

Is the Old Shoemaker Still with You?¹

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Shoes and shoemaker's tools in Vesterheim's collection pose intriguing questions. Are they more representative of the way of life in Norway or North America? Treasured enough to have an extended life in the museum, what do they tell us about the "walks of life" of the original owners? We can find a broader context for shoes and tools in the Vesterheim collection by taking a close look at the artifacts and by reading the words of immigrants' memoirs, diaries, and letters. We will begin with a look at shoes in Norway at the time of emigration; then we will examine footwear as acquired and used in North America.

Norwegian Shoes

The 1850s marked the beginning of mass emigration from Norway to America. At that time, the population of Norway was largely rural and agrarian. Most farms were small and the farmers participated in subsistence and barter economy. Without cash to exchange, many needs for rural families were produced on the farm. Clothing was provided by the family's labors as they raised sheep, wove fabric, and constructed garments. Shoes were often included in the family's production. Generally, some shoes for daily use were made and repaired on the farm, and finer leather shoes that were reserved for church could be made by traveling shoemakers. Established professional shoemakers made their living in towns and urban areas.

Men, women, and children throughout rural Norway wore wooden shoes for their daily farm work. Wooden shoes are especially practical for use in barns and farmyards, and walking through damp fields. There were regional styles such as the ones in southern Norway that have an upturned toe, and the shoes in western Norway that typically come up higher on the instep, much like those more familiar to us from the Netherlands. Other variations included wooden soles

with a simple strap over the top to hold the shoe on the foot. Wooden shoes were often made on the farms and required specialized tools designed for carving out inside the toe. When shaping these custom-made wooden shoes, the maker sized them to be worn with either knitted stockings or fulled woolen fabric foot wraps.

In addition to wood, other materials were used to make practical shoes for farm families. Water-resistant shoes could be woven of birch bark. These were well suited for damp forest surroundings. Also well suited to the cold Norwegian climate were rawhide boots and shoes made from the skin of the lower leg of a cow or reindeer. Simply styled leather shoes or boots with leather soles were occasionally made at home. Whether homemade or purchased from a professional shoemaker, finer leather shoes were reserved for Sundays and more formal occasions. Fashionable European-styled shoes, as could be found in urban areas internationally, were worn by residents of larger towns and cities.

Travel to North America

When Johannes Storseth prepared to immigrate to Washington State in 1887,

"He began to make a big box, five feet long, three feet broad, and four feet high. Even with such dimensions, it would contain only the most necessary articles, such as a herring net and a good supply of homespun linen thread . . . several hundred feet of rope to be used for fishing lines, and hooks by the hundreds. For bedclothes he packed a fine fur rug and some fancy woolen blankets, clothes, and shoes enough for many years."²

Even if extra shoes were brought initially, hard use would require that they continue to be maintained and eventually



Handmade wooden shoes with upturned toes and carved vine design. From c. 1911, these were made by the uncle of the donor when she visited Etna, Vestland County, Norway. The uncle made shoes for the whole community although he was not a shoemaker by trade. These shoes painted gold without signs of wear were likely to have been saved as a memento of the trip or worn for fancy dress in America.

Vesterheim 1990.050.001 – Gift of Le Ora Wischer.



Birchbark strips one-inch wide were woven to make a double thickness for the sole and body of these handmade shoes. It is not clear whether they were made in Norway or America, c. 1850s. They belonged to and perhaps were made by Christian Winger from Vinger in Hedmark, Norway. Winger worked on a farm near Strongs Prairie, Adams County, Wisconsin.

Vesterheim 1968.025.001 – Gift of Eola Moore.



The Family on the Road, Rauland, Telemark. Photo by Herbjørn Gausta, about 1895. Wooden shoes in use in the countryside.



Because of the casual position of this double portrait, we can actually see the whole boot that one man is wearing. Sam Lunely and unidentified man. Photo by Matt Bue, 1909. Vesterheim Archives – Enstad Collection.

replaced. The first immigrants traveled across the ocean by sailing ships. After 1875, travel was by faster steam ship. Either way, from the ship they generally traveled west as far as a train would take them and the rest of the journey was by wagon or, as commonly, on foot. Immigrants reported the trauma of walking 25, 100, and even 300 miles on foot. For instance, the Larson family: parents, children, grandmother, uncles, and aunts decided to finish their journey to DeSoto, Iowa, on foot in 1870, walking 25 miles.

“It was a hot day and the clothes which were so comfortable in Norway in the middle of May were anything but comfortable in Iowa in early July. . . . In the evening we finally reached our destination, a weary, discouraged, footsore group. For a week Mother was unable to walk.”³

Lars Reque and Ole and Nils Gilderhus started to walk from Chicago on their way to Dane County, Wisconsin, a distance of more than 200 miles. In Albion, Wisconsin, they stayed overnight with Thorstein Olson who was a shoemaker and he mended their shoes before they continued on the next leg of their journey.⁴

Shoes in North America

There are shoemaker’s tools in Vesterheim’s collection, but the lack of evidence of broad use in this country attests to changes encountered by newcomers. Rural life was different in many ways. For women, their jobs were more homebound than in Norway. Where they had cared for the cattle in farm fields and in mountain summer pastures, women were now primarily indoors or would raise chickens in the home farmyard. Changes in agricultural practices for men meant that those who had made shoes for their families in Norway had new responsibilities. Larger tracts of land needed to be cleared and the soil broken and farming became more mechanized; the whole farm culture changed. Because of these reasons and social pressure to look American, Norwegian Americans soon began to use manufactured shoes available in the ready-made market.

