

# Material Culture and People's Art Among the Norwegians in America

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## “Well, I Wondered When I Saw You, What All These New Clothes Meant”: Interpreting the Dress of Norwegian-American Immigrants\*

*by Carol Colburn*

NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN IMMIGRANT dress during the period of mass migration to the American Upper Midwest represents the blending of two visual languages. The traditional Norwegian dress was a language understood within a context where society was family-based and community-oriented. By contrast, fashionable dress conveyed individual status within the context of the international European and American economic marketplace. Understanding the dress of the immigrant, who was in transition between these two social contexts, can pose difficulties.

The title of this study is a quotation from Hattie Oleson, a woman who emigrated from Norway to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in the 1860s. She spoke about a nephew's bride, suggesting that the language of fashionable dress was like a foreign language at first.<sup>1</sup> Traditional Norwegian wedding dress, at least in many areas, included the finest forms of embroidered shirt, skirt, and bodice, with costly accessories of great family significance. Gold and silver, used to decorate the wedding crown, yoke, and belt, and for the accompanying jewelry, indicated the economic status of the bride's family and signified the continued husbandry of family holdings by the two families involved in the marriage. The traditional Norwegian dress would have made a clear and

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definite statement about the occasion, family tradition, and a future which referred to the past. The fashionable wedding clothes that Hattie Oleson saw worn by younger relatives posed a question.

This incident indicates that, just as with verbal language, immigrants had to learn the language of American fashionable dress. At first, as in speech, they used a combination of their mother tongue and the language of their adopted land, but eventually they abandoned the vocabulary and even lost the accents that were their heritage from Norway. Indeed, the analogy of visual to verbal language is most apparent when one observes the ease with which children and young people adopted both English and the language of fashionable dress, soon becoming indistinguishable in speech and appearance from their Yankee contemporaries. The older people were often reluctant to use English or to wear fashionable dress, but over time the transition occurred in both language and dress at an almost equal rate.

Throughout this article, the meaning of immigrant dress will be the major concern. Dress, in other words, will be dealt with as a language. Although there are parallels between visual and verbal languages, it is not easy to translate one to the other, or to put into words exactly the message conveyed by dress. In a study of nineteenth-century American dress, sociologists Jeanette and Robert Lauer have established categories of meanings expressed by dress which have been shown to remain constant and to find expression in divergent forms of dress over time and space. They see clothing as expressing personality, moral character, conformity and non-conformity to social norms and roles, social status, and group membership, and finally, as making a general statement about the condition of society.<sup>2</sup>

While all the above categories of meaning conveyed by dress can be discussed in reference to that of Norwegian Americans, two take on special importance in this analysis of immigrant dress: expression of group membership and expression of status. Understanding the dynamics of communication in these categories will be the focus of this article. Broadly speaking, traditional Norwegian dress can be seen as an expression of group membership, where the family, the community, and the Norwegian heritage are clearly identified. Fashionable dress, which communicates the extent to which an individual participates in the international economic marketplace, expresses actual or desired status apart from immediate community or family heritage.

In Norway in the late nineteenth century, the distinction between the professional or upper class and the peasant class was clearly delineated by dress. The professional class wore fashionable clothing, and the peasant class wore traditional folk dress.<sup>3</sup> The following incident related by an educated man of professional background who immigrated to North Dakota demonstrates the confusion which could result from the change of contexts from Norway to America: "As soon as I came into the kitchen . . . I was told that a terribly fine lawyer from Minneapolis had come in. I was very curious to see this fine gen-

tleman, and met him then at the supper table. He condescended to speak to me . . . He had been watching me and wondering what kind of a fellow I was, of the 'better class' and yet wearing working clothes. Since then, Mr. [Alf E.] Boyesen and I have become good comrades. He dupes people with his fine exterior, while I stick to my working costume, though in the evening we discard our masks."<sup>4</sup>

The visual language of dress can be understood only within a social context. The rapid changes in social context experienced by the immigrants must be considered before attempting to deal with the meanings of dress. B. Lindsay Lowell has pointed out that changes in social structure were already in process in Norway during the period of emigration, and that emigration itself resulted from an international economic revolution. In the traditional society, which formed the social environment of most immigrants, the immediate family (the kinship group) and the community formed the dominant social structure.<sup>5</sup> This was true not only among peasants, who comprised the majority of immigrants, but to a degree in other levels of society as well.<sup>6</sup> In Norway, the upper or cultured class consisted of officials, educated professionals, and wealthy merchants. The peasant class consisted of landed farmers and cotters, with trained artisans in the towns and the countryside also loosely associated with it.<sup>7</sup> The families maintained positions within these classes by intermarriage. While a breakdown of this structure was occurring in Norway as a result of industrial and economic developments, the move to America, where these developments had been more rapid, forced individuals to make dramatic adjustments almost immediately. When Norwegian immigrants came to America's Upper Midwest, most areas were already partially settled by a combination of Yankees and immigrants from other countries; therefore they had to interact with a mixed as well as a new society. The dominant society in America had a more cosmopolitan and democratic character with a different industrial and economic base. In the words of an immigrant quoted by Theodore Blegen: "Farmers and artisans are just as good as merchants and officials. They all have practically the same manners, and the appearance and dress of people are usually the same as they are in Norwegian towns."<sup>8</sup>

A Norwegian man who had recently immigrated to North Dakota wrote to a friend in Norway, "You say that you don't like the girls in Vågå, because they are a bunch of dull clotheshorses. I know that you prize simplicity, and so do I. But yet I dare say that you haven't seen anything of clotheshorses, in comparison to me; and here in America it is very difficult to find a girl who according to your definition would not be considered a clotheshorse. Yes, I have often been irritated by all the vanity and pomp, which the girls here are loaded down with. And yet the girl I love is, to this way of thinking, also a clotheshorse. It's just that each one of these poor people wants to be like all the others, and I can only hope that under the fine clothing beats a humble

heart.”<sup>9</sup> His words demonstrate that the type of dress known from the upper and urban classes in Norway was also by the time of emigration finding its way into smaller rural villages such as Vågå. The reason for it was simply conformity to an expanding and changing society. The principle of conformity, which had led to the standardization of traditional dress, was still at work, but in a new setting.

The wearing of fashionable dress required participation in the international economic system, for it required imported fabric and accessibility to dress-makers and tailors trained in the European sartorial arts. The Norwegian peasantry had developed dress which relied primarily upon materials and skills generated within the family and the local area. While traditional folk dress required great skill to produce and even great expense to the owner, procuring this dress required very little interaction with the international trade community.

The language of Norwegian dress based on family heritage (which included many local dialects and idioms) was still the primary language of dress understood by those who immigrated, although they were already aware of developments that could bring change. Many historians have commented upon the rapidity with which Norwegian immigrants blended into American society.<sup>10</sup> A part of this involved quickly adopting the language of American fashionable dress. Such dress symbolized assimilation into a broader society with the higher economic standing toward which they were aspiring more than it did family, community, or occupational identity. Being aware of fashionable dress in urban and upper-class Norway, but generally not participating in the economic structure on which it was based, the immigrants easily made a change once they entered the new economy. A close look at Norwegian-American immigrant dress, however, indicates that a slight Norwegian accent often remains here as it also does in the use of English. Looking on dress as a language through which the immigrant speaks sheds light on the complexity of the immigrant experience.

Photographic portraits are a primary source for the interpretation of immigrant dress. They were an important means of communication among Norwegian families both across the Atlantic and across the American continent as immigrant families and groups divided in their search for new opportunities. Photographic portraiture was relatively new in the mid-nineteenth century when the early wave of migration from Norway to America occurred. Refinements of the positive/negative photographic process, invented in 1839, made portraiture a successful enterprise around the world by 1850. At first using the one-of-a-kind daguerreotype process, photographers had set up businesses in all major cities by 1855 and had by 1860 switched to the cheaper process of albumen printing, using a glass plate negative which produced multiple prints.<sup>11</sup> The availability of multiple prints of photographs meant that immi-

*The Language of  
Dress in Photographs,  
Written Accounts,  
and Surviving  
Garments*

grants brought photographic portraits along with them, they sent them back to their families, they received them from Norway after they arrived, and they sent them from settlement to settlement within North America.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the images helped to ease the pain of the separation of friends and families.

