899, and it looked like he was going to pass away several times the following weeks until he finally recovered in late May.¹⁴⁷ The following autumn he resumed his studies and went to school in Willmar every day except Saturdays, putting great effort into his studies. He started high school in 1900 where he was taught subjects like Latin, Physics, Algebra and classical English. After graduating in 1906 he worked as a reporter for the local newspaper over the summer before he began his “Baccalaurene Artium” at the University of Minnesota in the autumn with the prospect of becoming a teacher.¹⁴⁸ Upon graduating the university in 1908 he considered studying in Europe, either in Christiania, Norway, or in Great Britain or Germany, as this would make it easier for him to become a college professor. The language would not be a problem as Albert was fluent in German and French as well as English and Norwegian.¹⁴⁹ In 1913 he received his doctorate in Philosophy at Clark University, Worcester¹⁵⁰ in Massachusetts where he also met his wife, Beatrice Gilbertson.¹⁵¹ They moved back to Minnesota where Albert got a job lecturing at the University of Minnesota while his wife studied Norwegian at the University and took some of Albert’s classes. Sometime before 1919 they moved back to Massachusetts.

3.2.10 Mina & Marie Gilbertson

Mina and Bertha Marie, often referred to as “The Gilbertson Sisters”, both lived in Ellsworth, Minnesota. Mina was born in Minnesota around February, 1875 to Norwegian parents,¹⁵² while Marie was born around April, 1878, also in Minnesota. In 1899 they bought a millinery store in Ellsworth which they ran together for many years.¹⁵³ Marie married Albert W Nelson

1895 Minnesota State Census. Nobles County, Minnesota, census records. Gilbertson, Albert, census ID: 1784700; digital image, MNHS.org. Accessed 22 January, 2019. <http://people.mnhs.org/finder/census/1784700>.

¹⁴⁶ Correspondence from Trygve Gilbertson to Petter, 20 October, 1897, A449.

¹⁴⁷ Correspondence from Ole & Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 28 June, 1899, A429, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹⁴⁸ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1907, A402.

¹⁴⁹ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A438.

¹⁵⁰ At Clark Albert particularly worked on the cultural patterns of ethics among the Eskimo, as well as the theme of folklore.

¹⁵¹ Correspondence from O & M Gilbertson to Petter, 28 September, 1913, A433.

¹⁵² 1905 Minnesota State Census. Nobles County, Minnesota, census records. Gilbertson, Mina, census ID: 1787033; digital image, MNHS.org. Accessed 22 January, 2019, <http://people.mnhs.org/finder/census/1787033>.

¹⁵³ Correspondence from Ole & Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 28 June, 1899, A429.

on Christmas Day, 1906, and they took over Nelson's farm.¹⁵⁴ Mina married carpenter Raymond Webber 27 June, 1916 and they continued living in Ellsworth.¹⁵⁵

There is no explicit reference as to how Mina and Marie were related to the other Gilbertsons. They never appear in censuses with a father¹⁵⁶ but their mother was Annie Gilbertson. Annie was born around 1845 in Norway, and moved to Minnesota around May, 1874.¹⁵⁷ She had another daughter, Annie Jr., around 1873.¹⁵⁸ Annie Jr. was born in Norway meaning they must have emigrated soon after her birth. Though the letters never explicitly say how they are related to the other Gilbertsons, Mina refers to Petter as her cousin and Marthe as "Aunt Martha Gilbertson"¹⁵⁹ so it is likely that either her mother or unnamed father was related to Ole Gilbertson.

3.2.11 Petter Olaussen

Petter came to America sometime before August, 1893 and stayed a brief time with Gulbrand Paulsen in Wittenberg, Wisconsin before coming to Ellsworth, Minnesota.¹⁶⁰ He stayed in Ellsworth until early 1897 when he remigrated back to Norway, making him one of the numerous other young Norwegians partaking in circular migration. Back in Vestre Aker, Norway he joined the military serving under King Oscar II of Sweden and Norway.¹⁶¹ He married in 1902, and they moved to Kongsbergaden no 14 where they later had children.

Petter is sometimes referred to as "Petter Olaussen"¹⁶² and other times as "Petter Gilbertson". One envelope addressed to Petter Olaussen mentions "Olaus Gulbrandsen"¹⁶³ and as Norway still used a patronymic naming system at this time it is likely that Olaus Gulbrandsen was Petter's dad and Ole's brother. This is likely as Ole and Marthe sign their

¹⁵⁴ Correspondence from Mina Gilbertson to Petter, 29 December, 1906, A422, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹⁵⁵ Correspondence from Mrs Raymond Webber to Petter, 4 December, 1916, A447, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹⁵⁶ Or male.