Descriptions of shoes worn in America by those who immigrated emerge from their words in letters, diaries, and memoirs. While some continued to use Norwegian shoes, once they could afford to buy ready-made styles, these became the finishing look for their new American lives.

“[Father’s] Sunday shoes were plain, broad-toed, laced, black calf-skin, which he greased, both soles and tops, with unsalted lard every Saturday.”⁵

“At Christmas, we got to put fine little patent leather shoes on and we felt like we didn’t touch the ground. We felt so light, because we always had to have heavy shoes on. Oh, it was so good to dress up for Christmas.”⁶

The perspective of a Norwegian immigrant shoemaker, Ole Johnson, makes new choices in footwear clear. He moved to the river town of Galena, Illinois, to establish a new business. However, “It was dull in Galena because people there were actually buying ready-made shoes . . .”⁷

Some early immigrants did not adapt to this new ready-made system as readily and their letters reflected this. Throughout the Midwest, Norwegian Lutheran pastors were serving many congregations, which meant they had to travel, often on foot. Pastor Olaus Duus traveled 3–4,000

miles a year in the 1850s in central Wisconsin. Writing home to Norway, he asked relatives to send handmade Norwegian-style leather boots:

“One thing I should especially like to have, if there is any possibility of getting it, is a pair of good greased leather boots. Those I got when I left home have seen their best days. If Lyng remembers the size, please send me a pair of high boots which are sewed and not pegged, since I can’t get that kind here.”⁸

Pastor Olaus Duus believed his older-style Norwegian custom boots suited his purposes best. Our title quote by Caja Munch, writing home to Norway in 1857 provides another example: “Is the old shoemaker still with you? Ask him if he doesn’t want to come over here and make me a pair of boots. I can’t get any I really like in this country.”⁹

We learn that in time, Norwegian-American families bought shoes at dry goods stores and tailor shops or purchased shoes by mail. When some immigrant shoemakers did find clients for their custom-made shoes, often they had to diversify to stay in business. This was the case for shoemaker Nils Jensen of Stoughton, Wisconsin, who carried a line of ready-made footwear along with offering his custom-made boots and shoes.¹⁰

Quotes about the making and use of wooden shoes are particularly fascinating, as very little on the use of wooden shoes in this country has been recorded. Berta Kingstad thought that wooden shoes would be practical for farmyard chores in Illinois, so she wrote home to Norway, telling her father that he could use her mother’s foot size as a reference in carving wooden shoes to send to her in America: “Father, you must make a pair of wooden shoes and send them with Martha when she comes. You know that Mother’s shoes will fit me.”¹¹

Although Berta asked for wooden shoes from Norway, some wooden shoes were made by itinerant shoemakers in agricultural communities, such as remembered by Laurence Larson.

“Once an old man who was skilled with a carving tool came to our home and made my sister and me a pair of wooden shoes, of which we were inordinately proud. We had to make an immediate trip to our grandparents’ house to display our new footwear. After a time the basswood split into pieces, however, and by that time our pride had also suffered a cleavage.”¹²

Wooden shoes were also manufactured ready-made and available to rural customers by mail-order, such as in Montgomery Ward & Co. Catalogue No. 57 from 1895. Various styles were touted as useful on the farm for outdoor chores, or recommended for mill and factory work.

Extremely cold winter months in northern areas required layering of footwear. Rubber overshoes together with felted wool liners provided a solution for enduring snow and cold conditions.

“Winds were penetrating on the prairies. The temperature could and did go down to 25, 30, and 40 degrees below zero or even lower. My husband [Pastor R. O. Brandt] tried various devices for keeping warm. He used felt boots with long, heavy storm socks inside over his wool hose, and high overshoes over the felt boots.”¹³



Ole A. Lomen's toolbox was embellished with rosemaling in 1836. He and wife Marit Knutson came from Vestre Slidre, Valdres, to Koshkonong, Wisconsin, in 1848 and moved on to Winneshiek County, Iowa, in 1850. Tools stored in the box would have been used in making and repairing leather shoes and include lasting pinchers (left) and lasting jack (right) along with other hand tools for shaping and finishing the leather. ¹⁶ Vesterheim 1979.017.001 – Gift of Oscar Lomen.

Information about the use of shoes is sometimes paired with information about the use of no shoes: Going barefoot saved the need for new shoes, especially among fast-growing children, who enjoyed the freedom from heavy practical shoes in the summer months.