The importance placed upon these portraits as a means of communication is attested to by the immigrants' own words:

"I have smartened up the room . . . all my very dear daguerreotypes are hanging, amongst which I miss very much Grandmother and everybody there, besides little Johan and brother Oskar."<sup>13</sup>

"Little Sven is also healthy and growing. . . . In my next letter you will get a picture of him if everything goes as planned, for Uncle Tom has promised to go with us up to a town called Rasjel [Rochelle] as soon as he is through working."<sup>14</sup>

"There is something else that we all want you to do, and that is that you—Father and Mother especially—get your picture taken and send us. We will send you money when you need it, if you will just have your portrait taken. It is difficult to know whether we will ever see you again in person . . . so it will be especially dear to see your picture."<sup>15</sup>

Portraits could be sent with a new immigrant arriving from Norway or with an immigrant who had decided to return. However, they were usually sent through the mail with accompanying letters traveling both directions across the Atlantic:

"Write to me soon, and please, if possible, send me your portrait."<sup>16</sup>

"Sven will soon come sent in a letter, and then you shall see for yourself what a wild American you have for a cousin."<sup>17</sup>

Since photographic portraits were difficult and expensive to have taken, the sitters made every effort to create the images that they wanted their relatives and friends to have of them. Within the convention of using their best clothing, choices in dress were made, and the props and accessories were added to compose a photograph which made a strong and specific statement. The importance of the choices of dress for these portraits is also documented in writing by immigrants themselves:

"Munch and I brought little Else with us to Beloit one day and had ourselves daguerreotyped. . . . It is good of me . . . except that I am equally wide and tall, but that the man [the photographer] certainly could not help; and the bows on my waistband have made me look rather worse than better. I was dressed in my old black costume from Norway, Munch in clerical garb, and Else in a small checkered green woolen dress, indeed, she is so sweet—well, you will be able to judge that for yourself."<sup>18</sup>

"Unfortunately I have no photograph of Ida. She should have had one taken with the little boy, but to tell the truth, she didn't have a decent dress to use, since all her old dresses have become too small and she hasn't had time to

sew any new ones. I can't get her to have any made, she wants to do it herself."<sup>19</sup>

Certain occasions precipitated a trip to the photographer; photographic archives attest that confirmations, weddings, family reunions, or occupational achievements were most often commemorated.<sup>20</sup> The usual formal, fashionable American dress associated with these events can be seen in these portraits; but even there personal choice created the individual look and conveyed a carefully composed message to the receiver:

"Many couples of those days had their pictures taken soon after the wedding. But John wouldn't go. . . . It was four months before I could persuade him to do it. By this time he had given me the prettiest present of his life. It was a heavy solid gold chain about one-half inch wide, with little links that were turned on their sides, so that the round part was on top. At the end of the chain was a small fat locket, decorated in blue enamel, which opened up to hold two small pictures. I always thought it set off my outfit very well in the picture."<sup>21</sup> An engagement pendant on a heavy chain was a customary gift from a man to his betrothed in Norway.<sup>22</sup> The pendant became part of the bridal ensemble, so the chain referred to in the above quotation no doubt held special significance beyond the aesthetic effect which Thurine Oleson describes. The chain in her portrait conveyed her Norwegian heritage and the occasion of the wedding in the visual language of dress.

Admittedly, there are certain limitations in using early photographs as documents of communication through dress. First is the lack of color. To our eyes, it appears that everyone wore extremely drab, dark clothing during the entire late nineteenth century. To be sure, it was customary for both women and men to have a best suit and dress of a practical dark color, often black,<sup>23</sup> but these were not always worn for portraits, although the black and white images may suggest that they were. A look at collections of existing clothing from the period dispels the impression that all clothing was dark or black. There is a variety of vivid colors and elaborate patterns, especially in the accessories. Because of the color limitation of the photographs the immigrants often accompanied a portrait with a written description of fabric, as in Caja Munch's letter of October, 1858, quoted above. Even swatches were sent to help the receiver envision dress: "Well, now I must stop, but before I fold the letter up I will ask you for a small gift, and that is a lock of hair from Father and Mother so that I can have a living memory of them, and also a little scrap of cloth from the last dresses you got. I hope to get your portrait sometime."<sup>24</sup>

Another explanation for the drab appearance of clothing in portraits may be advice offered by professional photographers. Edward L. Wilson tells his Philadelphia sitters the following in a pamphlet of 1871 titled "To My Patrons": "A black silk looks nice on almost everybody, and if not bedecked with red ribbons or lace that will take white, generally pleases. . . . striped

goods, or goods having bold patterns in them should never be worn for a picture. Avoid anything that will look streaky or spotty.”<sup>25</sup>

While the photographs chosen for this article indicate that Wilson’s advice was not followed everywhere, one must take into account that such advice could make dress in photographs not necessarily representative of what was generally worn. One could also speculate that the use of distinctive accessories in nineteenth-century portraiture might have been encouraged by such advice, for the dark dresses and suits serve as a fine foil for jewelry and the like.

In addition to the limitations and conventions of photography, one must consider the intended audience of photographs in using them as sources of information on dress. Portraits were made primarily for families or family members who had been separated by migration. Leaving a visual record of oneself for posterity also played a part. Information on intent and the specific audience for photographic portraits is now often lost. Even the precise identification of the subject is often unknown, which significantly reduces the conclusions that can be drawn on the meaning of his or her dress. This accounts for the necessity of supplementing the photographic material with written references to dress and its meaning and with descriptions of actual remaining dress.

### *The Interpretation of Dress*

The dress of the Norwegian Americans tells the story of an evolving society. The change from a family- and community-based social structure to a broader industrial and economic structure required immediate adjustment, and clothing reflected that. “They [Thurine Oleson’s parents] had been well supplied with Norwegian clothes when they came here, both for everyday and Sunday. They soon found out, however, that the style and cut of knee breeches with silver buttons, rich embroidered guimpes, and brightly-banded skirts caused laughter wherever they went. So, despite their financial troubles, they had to change over to American style as soon as they could. This was hard, because they had been accustomed to the best, and the best clothes were expensive after the Civil War.”<sup>26</sup>

Despite the sweeping changes, some remnants of the dress from Norway were included in portraits, apparently when the sitters wanted to communicate their origin, or when there was still a degree of unselfconscious continuity in dress. The anachronism was probably not detected by most viewers at the time. Sometimes the economic circumstances of peasant class immigrants, or the social structure in which they lived, did not change appreciably in the first years of residence in America. In such cases, the old continued to have a natural place with the new. For whatever reason, examples of women’s, men’s, and children’s dress that recall the old family-based social structure will occasionally appear in immigrant photographs. It was the women’s dress which was most likely to contain symbols of continued heritage. Fewer exam-



ples of men's clothing reflect this, an indication that men had to find their place in the American economic and occupational system more rapidly than women. Children's clothing depends upon the choices of their parents and is therefore symbolic of their parents' hopes, dreams, and aspirations as Americans.

Elisabeth Koren, whose diaries of the 1850s have been published, refers to two old women from Voss who wore their mountain dress in a remote area of Alameda county, Iowa, in 1853.<sup>27</sup> Her specific comment on their retention of folk dress indicates that it was a rare sight. Most immigrant women would have known from exposure to international dress among upper-class Norwegians that they would need to transform their appearance to fit their new environment. Judging from both portraits and extant dress, a popular choice of fashionable dress in the early years was the black dress of silk or lightweight wool, often trimmed with bands of velvet at the neckline, cuffs, and hem. While this was considered to be internationally fashionable, actually the manner in which it was worn and the persistence with which it was worn by first generation immigrants often identified them as being from the old country. They had obtained a fashionable dress but then continued to wear it without change just as they had worn the traditional dress. Traditional dress too had undergone slow stylistic evolution but did not change in a constant cycle as is required by definition in fashionable dress. Caja Munch referred to her "old black costume from Norway" in the statement quoted above.<sup>28</sup> It is not clear whether most immigrant women obtained or made their black dresses in Norway or in America. The dresses required skills and materials from the international marketplace, but these were available in most parts of both countries by the second half of the nineteenth century. Examples of this best black dress can be seen in Ills. 1, 2, 3, 13, 17.