¹⁵⁷ 1905 Minnesota State Census. Nobles County, Minnesota, census records. Gilbertson, Anna, census ID: 1784887; digital image, MNHS.org. Accessed 22 January, 2019. <http://people.mnhs.org/finder/census/1784887>.

¹⁵⁸ 1895 Minnesota State Census. Nobles County, Minnesota, census records. Gilbertson Junior, Annie, census ID: 1784965; digital image, MNHS.org. Accessed 22 January, 2019, <http://people.mnhs.org/finder/census/1784965>.

¹⁵⁹ Correspondence from Mrs Raymond Webber to Petter, 4 December 1916, A447.

¹⁶⁰ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A438.

¹⁶¹ Correspondence from Trygve Gilbertson to Petter, 20 October, 1897, A449.

¹⁶² Or "Olausen"

¹⁶³ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A438.

letters with uncle and aunt, and their children and Mina refer to Petter as their cousin. The use of Gilbertson as a last name was restricted to Petter's time in America and is likely a case of conforming to the American system.

3.4 Identity in the New World

As is the case for any immigrant, the members of the Gilbertson family had to find their own place and identity in the Minnesota. With the exception of Albert, they had all been born in Norway and brought with them some memories of their birth country. Now they faced the question of how much of their past would make up their identity and how much they wished to assimilate into their new society.

This section will use for its basis the theory presented in chapter 2 concerning the three responses found among immigrants and their cultural identity. The theory will be applied to a reading of the Gilbertson family's letters in the pursuit of gaining an understanding of how they adapted to their new lives in the United States. The primary focus of this chapter will be on Ole, Marthe, Trygve and Albert as these are the family members whose letters are still preserved and from which we have adequate materials to base such a reading on.

3.4.1 Affirming One's Old World Identity

As we saw in chapter one, Norwegian immigrants tended to settle down in highly concentrated Norwegian areas where they formed their own communities and often settlements. These communities in turn provided an excellent environment for preserving their Old World traditions, language and culture. From the letters it is clear that both Ellsworth and Willmar were areas with a large number of Norwegian immigrants, and that the Gilbertsons stayed in touch with many of these Norwegian families.¹⁶⁴

Another indication that Norwegians were a substantial ethnic group and made up a significant part of the area's population comes from the local media. Willmar housed several

¹⁶⁴ Ole and Marthe frequently wrote about other Norwegian families in their letters: how they were doing and what they were up to. The Norwegian Emigrant Museum's archive also holds letters from other Norwegian friends of the Gilbertsons like J. A. Thompson, Charlie Larsen, and Gulbrand Paulsen.

newspapers catered to Norwegians immigrants, like “Western Minnesota Press” which was published both in English and Norwegian,¹⁶⁵ and “Willmar Tribune” which included updates on current events in Norway, Sweden and Denmark.¹⁶⁶ The Norwegian Free Church was also active in Willmar and they published their own magazine called “Folkebladet” which the Gilbertsons subscribed to and sent to Petter so he could read about what was happening in Minnesota and the rest of the nation.¹⁶⁷

The church was another essential institution in the society which helped maintain the Old World ways, and the Gilbertsons were ardent churchgoers. Upon moving to Willmar, Ole and Marthe joined the congregation on their meeting 1 January, 1897 and were active participants in the Norwegian Free Church in Willmar.¹⁶⁸ They went to numerous events, often several times a week,¹⁶⁹ and three times Ole gave money in order to help build the new church in Willmar.¹⁷⁰ Ole was a religious man who hardly wrote a letter without any mention of God or reciting words he must have heard from the local priest. He wrote about the funeral of Thilla’s daughter Túlla, saying how the priest Gynil first held a speech in English at their home before delivering the funeral in Norwegian at the church.¹⁷¹

Marthe Gilbertson

Out of all the Gilbertsons, Marthe seems to have been the only one who never fully adapted to her new home. Though we have few letters written solely from her, she did write two very revealing letters illustrating how she felt about her life in the States.¹⁷² The first letter is dated Willmar, 21 July, 1907.¹⁷³ In it she wrote about their decision to sell the farm and shared with Petter some of their thoughts about the future. They had not decided yet what they were

¹⁶⁵ “About Western Minnesota press”. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, accessed 17 April, 2019, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89081001/>.

¹⁶⁶ “About Willmar tribune”. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, accessed 17 April, 2019, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89081022/>; “Willmar Tribune.” *Minnesota Digital Newspaper Hub*, accessed 17 April, 2019, <http://www.mnhs.org/newspapers/hub/willmar-tribune>.