“None of us children had shoes on our feet from the time the ground stopped freezing in the spring until it got cold in the fall... One pair of shoes per year was our allotment until we were old enough to work in the fields.”¹⁴

“Mother had to make a rule — we were allowed to shed shoes and stockings on the 17th of May, and not before.”¹⁵

Conclusions

While some new immigrants continued to wear familiar Norwegian-style shoes out of preference, many families quickly adopted American shoes available ready-made. The reasons for this change were functional but also largely economic and social. Norwegian shoemaking tools were brought to America by farm families who were accustomed to making and repairing shoes, or by itinerant or professional

shoemakers hoping to find a market. Some families saved shoemaking tools to repair their own shoes, even if they were purchased ready-made. Custom shoemakers had a hard time finding clients in America, causing them to make significant changes in occupation. Factors such as extreme weather, economic conditions, the nature of rural life, and the availability of a wide variety of ready-made shoes all contributed to significant changes in footwear within immigrant communities. Vesterheim Museum's collection contains these and other artifacts that reflect these changes with fascinating detail.

Footnotes

¹Letter from Caja Munch in Wiota, Wisconsin, to her parents in Hovland, Norway, June 1857. Munch, Caja (1970). *The Strange American Way: Letters of Caja Munch from Wiota, Wisconsin, 1855-1859*. Translated by Helene Munch and Peter A. Munch. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, p. 100.

²Storseth, John (1943). "Pioneering on the Pacific Coast". *Norwegian-American Studies and Records*, 13: 133-162, 135.

³Larson, Laurence (1939) *A Log Book of a Young Immigrant*, Northfield, Minnesota, Norwegian American Historical Association (NAHA).

⁴Anderson, Rasmus B. (1896) *The First Chapter of Norwegian Immigration, Its Causes and Results*. Madison, WI.; Author.

⁵Xan, Erna Oleson (1952). *Wisconsin My Home, As Told by Her Mother Thurine Oleson*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, p. 62.

⁶Letter from Caja Munch in Wiota, Wisconsin, to her parents in Hovland, Norway, June 1857. Munch, Caja (1970.) *The Strange American Way: Letters of Caja Munch from Wiota, Wisconsin, 1855-1859*. Translated by Helene Munch and Peter A. Munch. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

⁷Carl Martin Roan, "The Immigrant Wagon" (typewritten manuscript, n.d. (pre-1946), NAHA.

⁸Theodore C. Blegen, ed. (1947). *Frontier Parsonage: The Letters of Olaus Fredrik Duus*, Norwegian Pastor in Wisconsin, 1855-1858. Northfield, MN: NAHA, p. 91.

⁹Letter from Caja Munch in Wiota, Wisconsin, *The Strange American Way*, p. 100.

¹⁰Clauden, C.A. (editor and translator) (1982). *A Chronicler of Immigrant Life: Svein Nilsson's Articles in Billed-Magazin, 1868-1870*. Northfield, MN: NAHA.

¹¹Zempel, Solveig (editor and translator). *In Their Own Words: Letters from Norwegian Immigrants*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota (1991), and Munch (1970), p. 136.

¹²Larson, *A Log Book of a Young Immigrant*.

¹³Brandt, Mrs. R. O. (1933) "Social Aspects of Prairie Pioneering: The reminiscences of a Pioneer Pastor's Wife", *Norwegian-American Studies and Records* 7.

¹⁴Olaf Erickson (1947), "Olaf Erickson: Scandinavian Frontiersman (Pt. II)". *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 31(2): 186-207 204.

¹⁵Hilda Thompson Quickstad (1982). "Memories of My Childhood" (Preston/Rushford). Hilda Quickstad Collection, NAHA.

¹⁶Candace LaCosse, Shoemaker in Duluth, MN. Correspondence with Carol Colburn September 18, 2021.

About the Authors

Carol Colburn's background in theater, art history/museology, and human ecology/textiles has led her to study textile and clothing history from many perspectives. Her continuing interest in Norwegian-American clothing has resulted in many projects and publications inspired by the collections at Vesterheim Museum. Now living in Duluth, Minnesota, Carol researches historical garments for what they tell us today and teaches heritage sewing workshops. Visit her website - carolcolburn.net.

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These are representative of factory-produced 'ready-made' footwear c. 1860s-1910s. They feature a leather sole, leather foot to the ankle, and blue cloth legs. The heel measures 1 inch. Stamped in the sole "Manufactured by C. Gotzian & Co., St. Paul." C. Gotzian & Co. began as a small custom shoemaking shop established in the 1850s by a German newcomer to Minnesota. By the 1890s he led a prosperous manufacturing business in downtown St. Paul, making 5,000 shoes per day and employing 700 people. Available in all the latest styles and patterns, the company made shoes and boots to be marketed widely. To convince customers of the ready-made products' comfort and fit, this slogan was part of their advertising - "Fits Like Your Foot Print." (The St. Paul Globe Golden Jubilee Edition c. 1904.) Vesterheim LC6815 - Luther College Collection.