

NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

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A NORWEGIAN DYE NARRATIVE

(OR HOW KORKJE BABY CAME TO CANADA, ONLY TO DYE IN MAINE)

by *Karen Diadick Casselman*

Authorities on Norwegian korkje, a red/purple made from the lichen *Ochrolechia tartarea*, describe how to preserve and store the finished dye by evaporating the moisture (a mixture of ammonia and water), then wrapping the remaining pieces of lichen in dock leaves, to form a 'cake' or a 'ball'.¹ Anyone who makes dyes will realise that instructions as vague as this require a considerable leap of faith. Undaunted, on a 1992 trip to Norway I did succeed in making korkje. But no one I discussed the dye with then, and in the years since, can verify the 'cake' process, or shed any light on it whatsoever.²

So when I talk or write about korkje, it's like beginning a bedtime story. There is some fact, a lot of fiction, and a measure of mythology in the tale, not to mention confusing history and a dose of mystery.³ Sources still disagree on how the dye is made. Of the few people who have practical knowledge of the dye (and they are few in number, even in Norway), none have been able to help me in regard to how 'korkje cakes' are made.⁴

I had researched korkje in Norway in 1992, brought home lichens, made the vat here, and done korkje dyeing, but the mythical 'cakes' eluded me. I joined the 1999 Norwegian Tour to go back and try one more time to demystify 'korkje cakes'. Tour members, inspired by Barbara Stam, christened my 1999 Arctic dye research (conducted largely in hotel bathrooms) as 'korkje baby'. The name derived from the 'coddling' Fred Stam provided to the 'baby dye vat' (a raspberry jam jar), which at various times wore hats and improvised blankets, not to mention a fingerless glove fashioned into an old-fashioned 'soaker' to prevent night-time leakage. My goal was to maintain the korkje vat at normal body temperature. Although I was completely prepared to sleep with the vat, and *did*, I hinted it would be nice to have alternative 'babysitting' options. Barbara and Fred Stam eagerly offered.

Thus 'named' by his good wife, Fred Stam carried the baby korkje vat beneath his jacket, clutched to his left side, for three weeks. (His six-foot-four figure was slightly tilted as a result, and thus distinguishable at a considerable distance, an abnormality we all attributed to his Icelandic heritage.) Fred carried 'korkje baby' on and off ferries and buses, up and down hotel stairs, in and out of Husfliden, and took it with him to restaurants, museums, and yarn shops. I slept with the 'baby' and assumed responsibility in the air where the 'bundled vat' (secure in a Vågen Folk High School towel, and an ear warmer twisted into a woolly cap) rode at my feet in the gigantic handbag I always carry, a clothing accessory which immediately identifies the mature graduate student disguised as an ordinary middle-aged women.⁵



Fred and Barbara Stam, Fallston, Maryland, pose with the baby korkje vat in Trondheim, Norway.

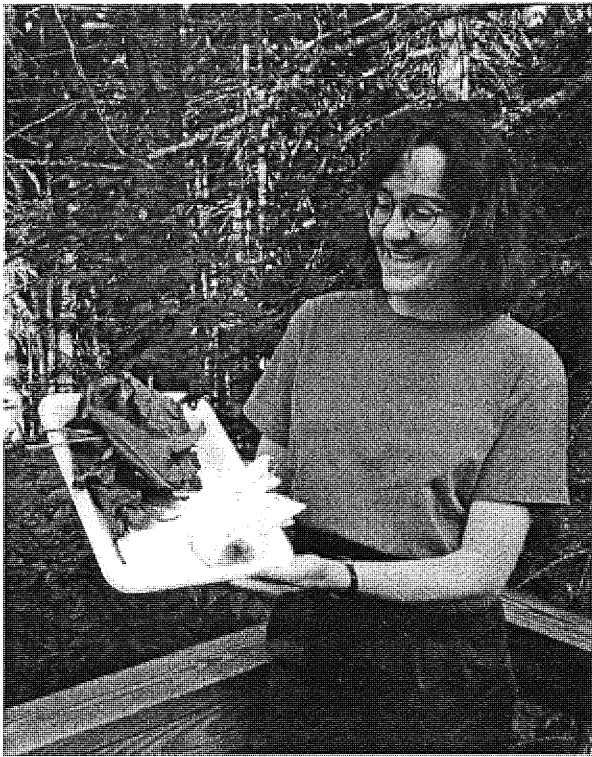
Serious research on this tour was a challenge. Every hilarious event was photographed in detail. In volume alone, this visual documentation exceeds most Royal tours. There were misadventures involving killer terns, vengeful insects, raucous sailors, reindeer meat soup, and showers with floor-to-ceiling doors that threatened to lock permanently, not to mention close escapes from the Vinminopolet where Bailey's Irish Cream sought to destroy *us*. Last but not least my concentration was further impeded by Kay's clogs, footwear which as early as 1 a.m. (sun by then rising) or as late as 5 a.m. (sun by then high and bright), would thud to the floor of the room we shared with a resounding *klump*, causing tour members in rooms below us to conclude we were making a night-time getaway because of the 'misplaced bus voucher' incident, or some other minor breach of tour etiquette.