¹⁶⁷ See for instance Correspondence from Ole & Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 28 June, 1899, A429;

Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter, 31 July, 1898, A428, *America Letters Collection*, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

¹⁶⁸ Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter Gilbertson, 20 January, 1897, A425; “Obituary – Ole Gilbertson”. *The Willmar Tribune*, 30 December, 1914.

¹⁶⁹ Correspondence from Ole & Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 28 June, 1899, A429.

¹⁷⁰ Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 6 April, 1919, A448.

¹⁷¹ Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter Gilbertson, 20 January, 1897, A425.

¹⁷² Ole would often write the letters and end them from the both of them: “From your uncle and aunt Ole and Marthe Gilbertson”, my translation.

¹⁷³ Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson [din tante] to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A423.

going to do once the farm was sold but Marthe championed the thought of moving back to Norway now that the kids were all grown. The second letter is dated, 6 April, 1919, about two years after Ole passed away.¹⁷⁴ Written in Ellsworth, the letter is confessional, bringing to light worries and thoughts unseen in previous letters about debts, Ole's thoughtless spending habits, and other chronic problems with Ole's family.

We have thought about whether we should go to Norway to live out the rest of our days. I think I would like that; I think a different climate would help with my illness, and then it's so strange when you do not know the language, and you know it's mostly English spoken in our family. Three are married to the English and you know the children do not speak Norwegian and I feel so alienated from them. I have previously said that should I live to become 70 years old, I would see Norway again. Since Albert has written you, I would just like to ask you a question Petter: if we saved about a thousand dollars, could we live out our days back home (...)? We would like to live in the outskirts of a city where it is easy to get to church and such...¹⁷⁵

As we can see from the passage, and which is further expressed in her letters, Marthe still felt a strong connection to Norway and identified as a Norwegian living in America, and not as a Norwegian-American. This is perhaps most evident in the fact that she does not speak English despite having lived in the United States for 23 years, and despite the rest of her family having learned the language. From the 1905 Minnesota State Census we know that Marthe's primary occupation was housekeeper, meaning she had less need to interact with English speakers and less opportunity to integrate into American society.¹⁷⁶ This does not mean that she was isolated on the farm. As we have seen, both Marthe and Ole were active in the local church community. The congregation of the Norwegian Free Church was naturally predominantly Norwegian, and sermons and ceremonies were mostly given in Norwegian meaning that for Marthe, and many others, it allowed them to maintain their Old World ways and did not need to take part in the Anglo-American society.

¹⁷⁴ Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 6 April, 1919, A448.

¹⁷⁵ Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson [din tante] to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A423, my translation.

Original text: "...vi har tængt lit paa om vi skulde reise til Norge og leve vore siste dage, jeg synes jeg har lyst til det, jeg tror det vilde hjelpe for min sygdom at komme i et andet klima, og saa er det saa rart naar man ikke kan sproget, og det ved du er mest Engelsk i vor Familie 3 er jo gift med engelske og da ved du Barna kan ikke norsk, saa det blir saa fremet jeg har for sagt at levede jeg til blir 70ti aar skulde jeg se norge da Albert har skrevet saa meget, vil jeg bare gjøre dig Petter at Spørgsmaal tror du at om vi fik et par Tusind Dollar tilbeste eller der om kring, om det kunde hjelpe os til en stille sørgfri Alderdom der hjemme (...) vi skulde nu like at være i en Bye i en údkant vor det var let at komme i Kirke og forsjelligt".

¹⁷⁶ 1905 Minnesota State Census. Kandiyohi County, Minnesota, census records. Gilbertson, Martha, census ID: 1786824; digital image, MNHS.org. Accessed 22 January, 2019. <http://people.mnhs.org/finder/census/1786824>.

The passage also goes to show Marthe's desire to return to her home country now that their children were cared for and had families of their own. She never got to move back to her beloved Norway, but from her next letter we learn that she went back to Norway for a visit and that "the Norway trip was good for me".¹⁷⁷ She appears to have been the only one in the family who went back to visit relatives and she writes fondly of her time there, concluding "it was hard a lot of the time in Norway but Norway is still dearest to me".¹⁷⁸

Therefore, it seems accurate to conclude that Marthe belongs in Øverland's group of immigrants who maintained their Old World loyalties and identity. Marthe found a community in which she could keep her heritage alive and remained first and foremost a Norwegian. What interactions she had outside of the farm seems dominantly to be with other Norwegians since she did not know any other language she could communicate with. Though we cannot say whether she enjoyed her new home or not, it is clear that her loyalty still lay with Norway and she always identified as Norwegian.