Thurine Oleson's description of her mother's dressing for church on Sundays in the 1860s through the 1880s reveals something of the mixed messages of fashionability and retention of old country habits in the dress of immigrant women. "Mother's dressing would go like this: First, next to the skin went a long bandage, wrapped tightly about the abdomen, cotton in summer, wool in winter. This was her corset, and she was never without it. Over that would go a clean white shift of sturdy cloth. Then a full tan cotton petticoat with a border of many colors around the bottom, red and green and brown. This was topped by a pretty white cotton petticoat with lace or embroidery at the bottom, about two or three yards around. Her dress was of black alpaca with tight-fitting waist and full skirt, tight-fitting sleeves, and a little black collar around the high neck, fastened with a black bone pin in the shape of a four-leaf clover. Black jet buttons closed the front and the sleeves. . . . One of us children would be dispatched upstairs for her black cashmere summer shawl, the point of which fell just long enough for her to sit on it. This was fastened

## *Women's Dress*

Ill. 1. Ole Halverson and family, the first Norwegians to live in Winneshiek county, Iowa, arriving in 1843. There is a clear distinction in dress between the generations in this portrait.

The older immigrant woman is wearing a simple dark dress accessorized with an apron, a scarf at the neck, and a dark cap covering her hair. Her use of these accessories particularly marks her Norwegian habits of dress. The younger women wear dresses which are more fashionable in cut for the 1870s–1880s. The men wear sack jackets, but two have scarves arranged at the neck in an old style. The father has also retained the manner in which he groomed his beard in Norway. *Courtesy of Vesterheim*



Ill. 2. Anonymous couple. The woman's pose with the waist thrust forward is more typical of the stance of a woman in folk dress than the erect posture of a woman wearing fashionable dress of the 1870s. This may be the result of the immigrant woman changing to fashionable dress on the outside, but not adopting fashionable undergarments, including the corset. Her dress is a good example of the dark dress with velvet trim and matching apron which is seen in many immigrant portraits. *Photographer: Slater Sunnes, Iowa. Courtesy of Vesterheim*



Ill. 3. Andrew Amundson family near Lodi, Wisconsin, c. 1873.

A family portrait where the ages of the women are well differentiated by their dress. The mother wears the dark dress ubiquitous among first-generation immigrants. Her posture and the manner in which she has belted her dress are reminiscent of women in traditional apparel. The girls are wearing dresses in lighter colors and patterns with a more fashionable cut, the one, however, with a belt identical to the mother's. Like the mother, the father has an old-world appearance, because of the manner in which he grooms his beard. He appears in a well-worn knee-length frock coat, although the details of the waist seam and front closure are obscured by his folded arms. Photographer: Andreas Larsen Dahl, Dane county, Wisconsin. *Courtesy of State Historical Society of Wisconsin WHi (D31)335 detail*

with a long, black-headed pin. In winter, the dark red shawl, being heavier, was held together with two bigger silver pins, hooked together with a chain. These pins were topped by a small silver cup, each filled with a pretty blue stone."<sup>29</sup>

This description indicates that older women adopted the black dress to conform to 'town dress,' which they were already familiar with in Norway. However, they did not always adopt the fashionable corset which provided the body-shaping required to wear truly fashionable dress. They retained their old familiar underwear, the wrapped bandage which provided support for the abdomen but did not give the silhouette one expects to see from corseting. The posture of the women standing in Ills. 2, 3, and 17 is more characteristic of someone wearing the traditional folk dress than the fashionable dress. Even the colorfully bordered petticoat which Thurine Oleson mentions contributes to this bulky silhouette. This stiff petticoat is being used under the more fashionable white embroidered petticoat, again a melding of the two styles of dressing.

The black dress could be used for many occasions. Caja Munch refers to wearing her black silk dress to church in 1855: "On the way home [from church] I wanted to run to keep myself from freezing but tripped in my black silk dress and tore it, but not too much—uh!"<sup>30</sup> Caja Munch, of course, was a minister's wife of upper middle class origin who would have worn a dress of this kind for church even in Norway. Later in the 1880s Berta Serina Kingestad, still a hired woman in other people's houses, has a black dress for formal and important occasions. In a letter to her sister in Stavanger she refers to fabric swatches which she sent back: "The dotted I have for Sundays and the black for a best dress."<sup>31</sup>

If there was a death in the family, the black dress was used for mourning. Berta Serina Kingestad wrote to her family in Norway concerning the use of a black dress for mourning after a sister who remained with her parents in Norway had died: "When you write, you mustn't forget to tell me if you and Mother have black dresses; if not, I shall try to send you a little money when I get my wages here, so you can each get a dress. I will go to town as soon as the weather permits and buy one for myself. I have no black dresses now. I will enclose a little scrap of my collar and mourning band. That is what they use in this country, and you will get a scrap of my dress in my next letter if we live so long."<sup>32</sup>

Her letter provides interesting evidence of influence from immigrant dress back to Norway or, at least, of parallel developments in both countries. A traditional custom of dress for mourning in Norway was to cover ordinary dress with an encompassing white cloth.<sup>33</sup> The American mourning dress Berta describes, consisting of a black dress with mourning bands and collar, documents the increasing dominance of fashionable dress in both Norwegian and Norwegian-American society.

The best black dress did prove to be the dress most often chosen for studio



Ill. 4. Wedding party at Old Norway Grove Church near DeForest, Wisconsin, c. 1870.

The bride wears fashionable dress and the bridegroom wears a sack suit. The man to the left of the groom is wearing the longer frock coat that is more closely fitted at the waist. Representing the older generation, parents of the bride or groom stand to the right in the picture, and each is less Americanized than the younger people. The mother, in a plaid dress, has chosen to wear her apron, a hold-over from the Norwegian custom. The father, like many of his generation, has all the elements of American men's wear except the necktie. Some of the guests in the back wear boldly striped shawls which are likely to have been brought from Norway. *Photographer: Andreas Larsen Dahl, Dane county, Wisconsin. Courtesy of State Historical Society of Wisconsin WHi(D3)71*

portraits, but some photographs show women in variously colored and patterned dresses. The woman in a plaid dress in the foreground of Ill. 4 must also be wearing her 'best' dress, as her placement in the wedding photograph implies that she is the mother of the bride or the groom. A striped dress was chosen for a formal portrait in Ill. 10. Plaid and striped fabrics such as these could have been purchased or handwoven by the immigrant women either in Norway or after immigration.<sup>34</sup>

Although the exception rather than the rule, the specific style of the fashionable dress chosen by immigrant women could reflect characteristics of traditional dress. This is seen on five portraits known to me from the 1880–1890s, one of which is included here (Ill. 5). The division of the bodice into side panels and a center plastron with lacing up the center creates a style reminiscent of traditional bodices. Other styles seen on Norwegian-American portraits incorporate rows of brilliant buttons used to divide the bodice in a similar fashion, or arranged in a circular manner as on the traditional bodices of Flesberg or Numedal.

Using a shawl over her Sunday dress both winter and summer also marked

Ill. 5. Anonymous couple.  
The woman's dress, though of fashionable cut of the 1880s, reflects a characteristic of traditional dress. The bodice is divided into side and center panels and includes the detail of lacing from the bottom edge to under the bust, recalling the structure of the traditional bodice laced over the blouse. The man's clothing is typical of most immigrant men who acquired fashionable dress—the sack suit with jacket, vest, and pants of dark wool. *Photographer: Evans & Norcott, Madison, South Dakota. Courtesy of Vesterheim*



Thurine Oleson as retaining an old custom.<sup>35</sup> Although large wool shawls were used throughout the period by old stock Americans as well, fashionable options in the 1860s also included cloaks or sleeved coats, cut wide to be worn over fashionable hooped skirts.<sup>36</sup>

Plaid, striped, plain, and paisley shawls appeared on immigrant women from any country in this period, as they were an item imported worldwide, used with fashionable dress and traditional dress (Ill. 6). Caja Munch probably wore fashionable Norwegian dress before arriving in America, so she was fully prepared to conform to fashionable American dress; yet her comment on a new shawl purchased in America indicates her preference for it over other options for outerwear. Her sister Nanna remained in Norway and had a shawl exactly like the one Caja purchased in America. "Last time Munch returned from Chicago, he brought me a very big, nice and warm plaid exactly like Nanna's, so I must think of you, dear sister, every time I use it, and Munch says the same."<sup>37</sup>

Although the use of shawls was international, with some of the regional Norwegian traditional dress certain patterns and colors of shawls were distinctive. The striped shawl is typically worn as an outer garment with the Setesdal folk dress.<sup>38</sup> Numerous examples of this type of prized colorful shawl appear on portraits of Norwegian Americans, and an actual shawl of this type is in the Vesterheim collection. In Ill. 7, the anonymous woman is wearing a striped shawl folded parallel to the length of the shawl as it was worn particularly in Setesdal, not in the triangular manner which would have been the common method of folding a shawl when worn with fashionable dress. These boldly striped shawls also were worn by a number of the women attending the wedding recorded in Ill. 4.