'Korkje baby' provided a suitable revenge for the clogs. Nightly the wee vat appeared, ready for bed (as was I), many hours before Kay. Me (wearing sleep mask, earplugs and bite plate) and 'korkje baby' (the jam jar disguised as an infant) were a sight to inspire nightmares in even the most well-adjusted of weavers. It was in this atmosphere of semi-hysteria inspired by twenty-three hours of daylight that my 1999 korkje research proceeded. With such auspicious circumstances, how could I fail? Surely, I reasoned, the korkje cake we would make, when the vat fermentation was complete, would materialise into Appendix 2 of my thesis.

The lichen harvest was begun and completed on the Lofoten Islands. Aided by Sue Henrikson, I gathered enough *Ochrolechia tartarea* to prepare korkje in the raspberry jam jar 'vat'.⁶ Notwithstanding Lunde's difficulties in 1976, the preparation method is simple: you crumble the lichen into the jar, moisten it with ammonia, add a little water, replace the lid, shake vigorously, and wait a few weeks. It was another adventure to find ammonia at Vågen's two grocery shops. 'Ammoniak' on the ingredients label indicated a cleaning product that was (more or less) appropriate. Kay was relieved for the traditional alternative was urine. (She knew I was entirely prepared to *pee* in the vat if the clog thudding persisted).

Once made, the korkje vat develops best at 'warm' room temperature. (This is also the case with cudbear, and other fermented AM dyes.)⁷ At home, I put dye vats near the stove, or out on the deck. In Arctic Norway, the closest approximation to 37 Celsius was human flesh and that's why I slept with 'korkje baby' snuggled under the duvet. That's also why she needed a diaper (a fingerless grey woollen glove). That's also why Fred Stam entered the picture, résumé in hand, ready to apply for the job as daytime sitter for the baby korkje vat.

While fellow Norwegian Tour members christened the vat 'korkje baby', we can blame the bad pun (*what happened to the poor thing in Maine*) on Vesterheim textiles curator Laurann Gilbertson. Due to prior commitments, Laurann was not with us in Norway but she was able to join me seven weeks later in Steuben, Maine, where I teach a yearly dye seminar at the Humboldt Institute. There Laurann witnessed the birth and demise of 'korkje baby'. Newsletter editor and (by then) experienced 'bjørkelav' dyer, Betty Johannesen⁸ played a role, as did Iowa State Textiles and Clothing professor, Sara Kadolph, who, like Laurann, was also a Humboldt alumnus.



Fresh dock leaves were collected in Maine, at the Humboldt Institute, by Laurann Gilbertson, Textiles Curator, Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum

Høiland's description of korkje cakes call for several steps. After the dye is made and the vat ferments for several weeks, the liquid is evaporated.⁹ The lichen pieces that remain are then formed into balls and wrapped in fresh dock leaves. *Fresh* dock leaves are in short supply in

Maine, in September. Laurann and Sara's success in locating fresh *Rumex crispus* (as they drove Betty to the Bangor airport) qualified them for their eventual and dubious distinction as 'korkje baby' midwives. Even more difficult than the *Rumex* search, however, was the leap of faith required to take a gelatinous mass of purple-black lichen bits and *somehow* form them into a ball. I spread out an old pillow slip, and began. I scooped into the raspberry jam jar with a spoon, and plopped the mound on the pillow slip. Dark purple dye oozed into the cotton fabric. Now we had a purple puddle. We had a flat mound of lichen bits on top of the puddle. We had ooze. We did not have a cake, let alone the potential for one.