3.4.2 Complementary Identities

Where Marthe embraced the re-created Norwegian society in Willmar and reaffirmed her Old World identity, Ole, Trygve and Albert found a way to combine their Old World identity with the New World. Appreciating their heritage and maintaining an interest in the affairs of their old home country they maintained a loyalty to their Norwegian roots while at the same time taking on a complementary identity embracing the possibilities offered to them in the U.S. With their different experiences and relations to Norway, Ole, Trygve and Albert offer us three different views on how immigrants adopted to their new home.

Ole was born and raised in Norway and left the country of his own choice as a grown man at the age of 40, and naturally had close ties to his home country. Trygve was only about six years old when they emigrated so his ties to Norway were more restricted though still present. He probably had some memories of his home country and spent his formative years raised according to Norwegian customs, though judging from his letter he did not seem to remember many of the people: "You must greet all your folks from me. I do not know any of

¹⁷⁷ Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 6 April, 1919, A448, my translation.
Original text: "ja den Norgestûr var nok godt for Mig".

¹⁷⁸ Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 6 April, 1919, A448, my translation.
Original text: "det var haart mange gange i Norge, men Norge er kjærest alige vel".

them, and I don't suppose They know me. But you can tell them who I am".¹⁷⁹ Albert was born in Minnesota and as far as we can tell never went to Norway.¹⁸⁰ His knowledge of Norway and Norwegian customs was therefore limited to what he was taught by his family and other Norwegians in the United States. Albert also had a natural loyalty to the U.S. as it was his country of birth. In sum, the various degrees of connectivity to Norway seems to be inversely related to the degree in which they integrated in Anglo-American society.

Ole Gilbertson

As the patriarch, Ole had to learn English in order to support his family. Though Norwegians preferred to maintain a self-sufficient livelihood, there was still a great advantage as well as necessity in partaking in society and interacting with other immigrants and the Anglo-Americans. Ole drove milk to the creamery three times a week,¹⁸¹ and took care of most of the shopping.¹⁸² He used several English words in his letters, especially when talking about farm life, including words like "farm", "harvest", "creamery", "Rail Road" and "bos"¹⁸³ indicating the necessity for him to know these terms in order to go about his business. Ole also seems to have been, at least to a certain degree, involved with American politics as he several times mentions William McKinley and the election.¹⁸⁴

Nevertheless, it seems like Ole maintained a strong connection to Norway as well. He spent the first half of his life living in Norway and even though he decided to leave it was an undeniable part of his identity. Although we do not know what made the Gilbertsons leave Norway it does not seem like it was from a lack of fondness for their country. From the constant mentioning of other Norwegians in Willmar and Ellsworth it seems like Ole and Marthe kept in touch with several Norwegians family and still sought out familiar connections. As an avid churchgoer Ole had, like Marthe, a natural connection to the Norwegian culture and society and we know from Marthe's letter that Ole on several occasions helped contribute to the Norwegian Free Church community.¹⁸⁵ Unlike Marthe,

¹⁷⁹ Correspondence from Trygve Gilbertson to Petter, 20 October, 1897, A449.

¹⁸⁰ The Norwegian Emigrant Museum's archives do not contain any letters from the Gilbertsons after 1919 so we cannot say for certain that he never visited Norway after this.

¹⁸¹ Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter Gilbertson, 20 January, 1897, A425.

¹⁸² Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 6 April, 1919, A448.

¹⁸³ Misspelled in the letter. Should read "boss". Correspondence from O & M Gilbertson to Petter, 28 September, 1913, A433.

¹⁸⁴ See for instance correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter, 16 November, 1897, A427.

¹⁸⁵ Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 6 April, 1919, A448.

however, this community was not the only one Ole experienced and interacted with and it seem safe to conclude that while Ole too maintained a Norwegian loyalty and identity, he also adopted to his new home and took on a Norwegian-American complementary identity.