With the traditional Norwegian folk costume, women in most areas wore aprons. It was a custom to cover the skirt with a functional apron for everyday and a decorative one for Sundays or whenever best dress was required.<sup>39</sup> Hav-

Ill. 6. Fremad Læseselskab (reading society), Moscow, Iowa county, Wisconsin, 1875.

(opposite page)

On this chilly day a group of Norwegian women display a variety of shawls, which were prized possessions even if they did tend to mark one's immigrant status in America. Some of the younger women wear the more fashionable capes with hoods, and many wear fashionable hats or the less fashionable sunbonnets associated with rural work dress. The woman on the right in a striped apron is continuing the old-country habit of wearing the apron for all occasions, not just for housework as was the American habit. The men wear a variety of suits with vests, most of which would be considered fashionable with the exception of the lack of neckwear on many. The man whom we can see full-figure standing in the center has a morning coat which is knee-length and has an angled center front edge which is not designed to close. *Photographer: Andreas Larsen Dahl, Dane county, Wisconsin. Courtesy of State Historical Society of Wisconsin WHi(D3)54*



Ill. 7. Anonymous young woman. c. 1870. The brocade and fringed silk scarf and striped shawl are indications of this young woman's Norwegian heritage. Two portraits were taken at the same time, one with the distinctive striped shawl and one without, perhaps for Norwegian and American audiences respectively. Photographer: Andreas Larsen Dahl, Dane county, Wisconsin. Courtesy of Historical Society of Wisconsin WHi(D31)748

ing habitually worn an apron, many first generation immigrants retained it even for formal situations such as sitting for a studio portrait. It can appear even over the best black dress. For such formal wear the apron too was black, often coordinated with the dress through the addition of bands of velvet trim near the bottom edge.<sup>40</sup> Ill. 2 shows this arrangement clearly.

When the Hardanger costume gained ground as the national costume of Norway in the late nineteenth century, a white apron with an insert of open-work embroidery became standard for traditional Norwegian dress. Ill. 8 shows the older women wearing the white apron with their fashionable dress. Ole E. Rølvaag gives us the most dramatic statement of the retention of the white apron for formal dress among the immigrants and of its emotional significance in *Giants in the Earth*. He described Beret as wearing her Sunday clothes to meet the American Indians on the prairie for the first time. Here Per asked her to sacrifice her very best white Sunday apron to bandage an injured Indian's hand: "She hesitated for an instant, then untied her apron and handed it over to him. He knew that it was her very best apron. He could not bear to take it, but he did not say so. 'That's just it, Beret-girl—the very thing! If that doesn't help him, I don't know anything in the wide world that would cure his hand!'"<sup>41</sup>





Not only black or white aprons are used in provincial Norwegian folk dress. Woven striped, checked, plaid, printed floral, and embroidered patterns are also found. Aprons of these types appear in Norwegian-American portraits with a regularity that indicates that this prominent accessory prevailed even when the rest of the traditional folk dress was abandoned. The older women in several multi-generational portraits wear their aprons while the younger do not (Ills. 1, 4, 6).

Other provincial Norwegian accessories that reveal continuity in dress among immigrant women include colorful, often fringed silk neck and head scarves.<sup>42</sup> As part of the folk costume, they were highly prized and were presented as gifts on important occasions such as birthdays, confirmations, and weddings, thus becoming symbolic of the family heritage. The patterned silk scarves were one of the few items of the folk dress that were not produced locally in Norway. Called 'fortune scarves' in Hallingdal, the scarves carried connotations of economic status throughout many districts in Norway and were handed down from generation to generation.<sup>43</sup> Having a large collection

Ill. 8. Detail of a wedding party at the Rue home in Ridgeway, Iowa, c. 1905. White aprons with openwork borders such as those on the older women were part of traditional folk dress used for festive occasions. In the larger photograph, of which this is a detail, the rest of the wedding party appear in fashionable dress. *Courtesy of Norma Wangsness, Decorah, Iowa*

of silk scarves would allow a woman to choose a favorite for every important occasion. By this means she personalized the folk costume that otherwise allowed her little variation.

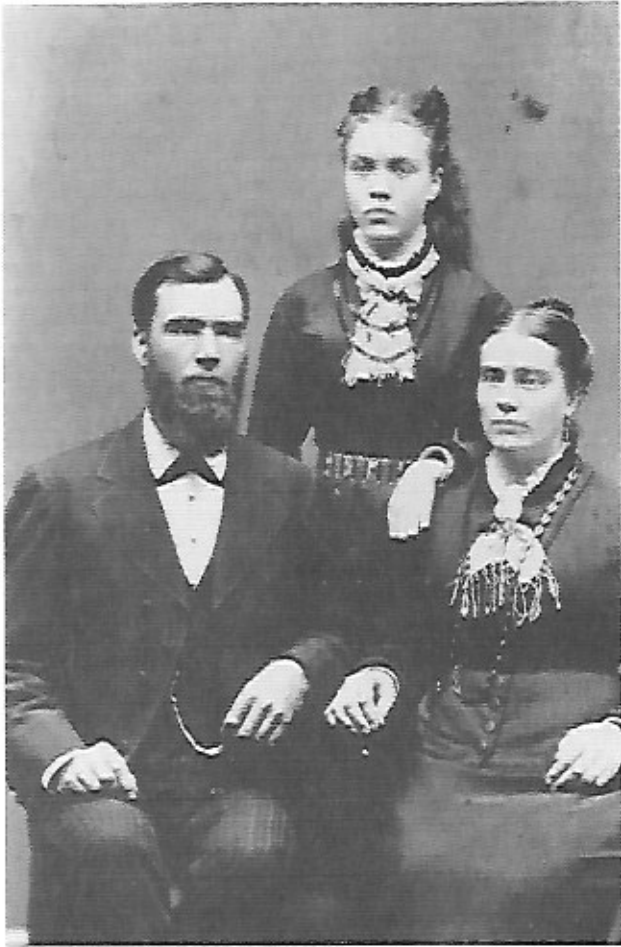
Both a heritage of the use of silk patterned scarves and the knowledge that these represented a product of international trade if not necessarily high fashion induced immigrants to bring these scarves with them.<sup>44</sup> They were small and light and were easy to pack among their other belongings. Once in America, they provided a means of embellishing an otherwise simple neckline of a fashionable dress. The manner in which these fringed brocade or plaid scarves were used and the frequency with which they appear in Norwegian-American portraits indicate that they retained some of the significance they once had in Norway even among women who had otherwise adopted fashionable dress (Ills. 7, 9).

Traditional folk costume always included a headdress for the married woman, which was distinctive as to region and often also indicated age and community standing. While the distinctive headdress of regional folk costumes does not appear on Norwegian-American portraits, older immigrant women did continue to wear caps or head scarves to cover their hair for portraits years after this practice had gone out of general fashion in America.

In her diary, Mrs. Koren refers to a woman she visited in the countryside as habitually using a white cap: "Ingeborg [Vold, a native of Voss, Norway], the lady of the house, a handsome, attractive woman who always goes about with a nice white cap on her head, is busy preparing dinner. . . ." <sup>45</sup> Thurine Oleson says of a fellow immigrant woman: "As her hair whitened, she took to black caps with lace on them."<sup>46</sup>

A variety of black and white caps covering the hair are seen on older women in the portraits studied (Ills. 1, 4, 10, 13, 17). On some of these caps wide ribbons tied in a bow beneath the chin held the headdress in place and at the same time provided a decorative finish to the neckline. These caps worn by older women were used indoors and outdoors in a different manner than hats with fashionable dress. By contrast, a variety of fashionable hats designed for outdoor wear and more functional sunbonnets and hooded capes can be seen on the Norwegian-American women in Ill. 6. Although most of the women depicted seem to have adopted a form of fashionable headgear, some wear these fashionable bonnets and hats in a manner which is reminiscent of traditional headdresses, their sunbonnets encircling the face as would head scarves, or their hats planted directly on top of the head in a way that brings to mind the traditional headdresses in such areas as Hallingdal.