Try again, Laurann suggested. Next I spread saran wrap over the pillow slip, then plopped the lichen bits onto the wrap, and gradually lifted the corners. I struggled to form the mass into a cohesive ball. My mind raced back to the so-called recipe. The 'ball' of dye (the fermented lichen pieces) was supposed to be *flattened* into a cake, then wrapped in fresh dock leaves. What if we skip the 'make into a ball' part, I suggested, and go right to the 'flatten' part? Laurann agreed that sounded logical (or that's what she said *at the time*). But as soon as I flattened the mass on top of the *Rumex* leaves (*smear*ed would be closer to the truth), those precious lance-shaped green leaves, sought over many miles of Maine highway, at such great effort, became, like spokes in a wheel, a sort of sieve. The dye ran down around the leaves, over and between them, under the saran wrap, and once more oozed onto the pillow slip.

Someone said try another type of leaf. Mullein! There was a five foot high specimen of *Verbascum thapsa* within feet of where we were, bent over a stone table in the Humboldt lab. Mullein leaves can be bent. They are wider than dock. They are also *miraculously absorbent*.¹⁰ Thus it was that Laurann photo-documented me

wrapping (more or less) a sodden mass of lichen bits into mullein leaves. (Fortunately this image is too dark to reproduce.) At this point some one began to laugh. True, this scenario was not quite what I had in mind. Since 1992 I had persevered with the idea that if *only* I could use Norwegian lichens, harvested in Norway, soaked in Norwegian ammonia - not to mention *pure* Arctic water and genuine Arctic air - my korkje vat and the mythical cakes would somehow fall into place by dint of dedication, persuasion, and *belief*.

We did make the actual dye, using the remainder of the lichen pieces. The result was a soft rose on wool and silk. But the wee 'cake', shrivelled and pathetic, came back home, wrapped in the same dye-soaked pillow case. The woolly hat was gone, ditto the Folk High School coddling blanket. I stuffed the 'cake' into a used coffee tin. The remains of 'korkje baby' travelled back to Nova Scotia in the trunk of my car, only to await a suitable burial.

And it came to me in the dead of winter, on a stormy night when I figured the same ferocity of wind, were it to blow in Trondheim, would likely topple the Kunstindustriemuseet. *We should have mixed the lichen bits with something dry, in powder form.* Clearly we needed a binding agent, some sort of *glue* which would hold the lichen bits together. Technically lichen dyes do not require mordants, but what if, I asked myself, we chose as a binding agent something fairly neutral, a product that would do the trick, yet not interfere with the dye? Sugar? Soda? Alum? Salt? Mud? Then I remembered: dock leaves contain silica! Never mind wrapping! What about *mixing* the lichen bits with dock *leaves*?

That was then and this is now. The thesis temporarily deserted only six weeks from my defense date so I could fly to Norway in search of 'korkje cakes', was completed in September 1999. The photograph albums of the 1999 tour

are still in circulation. My bank account is beginning to recover. Familiar faces popped up last May when I gave an Edmonton keynote and dye workshop. A month later, in an otherwise elegant Cincinnati hotel, the words '*KORKJE'S MOMMIE, IS THAT YOU?*' floated down an escalator, across a foyer, and into a ballroom. There were Fred and Barbara Stam, ready and prepared to relive every minute of the babysitting. But when Barbara asked, excitedly, 'And how did baby korkje's patty cakes turn out in Maine?' she saw the sadness in my eyes. "Oh no," she cried, "not *dead!*"

In the interests of science and human technology, I am fully prepared to try to rebirth' korkje baby' and make those cakes. I want to share this next research stage with those who assisted me in Norway and in Maine. The 'unveiling' of my middle-of-the-stormy-night ideas about korkje cakes *and the missing ingredient (s)* will occur at the Second Norwegian Textile Conference in Seattle.¹¹ Laurann has again offered to photograph the process. Sara has promised to keep a straight face. In the interests of advancing textile history, Janet Meany will serve Mr. Tomato hors-d' oeuvres. Fred and Barbara, godparents, will stand by and wave a Norwegian flag, Oracles have been consulted: the auguries are in place.