Trygve Gilbertson

Trygve lived most of his life in the United States and appears to have integrated well into the American society. He went to school and received a degree from the Norwegian Lutheran founded Augsburg seminary college in Minnesota.¹⁸⁶ We know that he learned English as he spent some time teaching English in various places in the Midwest and the one letter that the Norwegian Emigrant Museum's archives have by him was written in English and shows his mastery of the language.¹⁸⁷ In the letter, dated Augsburg 20 October, 1897, Trygve talked about McKinley and the Republicans, and gave his opinion on the government showing he took interest in what was happening in his new country. A particularly interesting passage shows how he appreciated his new country's political system and how he wished this for his old home:

Now since you have been in the U.S. and seen how things work in a Republic, can't you do something towards getting rid of that great nuisance called a king in Norway, and set up a republic there also, with for example Björnstjerne Björnson as president? You better try.¹⁸⁸

The passage shows a pride in American political institutions. His reasons for advocating republicanism in Norway indicates (a) his knowledge of the conditions in Norway at the time and his belief that they could improve, and (b) that he subscribed to the American ideals believing other countries should follow America's example. It demonstrates his continuous interest in the affairs of Norway and his still felt loyalty towards his country of birth in that he wishes a better future for it and better conditions for his fellow Norwegians. It also demonstrates an appreciation for his family's country of choice and loyalty towards this society.

Trygve's continuous interest and appreciation for his old country is not only shown in his interest for improving the conditions in Norway, it is most clearly shown by his appointment

¹⁸⁶ "About Augsburg University: History", Augsburg University, accessed 19 April, 2019, <https://www.augsburg.edu/about/history/>

¹⁸⁷ Correspondence from Trygve Gilbertson to Petter, 20 October, 1897, A449.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

to President of Sons of Norway.¹⁸⁹ Sons of Norway was, and still is, a fraternal benefit society founded by eighteen Norwegian-Americans in Minnesota in 1895 with the purpose to protect its members against financial hardship during times of sickness and death.¹⁹⁰ The society is also concerned with the preservation of Norwegian culture and tradition. The leading position in the fraternity, combined with his continuous interest in the state of affairs in Norway, shows a man who still identified with his Norwegian roots and who participated in the Norwegian society in Minnesota. His still felt loyalty towards Norway is expressed again later in the same letter: “I wish I could take a trip to Norway pretty soon too. I should very much like to see that dear old country again. And I will too, some day; just as true as I live that long.”¹⁹¹

Through his work as a lawyer, town councilman and collector for Kandiyohi County Trade Association Trygve was evidently an active member of the society and interacted with his fellow Norwegian immigrants as well as with the population at large. He seems to have found a way to combine his loyalty to Norway with an appreciation of his new country and its ideology and way of government. He saw ways in which his Norwegian heritage helped him fit into a society in the United States but never excluded the possibilities and opportunities offered by the American society. He believed in the Republicanism introduced to him by America and saw ways in which the ways of his new country could benefit his old country. His connection to the U.S. did not mean he felt he had to renounce his childhood country in order to be a valuable citizen, nor did he seem to believe he could not be Norwegian if he renounced “that great nuisance called a king in Norway” and advocated the ways of his new home. To an even greater extent than his father, Trygve seems to have had a complimentary identity where he first and foremost was a Norwegian-American.

Albert N. Gilbertson

Albert was born and raised among Norwegians in Minnesota and though he never lived in Norway he still felt a connection to the land of his family, calling it the “Land of the Vikings’ pride”.¹⁹² He enjoyed the privileges afforded him in his new country attending religious school, the local high school, University of Minnesota and Clark University as well as

¹⁸⁹ Correspondence from Marthe Gilbertson to Petter, 6 April, 1919, A448.

¹⁹⁰ “History”, Sons of Norway, accessed 5 April, 2019, https://www.sofn.com/about_us/history/.

¹⁹¹ Correspondence from Trygve Gilbertson to Petter, 20 October, 1897, A449.

¹⁹² Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 27 April, 1901, A401.

Norwegian summer school in his youth.¹⁹³ English was a natural part of his life, and he tells Petter that he understands English just as well as Norwegian. This is evident in that he did write letters both in English and Norwegian, sometimes writing most of it in English before ending it in Norwegian.¹⁹⁴ He was aware of what was happening in both Norway and the United States, keeping up with American and Norwegian newspapers alike.¹⁹⁵

Albert's interest in what was happening in Norway can be traced back to his earliest letters when he, 14 years old, writes to Petter in 1899 saying: "I think you would do best in returning to America again, it sounds like there will be hard times in Norway".¹⁹⁶ In a letter dated 27 April, 1901, he mentions reading papers about what was happening in Norway and shows an understanding of the conditions in Norway going back a couple of years: "I see in the papers that times have changed in Norway, and that people are starving to-death in Christiania. Well, that could be expected after such a big 'boom' as was going on there a couple of years ago. I believe if you came to this country you could easily find a good and steady job".¹⁹⁷ These passages suggest that Albert was a man who took an interest in his home country and what was happening there. The first citation not only goes to show his interest in the conditions in Norway, it also suggests a loyalty towards the United States. When suggesting Petter should move away from Norway before the conditions worsen he specifically suggests America instead of the many other options available to Petter. Although this might be because Petter previously had lived in the States, Albert would not have suggested it had he not meant America was a good place to live.