Elisabeth Koren was of the educated professional class in Norway before coming to America, so she did not wear folk dress even before emigration. As she aged, however, she habitually wore a small white cap of a type also seen on other older immigrant women of her class. Distinguished by their size and their placement on the crown of the head, these headcoverings used by older



**Ill. 9. Anonymous family group.**

Note the women's neckwear of brocade and fringe of silk used with fashionable dress of the 1870s. The scarves have thick chains arranged over them, which may have been retained from their folk dress when chains were presented to a woman at the time of her engagement. The younger woman also has a belt with broad metal plates resembling the belts used for high festive occasions in several areas of Norway. *Photographer: N.S. Hassel, Decorah, Iowa. Courtesy of Vesterheim*

**Ill. 10. Anonymous couple. 1870s (right).**

The husband is wearing a Norwegian vest, prominently displaying metal buttons. The vest is also cut very high at the neck, as opposed to the typical fashionable vest which would show more of the front of the shirt. He also continues old Norwegian grooming habits, with long hair and beard allowed to grow under the chin but shaven from the face. The woman wears a striped dress of lightweight fabric which was probably factory-made. She apparently has not adopted the American corset. The cap (usually white or black) was used by first-generation immigrants from many countries but not by later generations in America. This type, which covers the back and sides of the head, is distinct from the small lace cap worn on the crown of the head by ladies of distinction. *Photographer: Andreas Larsen Dahl, Dane county, Wisconsin. Courtesy of Wisconsin State Historical Society WHi(D3)92*



Ill. 11. Mrs. Elisabeth Koren, née Elsc Elisabeth Hysing, wife of the Reverend Vilhelm Koren, Decorah, Iowa. Mrs. Koren customarily wore a small lace cap, typical of immigrant women of distinction. Here she wears it with a dress of c. 1900–1905. *Preus Collection, Courtesy of Vesterheim*

women of standing seem to have served the same symbolic function as the larger traditional headdresses (Ill. 11).

Shoes are another accessory item in which some continuity is revealed but which also seems to have presented a dilemma for the Norwegian immigrant. Although seldom seen clearly in portraits, they are often mentioned in letters, because they were expensive, difficult to obtain, and of as much functional as symbolic or esthetic significance considering the rugged conditions of the American Midwest. They were among items which were requested to be sent from Norway. Caja Munch makes references to shoes sent from there to her brother, her child, and herself.

“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.”<sup>47</sup>

A conflicting opinion comes from Berta Serina Kingstad, a woman brought up with traditional rather than upper class dress, when giving advice on what her parents should send with her sister if she emigrates:

"You don't need to rig her out much with clothing and shoes. If she has one pair of shoes then that is absolutely enough for I will tell you that Norwegian shoes aren't worth much over here. They are usually too heavy as it is so hot here and the air so dry in the summer that they go to pieces."<sup>48</sup> Berta Kingstad was then working as a house servant. Later, when she went to work for a man who required that she do farmyard chores as well as housework, she remembered the practical wooden shoes that she wore in Norway for such work, and wrote to request some: "Father, you must make a pair of wooden shoes and send them with Marta when she comes. You know that Mother's shoes will fit me."<sup>49</sup> The quotations demonstrate that both good traditional boots and wooden shoes were still in Norway often produced in the home, and that they were not available everywhere in America. Kingstad's letter also suggests that wooden shoes were used by immigrant women when doing farm work. Wooden shoes are documented as having been worn among immigrants in Willmar, Minnesota, and they are known to have been made at Houston, Minnesota.<sup>50</sup> Wooden-shoe-making equipment is common among the tools that have found their way from immigrant farms to Vesterheim. There is little documentation of the extent to which they were used by women, but they were made for farm work and were therefore undoubtedly used for this by both sexes. One girl is wearing wooden shoes as part of her everyday dress in the school picture in Ill. 21.

Stockings rarely if ever show in portrait photographs. In first person accounts, however, they are mentioned frequently. Norwegian immigrants appear to have continued the tradition of knitting stockings at home even after commercially produced stockings became available. Berta Serina Kingstad's letters make this clear. As an unmarried woman working as a servant in the homes of others, she did not have the means to raise sheep or purchase wool in America, so she requested materials from her family in Norway in order to knit stockings for herself and her son: ". . . there is one thing I would like to have her bring me if she comes [her sister]. That is a little bit of black wool and a pair of carding combs. I have been able to borrow a spinning wheel, but there are so few combs here. I have gotten a little white wool . . . and when Soffia comes with black wool and combs, then I will spin gray yarn and knit gray socks."<sup>51</sup> Later, when her mother sent her some hand-spun yarn for knitting, Berta reveals the significance placed upon handmade goods: "I could not hold back my tears when I saw all the wonderful yarn and thought that each strand had gone through your hands . . . I must not forget to thank you for the carding combs. No one will ever take them from me. I will borrow Marta's spinning wheel soon, and then I will both card and spin."<sup>52</sup>

Many handknit stockings are found in a collection of textiles at Vesterheim made by three generations of immigrant women, beginning with Kari Iverson Staarvig from Vågå, Gudbrandsdalen, who immigrated to western Minnesota in the 1860s. Several examples that appear to have been made by Kari herself



Ill. 12. Ida Hampson. With her fashionable 1890s bodice, she uses the Norwegian *sølje* with dangles as a brooch. Photographer: Solberg, Decorah, Iowa. Hovde Collection, Courtesy of Vesterheim

have a tie-dye (ikat) pattern that research by Marion Nelson has shown to have been common in the area from which she came. There is reason to believe that the transfer of a tradition in handknit stockings documented by this family collection was typical.

Traditional jewelry was the Norwegian accessory most commonly incorporated into fashionable dress. Featured alone on the neckline or on top of silk scarves, Norwegian silver brooches, or *søljer*, appear frequently in Norwegian-American women's portraits. Like the scarves, brooches were easy to transport, were symbolic of social standing, and already had a place in fashionable dress. Originally used as both a decorative and a functional piece to close the neckline of the shirt, the styles of traditional Norwegian *søljer* are distinctive enough to show up very clearly on photographic portraits. Used by the immigrants as decorative jewelry on fitted bodices in the early years, and later on the more loosely fitted shirtwaists, they carried the message of common heritage to others in the group and of distinctive elegance to people outside. In fact, the *sølje* is the one item of dress which has had almost continuous use by women in many Norwegian families ever since immigration. Portraits of women from each decade since immigration can be found in which the *sølje* is prominently displayed on the fashionable dress of the time (Ill. 12). Imported *søljer* remain a staple in Norwegian-American gift shops.

Other items of silver which might have been retained from traditional dress are not as easy to identify as the *sølje*. The silver chain with clasps used to close a shawl and described by Thurine Oleson may have been a jacket chain used as part of the silver belonging to the traditional folk dress in her mother's home region of Telemark.<sup>53</sup> Eight women's portraits have come to light which

feature a long chain looped around the neck often arranged over a silk neckscarf. This may be a new way of displaying the chain which was often presented to a bride as part of the traditional folk wedding ensemble (Ill. 9). Silver on women's belts also was typical of Norwegian traditional dress. The younger woman, presumably the daughter, in Ill. 9 is wearing a belt which resembles the distinctive Norwegian belt featuring rectangular metal plates, typical of festive folk dress in Hardanger and other districts.<sup>54</sup> The manner in which identical belts are worn by the mother and daughter in Ill. 3 also recalls the use of the belt as an accessory in Norwegian traditional dress.