NOTES

1 The liquid used in the dye, traditionally, would have been urine, or a mixture of urine and possibly seawater; but there are no *known* illustrations or photographs of 'korkje balls' or 'cakes', even in references such as Klaus Høiland's 'Laven korkje, *Ochrolechia tartarea*, som fargeprodusent.' *Blyttia* 41, 1983, p. 17-21. Korkje *scrapers* (to remove the lichen) are illustrated in several sources, and in 1992 I acquired an antique 'mosegrav' from the Flekkefjord region, southwest Norway,

Cont'd on pg. 12

Celebrating a Partnership in Folk Art

Marion John Nelson

Dr. Marion J. Nelson, former director of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum and professor emeritus of art history at the University of Minnesota, passed away on September 6, 2000, in Minneapolis. He had only been recently diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

Marion and his wife Lila, who served as textile curator and registrar, retired from Vesterheim in December, 1991. The Nelsons came to the museum when it was first under the auspices of Luther College and, during their 27-year tenure, Vesterheim grew into the largest, most comprehensive museum in the United States dedicated to a single immigrant group.

Marion's directorship witnessed the systematic conservation and cataloguing of the museum artifacts, the organization of the archives, the restoration of buildings, increased acquisitions and fundraising, and the integration of museum activities into the fabric of the local community and the Midwest. Under his guidance, Vesterheim also built a state-of-the-art climate-controlled storage facility for textiles, furniture and fine arts.

Marion shared his vast knowledge of Norwegian folk art with the public in his artistic displays at Vesterheim, major exhibitions that toured the U.S. and Norway, and numerous books and articles. Weavings and other textiles were featured in Norwegian Folk Art: The Migration of a Tradition, Norway in America: Folk and Decorative Arts, and Folk Arts and Crafts of the Norwegians in America published in the journal *Migranten/The Migrant*.

In 1978 His Majesty Olav V, King of Norway, awarded Marion the Knight's Cross, First Class, in the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olaf for his lifetime of service to Norwegian and Norwegian-American society and culture. His contributions were considerable and continued for another 22 years.

Memorials may be sent to Vesterheim for the Lila and Marion Endowment Fund, which helps to preserve the museum's collection of more than 30,000 artifacts. A complete obituary appears on the museum website at www.vesterheim.org

Lila Nentwick Nelson

During Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum's annual meeting on October 14, 2000, Ulf Christiansen, Consul General of Norway, came to the podium and announced that he was about to do something very special, something that had been secretly planned for quite sometime. Marion Nelson had been one of the few who knew about it, he said.

The Consul General then said that many were familiar with Lila Nelson's crucial support of Marion in his work to preserve and promote Norwegian art and culture, not just in America, but world-wide. Not as many knew of Lila's own personal contributions, he continued, especially in textile arts. However, these contributions had never escaped the notice of the Norwegian government, he said.

As Vesterheim's first textile curator, not only was Lila pivotal in the preservation and dissemination of Norway's rich textile heritage, he said, she was also instrumental in the contemporary revival of traditional Norwegian fiber arts, especially weaving. For these reasons, he said, the Norwegian Government had asked him to present to Lila on its behalf the prestigious St. Olaf's Medal.

This important award comes just one year after Vesterheim announced that it would name a new weaving classroom after Lila. For such significant contributions to the understanding and appreciation of Norwegian textiles and for generous hours of teaching weaving, let us at Vesterheim be the first to say, Congratulations Lila! You are truly deserving of these honors.

Gifts to honor Lila Nelson will build the Lila Nelson Weaving Classroom at Vesterheim. Contact: textiles@vesterheim.org, 319-382-9681, or .523 W. Water St., PO Box 379, Decorah IA 52101.

Contributors: Charlie Langton, Laurann Gilbertson, and others

2 I have discussed korkje with four experienced Norwegian dyers: Reidun Almedal, whose 1980s korkje research is featured in Nina Saether's article, 'Purpur av Mose og Urin (*Norsk Husflid* # 6, 1997, n/p.); Gerd Mari Lye, co-author of 'Farging med Lav' (*Nyttevekstforeningens Småskrifter* # 8, 1981, p. 1-22); Ellen Kjellmo, well known author of *Båtrya i gammel og ny tid*. (Stamsund: Orkana, 1996); and Paula Sandvick (see footnote 4).