When the new Norwegian king ascended to the throne in 1905 following the dissolution of the union between Norway and Sweden, Albert wrote: "We Norwegian-Americans have followed with interest and sympathy the events in the old country the passing year. Live a free Norway, and independent people!".¹⁹⁸ On the same event two years

¹⁹³ See for instance Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter, 30 June, 1897, A426; Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 27 April, 1901, A401; Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1907, A402; Correspondence from Trygve Gilbertson to Petter, 20 October, 1897, A449.

¹⁹⁴ Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 27 April, 1901, A401.

¹⁹⁵ See for instance Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 27 April, 1901, A401: "I see in the papers that times have changed in Norway..."

¹⁹⁶ Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 18 November, 1899, A436, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway, my translation.

Original text: "Jeg tror du gjør bedst i at komme til America igjen, det høres ud som det blir daarlige tider i Norge."

¹⁹⁷ Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 27 April, 1901, A401.

¹⁹⁸ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1907, A402, my translation.

Original text: "Vi norske Amerikaner har fulgt med interesse og sympati med beginhederne i det gamle land det forgangne aar. Leve et frit Norge, et selvstændigt Folk!"

later he wrote: “We Norwegians in Vesterheimen¹⁹⁹ have not forgotten old Norway, and it was with excitement and interest that we watched the events over there”²⁰⁰ before he went on to cite the first stanza of the patriotic psalm and national hymn “Gud signe Noregs land”.

Albert’s writing on the liberation of Norway not only illustrate his knowledge and interest in the affairs of his “old country” but they also tell us something about his and many other Norwegian immigrants’ cultural identity. He refers to himself as a Norwegian-American clearly showing that he identified and felt connected both to his Norwegian roots as well as to the American society in which he was raised and lived. In the same letter he admits: “It is not only the old who longs for Norway. I would myself be happy about an opportunity to travel over there and see what possibilities Europe holds”.²⁰¹

Norway was not the only country Albert kept up with. Albert had a natural connection to the United States unlike that of his family in that it was his country of birth. He spent his formative years surrounded by both Norwegian and American society. He attended the local schools and received an American education. From an early age he wrote letters describing events and aspects of American life such as a detailed description of “one of the most heroic acts ever performed”²⁰² by Lt. Hobson in the Spanish American War, the “worst political election in living memory”²⁰³ in 1900, and the following conditions under William McKinley’s presidency.²⁰⁴ He was not shy to share his view on the “capitalistic ascendancy”²⁰⁵ and “robber-politics”²⁰⁶ that McKinley represented, nor was he shy about sharing his take on the American society at large.

¹⁹⁹ Term used by Norwegian-Americans to refer to their ethnic community in the United States. It translates into “the western home”. See Øverland *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, 25 for further explanation on the use of the term.

²⁰⁰ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A438, my translation.

Original text: ”Vi nordmænd i vesterheimen har ikke glemt gamle Norge, og det var med spent interesse at vi fulgte begivenhederne derover”.

²⁰¹ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A438, my translation. Original text: ”Det er ikke bare de gamle som langes til Norge. Jeg selv skulde glædes over andledning til at reise derover og se hvad udsigter der kunde være i Europa”.

²⁰² Correspondence from Albert to Petter, Unknown, A439, America Letters Collection, Norwegian Emigrant Museum Archives, Ottestad, Hedmark, Norway.

²⁰³ Correspondence from Albert N Gilbertson to Petter, 9 December, 1900, A437, my translation. Original text: “Den værste politiske-valgkamp i mands minde”.

²⁰⁴ See for instance correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1907, A402; Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A438.

²⁰⁵ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1907, A402, my translation.

Original text: “kapitalistiske Herredømme”.

²⁰⁶ Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter, 9 July, 1900, A431, my translation.

Original text: “röver-politik”.