Men also retained some of their Norwegian habits of dress in America, though fewer obvious indications can be found in portraits. As with the women, Norwegian accessories used with American clothing are the most common, although a few actual clothing items associated with Norwegian dress do appear. The men's traditional dress of many districts was influenced by Norwegian urban dress to a greater extent than women's traditional dress, so in many instances the distinctions are quite subtle. The traditionally styled jackets and coats usually retained some aspects of the cut and details of late-eighteenth to early-nineteenth century men's wear. For example, the standing collar found on many of the traditional men's coats and jackets had been retained from men's fashions of around 1800. It was perceived as incorrect in America, as shown by a statement made in an immigrant's letter sent home to Valdres. The immigrant's advice to his brother was: "You should have flat-collared jackets or vests."<sup>55</sup>

The directive meant that the brother need not bring the jackets and vests with standing collars used traditionally in Valdres. The collar should fold and lie flat against the neck, like the collar still used on men's suit jackets today. Other distinguishing features might also mark a jacket or coat to be of Norwegian origin. Many districts had their own distinctive fabrics, cut, and trim. Because of these differences, the men, like the women, invested in one fashionably-styled set of clothing to serve for all occasions requiring one to be dressed well in America. Thurine Oleson says of her father, "He had one best Sunday suit, of the finest black wool; this was seldom pressed but was brushed carefully after each wearing, folded in the original creases, and laid away in a trunk upstairs."<sup>56</sup>

The suit was perhaps purchased, like the woman's black dress, as the man's preparation for becoming American. If brought from Norway, it was probably made by a tailor. If purchased in America, it could have been either ready-to-wear or tailor-made because both options existed here.<sup>57</sup> Judging from photographs, the style chosen was usually the sack suit, which through the decades of the great emigration was fast becoming the international symbol of the businessman.<sup>58</sup> Familiar to us all today, it includes a loose-fitting hip-length jacket with no seam division at the waistline (Ills. 1, 5). This style of

### *Men's Dress*

suit is actually called the business suit, and it still connotes the wearer's participation in the international economic structure.

Other choices might have been occasion-specific coats which carried more connotations of the old class structure, such as the longer frock coat (Ills. 3, 4), or the morning coat (Ill. 6). Both these coats can be distinguished from the sack jacket by their longer length, falling approximately to the knee, and by a horizontal waist seam serving to give the coat a more fitted look when closed. The distinguishing feature between the frock coat and the morning coat is the shaping of the center front edge. The frock coat closes along a straight center front edge, while the morning coat is cut away at an angle which reveals the bottom edge of the vest. By the 1870s, both the longer coats were considered to be old-fashioned except when worn by men of professional standing or for formal occasions. Most Norwegian-American men in portraits have chosen sack suits even for their wedding portrait, which denotes their interest in appearing 'democratic' as well as moderately fashionable. Many look somewhat uncomfortable in their suits, as if their physiques were more suited to farm clothes that allowed greater physical movement.<sup>59</sup>

Regardless of what fashionable suit they chose, men sometimes retained the vests which they had worn with their Norwegian traditional dress. While Norwegian vests varied from district to district, they usually differed from fashionable men's vests in the following ways. First, the buttons of traditional vests were of silver, brass, or pewter, making a bold statement about position and heritage, not unlike the silver jewelry on women's traditional dress (Ills. 10, 13). The buttons highlighted a closure which might be either single or double breasted depending on the district of origin, creating a neckline usually falling higher on the chest than fashionably styled vests. The lengths of traditional vests also provided more variations. Some ended above the waistline; others continued below the waistline, terminating in a straight edge or in a single point at the center front. The short vest in Ill. 14 is distinctive and might have been retained from traditional dress. The traditional vests were often brightly colored, either solid colors (red was common to many districts) or multicolored stripes, plaids, or brocade patterns (Ill. 16). Few of the traditional vests in portraits reveal these patterns. This may have been the choice for the occasion of the portrait. One suspects that some vests which record black in the photographs were indeed of a bright solid hue because colorful vests were generally worn by Norwegian men.

The American suit was completed with long trousers, which many Norwegian men wore in Norway before emigration. In Norway, however, rural dress of many districts offered the option of knickers for both everyday working clothing and Sunday dress. These were immediately abandoned in America where only young boys wore short pants.

When men did give up their traditional coats, vests, and knickers, they apparently did not discard the silver, brass, or pewter buttons which had





Ill. 13. Anonymous couple, c. 1870.

The man is wearing a Norwegian-style double-breasted vest with silver buttons. The ends of his silk neckscarf appear from under his beard. The rest of his dress is American, although with his old style grooming habits and his pose with hands on knees he appears to be of the old school. The woman wears the plain dark dress typical of many first-generation immigrants who did not follow changing styles after their initial adoption of fashionable dress upon arrival. Finishing the neckline of her dress, she is wearing a collar seen on many of the Dahl photographs of Norwegian immigrants taken in the 1870s. With tating on the edge, it is similar to the turned-down collar of the traditional woman's blouse of some Norwegian provinces. Her headdress is very distinctive. Fur edging trims the bonnet, while a ruffled band frames the face. Though it is not clearly identifiable as a holdover of a particular Norwegian style, a bonnet of this shape would be considered out of fashion in the 1870s in America. *Photographer: Andreas Larsen Dahl, Dane county, Wisconsin. State Historical Society of Wisconsin WHi(D31)751 detail*

Ill. 14. Anonymous family group, c. 1870.

It is rare to find a family group in work clothing rather than in more formal wear. The woman is wearing a fashionably cut dress of a lightweight fabric. Her posture implies that she is not wearing a corset. The men all wear variations on work clothing which mark their transition between Norwegian rural dress and American styles. The checked shirt with asymmetrical placket for the front closure is cut in a style of rural Norwegian origin. The short vest on the other son might also have been retained from folk dress. It is unusual to see a sweater as worn by the father used as outerwear by an American man in the 1870s. Although it does not display the distinctive Norwegian two color patterning, it does feature the contrasting edging like Norwegian sweaters, and might be in the Norwegian tradition. It could have been made either before immigration or after, as many Norwegians continued spinning and knitting in America. *Photographer: Andreas Larsen Dahl, Dane county, Wisconsin. Courtesy of State Historical Society of Wisconsin WHi(D31)393*

embellished them. Numerous buttons which were removed and saved are found in the Vesterheim collection and in private families. The valuable buttons might also have been recycled for use on hand-knit sweaters and other home-produced items.

Formal American neckwear for men required an adjustment which some men were not willing to make. The man in Ill. 15 stands out among men in most conventional Norwegian-American portraits who, at least for formal pictures, did wear the stiff detachable collar and tie. Dr. J. C. Gronvold chose to wear neither collar nor tie. One might consider his shirt a medical gown, but immigrants in other professions also rebelled against the uncomfortable stiff neckwear of fashion (Ills. 4, 6). Thurine Oleson described her father's Sunday clothing in this way: "By the time I was old enough to take notice of things, Father had two elegant boughten shirts, of the purest fine white cloth and American make. They were used only for church, funerals, weddings, and other special events. . . . The shirt was full and wide and long, buttoned down the back. Father never wore an American collar with these shirts, but tied around his neck instead a fine brownish silk neck scarf, knotted in front. They were kept in a special *skuff* [drawer] in the *dragkiste* [chest of drawers]."<sup>60</sup>

Like the women, men too had worn colorful silk scarves with their traditional Norwegian dress. As a portion of dress which cannot escape notice by the viewer, a man's choice of tie was (and is) a crucial decision. As Thurine Oleson wrote, some men continued to use the scarf instead of the more conventional necktie. This could be worn with or without the stiff collar. While a scarf worn at the neck had been part of fashionable men's attire in the 1840s–1850s, its use waned in the 1860s when shirt collars became narrower.<sup>61</sup> The use of the scarf as part of traditional dress may account for its continued use well beyond this time both in Norway and subsequently in America (Ills. 1, 13, 16).

One can generally not see much of the shirt in portraits, as it is usually covered up by the vest or the suit coat. Yet, in a few portraits of men in their work clothing, we can see shirts of traditional Norwegian cut (Ills. 14 and 17). The checked shirt on the man to the left in Ill. 14 has a placket closure much like the traditional *busserull* or Norwegian workshirt. Likewise, the shirt worn by the mason in Ill. 17 displays a cut which was not conventional for American men; it appears to have a center-front buttoned closure, but the square-cut bottom edge, the yoke extending over the shoulder, and the fullness in the sleeve relate it to a Norwegian workshirt. Both of these photographs were made by Andreas Dahl, an itinerant Norwegian-American photographer who loaded his photographs with messages about the immigrants' lives in Wisconsin during the 1870s.<sup>62</sup> They proudly display the immigrants' lives against a setting of material achievements revealed by their homesteads. The clothing is as telling of merging traditions as are the props and settings.