3 Why all the confusion? I raised the question in a February 1999 article, 'Norwegian Korkje: Myth and Reality' (*Norwegian Textile Letter* 5, # 2, p. 1-7). I find that part of the answer lies in a much-quoted article: Dagmar Lunde's 'Forsøk med korkje' (*Arbok* 1972-75. 1976. Kunstindustrimuseet i Oslo, pp. 119-130). Reidun Almedal very kindly translated Lunde for me in 1997. Her translation indicates that Lunde was uncertain if she had the right lichens, in the first place; and secondly, Lunde had (like me, in 1992) no 'recipe' to follow in regard to the process.

4 Paleobotanist Paula Sandvik whom I met in Trondheim, on the 1999 tour, paid her way through university by selling dyed yarn and weaving. Paula had read about, but never seen, korkje 'balls'. Nor had Reidun, or Ellen Kjellmo. Tapestry artist Hannah Ryggen (1894-1970) used korkje to weave the 'faces' in her tapestries, many of which are on display in Trondheim.

5 Large handbags are also the essential container in which to carry a Norwegian delicacy known as 'Mr. Tomato,' a tall stack of tomatoes, cucumber, cheese, cold cuts and smoked salmon stuck together with herring paste (or, for the gastronomically timid, butter and mustard) which one creates at breakfast smorgasbords, for lunchtime consumption.

6 Four cups of lichen was sufficient to do the korkje tests, and leave some for future

projects. Imagine the traditional harvest where tons of lichen were processed for dyeing at nearby Farsund. The most recent analysis of this agricultural labour is contained in Inger Vågen and Torstein Engelskjøn's article 'Korkjelav [*Ochrolechia*] - viktig nyttevekst i Flekkefjords distriktet i eldre tid.' *Våre Nyttvekster* 94 (3), 1999, pp. 74-82.

7 Freshly made dye vats would have been placed near the hearth, or even in the byre, where body heat from the livestock would aid the process of vat fermentation.

8 'Bjørkelav' is a yellow Norwegian dye made from birch bark and lichens. (See page 16 of the 1978 edition of Johanne Nylænd's *Norske Plantefargar* (Introduction by Ingebjørg Vaagen) [Oslo: Norske Samlager]. Betty came to the Humboldt class to make bjørkelav, her motivation for 'authenticity' similar to my goal in trying to replicate korkje cakes. Had Betty not needed transport to Bangor airport, Laurann and Sara would not have 'discovered' the only *fresh* dock leaves in Maine!

9 The apparent lack of empirical knowledge in regard to this process is discussed in my thesis, *Lichen Dyes and Dyeing: A Critical Bibliography of European and North American Literature in a Culturally Marginalized Field*. (Saint Mary's University, Halifax, 1999, 278 pp.) In this study I include Dagmar Lunde's negative opinion of the efficacy and fastness of korkje. (Lunde had great difficulty preparing the vat: see my 1999 NTL article). A more favourable account of korkje's history and economic value is in Vågen and Torstein's article, but even in this case, there is no actual 'recipe' for korkje 'cakes' or 'balls'.

10 It is no coincidence that certain properties of *Verbascum thapsus* (velvety texture, contoured shape, and abundance throughout North America, often near homesteads) endeared

it to women in the days before modern hygiene products were available.

11 I will also 'unveil' other ideas about *the missing ingredient* including some thoughts on korkje cakes gleaned from Fred Stam, the official babysitter, and other tour members who have supplied views on creative ways to turn purple ooze into a korkje patty cake.

Studio Vista Textile Monograph # 3 is now available. **ECOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL DYES: A WORK BOOK FOR THE NATURAL DYER** includes dye methods featuring 50 ecological alternatives to conventional mordants. Information on waterless dyes, solar methods, and Eco Dyes from fibre artists in the USA, Canada, Britain, and Australia. 60 pages. 18 Charts, colour plate, and international bibliography. Pre-paid \$21.50 (includes postage). Please make cheques payable to Karen Diadick Casselman. No postal orders please.

Folk-Art Tour to Voss Norway June 15 - July 1, 2001

Join Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum for eight days of classes in beautiful Voss, Norway, with six days to explore the history and folk art (and shopping) of Hardanger and Sogn. Classes are offered in weaving, rosemaling, woodcarving, knifemaking, and cooking.