Of all the Gilbertsons, Albert is the most persistent in urging Petter to return to America, constantly offering information about the demand for workers and their wages, as well as reassuring him that the conditions are better in America now than they were when he was there last.²⁰⁷ In every one of his letters he always tells Petter to come back to America for one reason or another.²⁰⁸ As a consequence of this we get to hear a lot about Albert's take on the American society and he also offered some criticism of it:

Capitalism and plutocracy control about everything in nation and society. The American worker seems to be very late in waking up to class consciousness which is probably because he's been taught since he learned to walk that here there is "prosperity, "liberty", "equality"²⁰⁹ and such illusions require hard hits to get out of one's head, though there are signs of refractions from the current conditions, and we should hope that the "independent", complacent "Yankee" will awake to a sensation of his rights as a human and worker.²¹⁰

One could read Albert's observations and criticism of American society and Yankees ignorance to what is going on as a foreigner with a negative view of the American society and the lies and illusions on which it is built. Such a reading would present Albert as a Norwegian distancing himself from the country he is living in and rejecting an American identity. However, there is nothing else in his or his family's letters which would support such a reading. Albert's endorsement of America in his letters to Petter as well as his interest in what is happening in America demonstrates his strong feelings for and connection to the United States. Considering this, such a passage can be read as an American who is aware of the changes in American society, what the general American is taught about his country, and has an understanding of the ideas it is based upon and wants to see an improvement. More than anything such criticism goes to show someone who did not blindly accept American society in a desperate attempt to get accepted and viewed as an American. It goes to show someone who felt secure in his right to live and be accepted as American and still disagree with aspects of it.

²⁰⁷ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 13 June, 1907, A402.

²⁰⁸ As we saw in section 3.1 this might simply be Albert being polite. Still, many of these encouragements are specific to Petter's situation and reads as an endorsement of America.

²⁰⁹ "prosperity", "liberty" and "equality" are written in English and in quotation marks in the original letter.

²¹⁰ Correspondence from Albert Gilbertson to Petter, 21 July, 1907, A438, my translation.

Original text: "Kapitalisme og penge-vældet styrer saa godt som alt i stat og samfund. Den amerikanske arbeider synes at være meget sên til at vaagne op til klassebevisthed og der er vel fordi fra barnsben af blir vi fortalt at her er det "prosperity", "liberty", "equality", og saadanne illusioner maa det haarde stød til at faa ut av hovedet, men der er dog tegn til brydninger med det nuværende forhold, og vi faar haabe at den "uafhængige" selvgode "yankee" kommer til at vaagne til følelse af sin ret som menneske og arbeider".

More so than his father and brother, Albert had a natural and stronger connection to the United States, it being the land of his birth. Albert was not shy to air his criticism of the road he believed America was on and of which he did not approve. Nevertheless, this criticism came from a feeling of belonging to American society and a right and duty to help improve it. His sense of belonging and loyalty towards Norway does not seem to have been absent even though he never lived there. Albert took a keen interest in the affairs of Norway having been raised among Norwegians and even refers to himself as a Norwegian-American when talking about the dissolution of the union between Norway and Sweden. His connection to Norway was probably not as strong as that of his father who had lived half his life there and knew plenty of people still in Norway, or as his brother, but he nonetheless took pride in his Norwegian heritage and felt a belonging to both countries.

3.5 Concluding Remarks on the Gilbertsons' Sense of Their Norwegiansness.

Out of the three different responses outlined by Øverland and Gjerde on immigrants' adaptation to a new society, only two seem to apply to the examined members of the Gilbertson family. The most common response seems to have been finding an identity which embraced their old country while also seeking to adapt to their new surroundings. While Marthe is the only one who seems to have struggled to feel a connection to the American society, it is interesting that none of them gave up on their Norwegian roots or ceased to identify with Norway to some extent.

In Marthe's letter we learn that not one of her grandchildren at the time spoke much Norwegian indicating that though the foreign-born Gilbertsons (and Albert), experienced a strong loyalty to Norway this did not live on much past the first generation. If this is a result of the Americanisation process that was dominant at the time and which is known to have greatly affected particular second-generation immigrants, we can only speculate. We do know, however, that the term and concept was known to the Gilbertsons as Ole used it in a letter to Petter before he remigrated saying he thought it would be a bad idea for Petter, having been so Americanised, to return to Norway.²¹¹

²¹¹ Correspondence from Ole Gilbertson to Petter Gilbertson, 20 January, 1897, A425.

What Ole meant when he used the term “Americanised” was not the assimilationists meaning which we have seen referred to the process of assimilation of immigrants into the American society and shedding of their Old World identities. Rather, he meant that Petter had taken up and embraced the American ideology, while maintaining a complementary identity. In this lays an understanding that now Petter had seen how things could be in America; with a republic and the founding belief of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, he could not simply accept the ways of the old country. Even though Petter had eventually decided that his greatest loyalty lay with his family and Norway, he still retained part of his American life and continued to take an interest in the state of affairs in America.