In most occupations other than farming, men were required to make a



Ill. 15. Dr. J. C. Gronvold, Goodhue county, Minnesota. Choosing to wear neither collar nor necktie for a formal portrait would be very unusual for an American man but appears to have been the choice of a number of Norwegian-American men who otherwise adopted American suits and shirts. With the traditional Norwegian dress of many districts, no tie was worn, but a silver neckpin closed the shirt at the neck. In America, such jewelry was not worn by men, so the shirt button sufficed for a closure if no scarf or tie was worn. *Courtesy of Vesterheim*



Ill. 16. Dr. Hans Christian Brandt, said to be the first Norwegian doctor in Iowa. The professional standing of a medical doctor could be indicated by the choice of a double-breasted frock coat instead of the more common sack coat, although the fit of the coat is not fine. He wears a patterned brocade vest and a silk neck scarf, both of which are typical of many Norwegian folk-dress styles. *Courtesy of Vesterheim*



Ill. 17. Anonymous family group, c. 1870.

Three generations mark different degrees of Americanization in dress. The men display the props of stonemason and blacksmith. The older stonemason wears a style of workshirt reminiscent of the *busserull*, with short square bottom edge and full sleeves. The younger blacksmith is wearing a vest which is of fashionable cut, although it is worn over a workshirt cut in an old style with the yoke falling low on the arm. His work requires a large leather apron. The two oldest women on the right wear the black dress adopted soon after immigrating and retained in spite of changing fashions. The seated pregnant woman and three young daughters all wear more fashionable dress of the 1870s. *Photographer: Andreas Larsen Dahl, Dane county, Wisconsin. Courtesy of State Historical Society of Wisconsin (D31)45388*

rapid change in dress. The clergy who came to perpetuate the state church of Norway among the immigrants, however, needed to retain the dress by which their position was identified in the mother country. Their black cassock, black stole, and white fluted collar constituted a highly visible example of Norwegian occupational dress in at least one segment of the immigrant church. During the emigration period, the Lutheran state church in Norway was facing challenges from the followers of Hans Nielsen Hauge, a dynamic lay preacher, as well as representatives of non-Lutheran denominations. These challenges were intensified among Norwegians who found themselves in the United States, which from the beginning accepted freedom of religion. Dress became a symbolic dividing line between members of opposing factions. The lay preachers or preachers linked with denominations or theological directions other than the high-church Norwegian state Lutheranism showed their differences by wearing no clerical garb. The first constitution of any Norwegian-American church body, written by the Hauge-oriented Elling Eielsen in 1846, condemned the use of state church clerical gowns with a quotation from

Luke 20:46, referring to “scribes which desire to walk in long robes and love greetings in the markets, to be seen of men.”<sup>63</sup> The lay element among the Norwegian Americans associated state church clerical dress with the oppression from which they had supposedly departed. Peter A. Munch comments: “Typically, the clergy is often singled out as the prime obstacle to social freedom and equality in the old country, and it shows considerable sensitivity on this point when even the clerical garb becomes a symbol of ‘oppression.’”<sup>64</sup>

The more liberal elements in the Norwegian peasant class were naturally dismayed to find this symbol of oppression following them to the new land. It was, however, not only the clerical garb of the pastor that aroused resentment. It was the whole set of upper class symbols that characterized even his personal life: “. . . the very presence in the settlement of a Norwegian professional minister and his family, with their refined manners, speech, and dress, seems to have been a constant source of irritation and it was even felt by some to be a threat to their newly won freedom. Obviously, it was a constant reminder of the settlers’ own lowly origin, a thing that they had hoped to leave behind and forget about in the new country.”<sup>65</sup>

The retention into the 1920s<sup>66</sup> of the clerical garb of Norway by pastors in the Norwegian Synod may seem surprising in the land of the free, but it is also most understandable. With the competition for souls in the New World, the immigrant pastors who looked on themselves as representatives of the official church of Norway had to muster all forces possible to retain their position among disbanded Norwegians who had crossed the Atlantic. Visual symbols of authority are more persuasive than theological arguments in keeping the faith of the simple.

The two images in Ill. 18 demonstrate the imposingly bold sartorial statement made by the clerical dress, as well as the intimidatingly sophisticated and refined impression made by the dress worn by the clergy when not preaching. The impression was not made without cost. Preachers’ wives had to devote a great deal of time to maintaining their husbands’ symbolic dress and had to acquire skills which in Norway would have been supplied by specialists. Caja Munch describes her struggles in a letter dated February 1857: “You can imagine, it is a laborious task to set up these ruffs for Munch; last time, I was at it for almost two days to get one of them fluted for him, but then it did turn out rather nice except for a little burn here and there. If it is possible to get some sent to him next spring with one of the seven ministers for whom there are vacant charges here, you would do us a great favor.”<sup>67</sup>

Male Norwegian-American headdress may not be as revealing of ethnicity as female, but interesting examples exist. In the image of an anonymous young man in Ill. 19, the message of hyphenated culture carries well across time. He is blatantly telling us that he is Norwegian American, as he has chosen to wear the soft “farmer’s cap,” typical of traditional rural dress in Norway, together with the suit and tie of fashionable American dress.

Ill. 18. Reverend H. Halvorson. Wearing correct fashionable dress in one photo and in another the complete clerical garments of the Norwegian state church, the status and beliefs of this man are apparent. *Courtesy of Vesterheim*



Ill. 19. Anonymous man In what might be a whimsical combination of a Norwegian “farmer’s cap” and fashionable suit and shirt, this man declares his hyphenated culture. *Courtesy of Vesterheim*

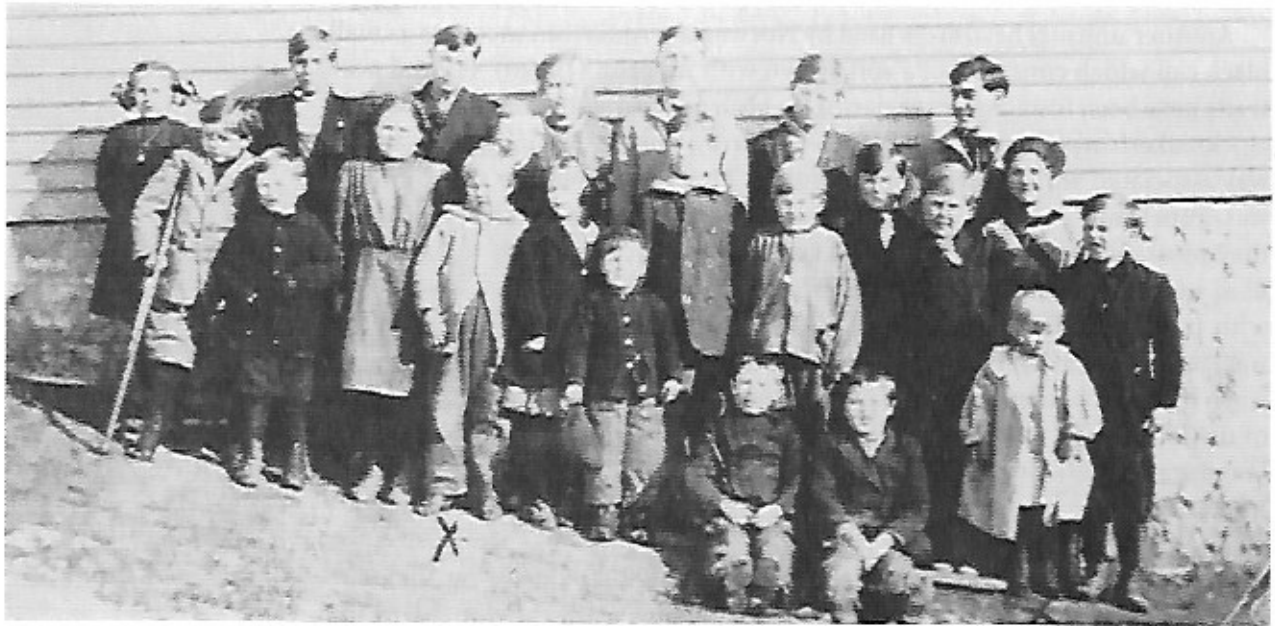
Ill. 20. Hans Johnson, lay leader The black cap was worn by clergymen and other professional, educated men in Norway. In America it was sometimes called the ‘preacher’s cap,’ but was used by older men in other professions here as well. *Courtesy of Vesterheim*

Another unusual headdress used by Norwegian-American men was a small black cap which consisted of a soft crown with no brim (Ill. 20). Formal portraits have been found of three pastors, a lay leader, a medical doctor, a skilled clockmaker/carpenter, and a publisher wearing this cap, an indication that it was associated with professional standing. The term "preacher's cap," which was sometimes used for it among the immigrants, reveals which profession they most closely associated it with. In Norway the cap appears to have been used only by some clergymen and other professionals. It has no association with traditional folk dress.<sup>68</sup> Beside declaring the professional status of the wearer, it may have functioned much like the previously mentioned small cap worn by older women, covering gray or thinning hair while also adding an air of distinction. To us it has interest as a distinctive element in the Norwegian language of dress that lingered among the immigrants for at least a generation.