Weaving classes will be taught by Åshild Fjose Kløve, a professional weaver who is currently the weaving instructor at the Voss Folkehøgskole. She is well versed in all of the traditional weaving techniques such as

skillbragd, *enkelt og dobbelt krokbragd*, (single and double boundweave), *tavlebragd* (monk's belt), *hullbragd* (honeycomb), and *dreiel* (a damask-like weave).

Åshild is now teaching a course at the school using a pattern from an old Voss skillbragd coverlet; a pattern that she said she would love to offer her students on the Folk-Art Tour. There are also special Voss patterns for single and double krokbragd, and she would like to introduce these to her students as well. Students will work on warped looms making smaller projects that can be taken home. This is an intermediate to advanced class with a limit of eight students.

The folkehøgskole in Voss will be our headquarters. A "folk high school" is a school focusing on Norwegian traditions in weaving, felting, painting, carving, music, etc. Breakfast, lunch, afternoon coffee and dinner, along with lodging, are included in your program price. Rooms are single or double with private bathrooms. The campus overlooks beautiful lake Vangsvatnet and is a 15-minute walk from the center of Voss.

The tour begins with supper at Hotel Terminus in Bergen on Friday, June 15th. Saturday will be spent in Bergen visiting the Historisk Museum, Hordamuseet, and Lysøen, home of Ole Bull. On Sunday we will travel to Voss where we will acquaint ourselves with the city and the folk high school. Workshops at the Voss Folkehøgskole are on Monday through Thursday, followed by a weekend trip, then back to Voss for four more days of classes. We will take another two days for excursions ending the tour on Sunday, July 1 in or near Bergen.

On our excursions we will visit Fjordland and Hardangerfjord, Hardanger Folkmuseum, Agatunet, and Norheimsund. Arrangements are in the works for visits to Sognefjord from

Gudvangen to Kaupanger, Fjærland, Jølster, and Gaularfjellet to Vik. During these travels we will be visiting stave churches, museums, private studios and workshops, as we explore folk arts in the different areas.

We hope to spend Midsummer night in the fjord village of Nordheimsund. I am sure we will find some Midsummer activities and fires. It is one of the most beautiful times of the year to be in Norway and spending it along a fjord is even better.

Vesterheim's Darlene Fossum-Martin and woodcarver Kåre Herfindal welcome you to Voss and the 2001 Folk-Art Tour. For more information or an application, please contact Darlene at: Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, PO Box 379, Decorah IA 52101, 319-382-9681, vesterheim@vesterheim.org.

IN MEMORIAM

Long time Norwegian Textile Guild member Bjørg Nelissen of Valparaiso, IN died in an automobile accident near her home Saturday evening, November 18. Bjørg was skilled in many of the Norwegian textile arts. She will be missed by all who knew her.

CORRECTION

In THE WARP-WEIGHTED LOOM: (article) featured in the August, 2000 **NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER** Olaug Isaksen was mistakenly identified as Sonya Vaugen. We regret this error.

Editor

Vesterheim Textile Calendar Spring 2001

April 20 and April 22

"No Pot Natural Dyeing" workshops
with Karen Casselman, Cheverie NS

April 21

Spin-In at the Decorah Fairgrounds,
hosted by Oneota Weavers Guild

June 1-18

Entry dates for 20th National Exhibition
of Weaving in the Norwegian Tradition

June 22-24

Ars Textrina Conference on Textiles
hosted by Vesterheim and Luther College

Contact: Laurann Gilbertson, 319-382-9681 or
textiles@vesterheim.org

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Seattle, WA 98115
(206) 524-4458

Caroline J. Evanger
1395 Center Rd
Chimacum, WA 98325
(360) 732-4247

Kathleen Gullberg
4246 W. Montfort Pl.
Seattle, WA 98199-3621
(206) 282-1256

Ingrid Kristine Hanssen
Havrevågan 13
430 33 Fjärås
SWEDEN
email: soederberg.hanssen@swipnet.se

Jody Grage Haug
(requests address withheld)

Ingebjørg Monsen
Ytre Morvik 8
5124 Ulset
NORWAY

Donna R. Monty
P.O.Box 263
Snoqualmie, WA 98065

Debbie L. Redlein
412 Shoreline Ct.
Richland, WA 99352
(509) 375-1155
email: redlein@owt.com

EDITORS:

Betty Johannesen
Donald Johannesen
51577 Bridgewater Ct
South Bend, IN 46637
(219) 272-9806