The fear of the Anglo-Americans that immigrants brought with them ideas from the Old World which would threaten their nation and the Republic does not seem to have been necessary when it comes to the Gilbertson family. Both Trygve and Albert championed a republican government and the ideas upon which the American society was founded. Albert indicating, and Trygve explicitly saying, they wished to see it instituted in Norway and other nations. This does not mean they denied their Norwegian roots, of course. Nor did it undermine their pride in their Norwegian backgrounds. They did not believe they had to renounce their old world identity in order to find a place in the New World.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to return the attention back to the everyday people who uprooted their lives in Norway in the search for a better life in the United States of America. From looking at the grand narratives of the Great Atlantic Migration in chapter one, to the focus on a small group of individuals who partook in the migration in chapter three, the aim of this project was to provide a human face to the migration. By focusing on how one family found a new home in the United States, and how they built a cultural identity, one can develop a better understanding of this Great Event in history as it was experienced by the people involved.

A focus on the homemaking process and the establishing of a (new) cultural identity allows us to simultaneously examine the individual and the society they live in. A focus on cultural identity tells us a lot about the homemaking process and the experience of migrating, as well as it reflects back on both Norwegian and American society. Since the immigrant's sense of cultural identity comes from the way they combined certain aspects of each of the cultures they felt a belonging to, which aspects that was carried on and which was adapted in their new society is a great comment on the everyman's feelings about the different cultures. More importantly, by exploring their cultural identity we get a better understanding of how the Great Migration was experienced by the people who participated in it and to what extent they felt they had achieved the "American Dream".

Summary and Findings

During the 19th and 20th century more than 50 million Europeans emigrated to the United States of America, around 900,000 of them Norwegian. This mass exodus was one of the greatest human migrations in history and was triggered in large part by an overpopulation and rising socio-economic problems which pushed immigrants to emigrate. The United States pulled with their promise of free land and a better life with plenty of available work and higher salaries. "America Letters" sent to friends and family back home contributed to more people emigrated and settling down in the same areas as the ones who had sent the letters.

This created settlements which were heavily dominated by one particular ethnic group. Norwegians tendencies to settle in rural areas created isolated settlements which helped preserve Norwegian cultural in America.

The massive rush of immigrants and their tendency to settled down in ethnically concentrated areas spurred on an Americanisation movement with the aim of acculturating the immigrants. The movement provoked three different responses among the immigrants: some felt the need to shed their Old World identity in order to prove themselves as Americans, others to reaffirm their Old World identity and insist that they too belonged in America, yet others found a way to combine both loyalties and formed complimentary identities becoming “Hyphenated-Americans.”

The study of letters written by a family who immigrated to the United States at the end of the 19th century suggests that the most common response of willingly immigrants is to form a complementary identity where one combines aspects of the old and new culture in order to form a new cultural identity. While this study is limited in its scope and do not examine enough immigrants in order to confidently comment on how many immigrants chose the different responses, it seems to suggest that many immigrants could not readily forget their roots and old loyalties. None in the Gilbertson family shed their old world identity completely. Out of the Gilbertson family members that this paper examined only Marthe steadfastly maintained a Norwegian identity while the other to different degrees embraced a complementary identity. It would have been interesting to hear how the other women in the family adapted to their new country and if the experience was greatly different for women than for men. We do however know that they married English-speaking men and that all their children spoke English and little Norwegian, suggesting that they too embraced, at least partially, an American identity.

What this exploration of the everyday life and cultural identity of a Norwegian family in Minnesota has seen is that the common immigrant seems to have been more preoccupied with their daily life than with any desire to change America. They settled down in concentrated areas not because they intended to spread their ethnic culture or refused to integrate into the America society, but simply because it was consoling to be surrounded by likeminded people in the same situation. The Gilbertsons, with the exception of Marthe, happily accepted the “American” way of life: already in the first generation of children born in the United States, the Norwegian traits were starting to fade out. The Gilbertsons, and most immigrants, seems to have been more preoccupied with the possibilities offered to them in

America, like owning their own land and getting an education in order to live the life they wanted, than anything else.

Future Work

There is no small task to learn a field in less than half year, and this paper bears traces of it. There are many essential researches and theories which could have been applied, and many more angles to examine. In order to fully benefit from a micro perspective of the immigration it would be useful to look closer at the local community in which the Gilbertsons lived. This could be done with more extensive and time consuming research by going over censuses reports, local registers, records and newspapers to get a fuller picture of the community and what coloured their daily lives. Furthermore, in order to fully understand the experience of the migration experience and the immigrants' responses to finding a new home in America it would be beneficial to explore more immigrants' experiences, preferably in the same community, in order to see if their experiences coincide with that of the Gilbertsons.

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