Children were not hampered by habit in dress, and it would appear that parents recognized early in choosing dress for them that they belonged to the New World. "I have made two woolen swaddling clothes, but they will not at all allow me to use swathe; here they mostly use little woolen skirts [shirts?] of which I have made three; and a thing they use much here is a small woolen bodice directly on the body, later on they wear woolen undershirts, which are used regularly both by women and by children; I will also do likewise, although not for my own person, but for the little one in case God is gracious enough to grant me a child."<sup>69</sup> So Caja Munch wrote in 1856. Three decades later Berta Serina Kingstad still explains the different practices in clothing babies in America to her family in Norway. "Yes, people here are far different than in Norway. People that I had never seen came and looked after me and I can tell you, for example, that I have gotten thirteen pieces of cloth for clothing for the little one. You see, they don't swaddle the babies here in this country."<sup>70</sup>

As the children grew, they required new clothes. Ready-to-wear clothing reduced the effort involved in keeping apace of the situation. Making them American as soon as possible may also have been looked on as giving the greatest benefit of the move to America. Judging from photographs, they were almost always dressed in American fashionable dress according to the financial capability of the parents (Ills. 21, 22). In their dress they were largely indistinguishable from Yankee children or children of immigrant families at the same economic level from other countries. Yet in formal portraits these Americanized children were sometimes given items of dress which bore messages of their Norwegian heritage. Norwegian immigrant parents probably did not want their children to look too foreign to their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins in the homeland or elsewhere in America. Some symbol worn in a portrait would make the lineage as clear as inherited facial features.

### *Children's Dress*



Ill. 21. Children at Kjomme School. Highland Township north of Highlandville, Winneshiek county, Iowa, c. 1912. This photograph provides an unusual opportunity to see children's everyday clothing where function is more important than style. The children are all wearing clothing which is predominantly American though most appears to be homemade, consisting of sweaters, simple jackets, and dresses of plain fabrics. The third girl from the left in the front row appears to be wearing wooden shoes, which would have been practical in the grass and dirt of the schoolyard. Wooden shoes were worn for farmyard work on some Norwegian-American farms, as they had been in Norway.

*Collection of Mildred Kjome, Decorah, Iowa*

Silver jewelry, especially the *sølje*, used as a brooch on girls' fashionable dress, became the most commonly retained item of this kind (Ill. 23).

Woven or braided bands which had previously added pattern and color to traditional costume as belts, headdresses, and garters were in America sometimes used as neckties in portraits of boys and girls (Ill. 24), and as trim on children's clothing. The transformed use of these bands provided a touch of ethnicity that was not too incongruent with otherwise fashionable children's clothing. The bands themselves might have been made in America, either braided or woven on small rigid-heddle looms. Perhaps they had been saved from the traditional dress of the mothers and fathers who were proud to use them on their children consciously or unconsciously as symbols of their heritage.<sup>71</sup>

O. E. Rølvaag reveals the significance of these bands for traditional women's dress in the previously mentioned story about Beret and the injured Indian man. What takes place in the episode below, apart from the touch of humor in it, is one in a series of small rites during which remnants from the familiar language of dress are sacrificed to survival on the prairie:





Ill. 22. Picnic at Kjomme School. Highland Township north of Highlandville, Winneshick county, Iowa, c. 1912. In their best clothes for their school picnic, many of the same children from Figure 21 appear here in more fashionable dress. The boys wear suits, which were available ready-made, or might have been homemade. The girls wear elaborate dresses of light summer cloth and lace. *Courtesy of Mildred Kjome, Decorah, Iowa*

“If you had a string to tie around the rags, so that they wouldn’t loosen when they got dry, they would keep the heat longer”, she said in a low voice, but calm and clear.

“Oh yes! . . . If I only had it!”

“She turned away for a moment and began fumbling at her clothes; then, with a bashful but determined air, she handed him one of her home-braided garters . . . ‘Will this do?’ she asked.

“Do? . . . My God! Beret, that’s exactly what we need!” . . . He bound up the sick hand tightly, and tied the garter around the bandage . . . ‘The fellow’s better already!’”<sup>72</sup>

A language of dress that may have been as precise as verbal language existed in rural Norway almost to the time of emigration. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, it was losing definition through contact with a different and far less articulate international language of dress reaching Norway by way of its ever-increasing upper- and middle-class urban population. The language of this so-called fashionable dress had early become the vernacular in America. The rural immigrant from Norway was therefore forced to make a sudden adjustment to a type of dress with which he had only

### *Conclusion*



Ill. 23. Anonymous girl.

Neck pins such as this were originally used to pin together the collar at the front neckline of the folk dress blouse. The cross dangles on this pin are distinctively Norwegian. This young girl wears the pin as a brooch to display her Norwegian family heritage on her fashionably styled dress of c. 1900. *Courtesy of Carol Colburn, Cedar Falls, Iowa*

Ill. 24. Anonymous family group.

The three children are wearing simply cut dresses of fashionable origin c. 1860. However, the decorative woven or braided bands added to each neckline reflects the Norwegian heritage of the family. *Mrs. Wm. H. Young Collection, Courtesy of Vesterheim*

slight familiarity. This article has dealt with how the challenge of that adjustment was met.

Both photographic and written documents indicate that the transition from traditional Norwegian to fashionable American dress occurred about as rapidly as economics would allow but that an understanding of the new language of dress came more slowly. One gets, therefore, the question in the title of this article asked by an immigrant woman looking at the wedding attire of her own relative, "I wondered when I saw you what all these new clothes meant."

The shock of adjustment appears to have been eased by retaining bits of the old vocabulary while accepting the basic structure of the new language. These bits now have scarcely more significance than simple familiarity while they originally would have contained precise meaning. That familiarity alone, however, gave comfort. These bits were primarily very personal things, such as a wrapping rather than a corset for the body, or such incidentals as jewelry, aprons, kerchiefs, woven or braided bands, and the like. Children were the first to lose even these except when special circumstances called for them. Mixed language in immigrant dress was therefore largely a first-generation phenomenon.

While significant elements of traditional dress disappeared from use, they did not totally disappear from immigrant consciousness. Parts of early costumes are among the more common treasures of Norwegian-American families<sup>73</sup> and have come in great numbers recently to Vesterheim, the Norwegian-American Museum, as changing life styles make family retention of heirlooms difficult. The reverence for traditional objects of dress is beautifully expressed in the memoirs of Thurine Oleson, who tells of dividing mementoes among her children on her fiftieth wedding anniversary:

"The choicest piece of the whole chest, of course, was the heavy gold wedding chain. It had been settled long ago that that should go to the oldest daughter, Clara . . . the wedding guimpe that had been made and worn by my grandmother, Signe, in 1810, the strips of ceremonial belt that all the grandmothers had worn for generations back. There were silver buttons from my father's coats and trousers . . ."<sup>74</sup>

The lingering respect for the messages of traditional Norwegian dress led eventually to a new chapter in its use among the immigrants. As early as the 1890s, when the last remnants of such dress were still in the process of disappearing from unselfconscious use, a revival of it as an expression of individual identity and ethnic pride began occurring, primarily in cities and towns. The quite different story of this rich and century-long revival is yet to be told.

## NOTES

1. Erna Oleson Xan, *Wisconsin, My Home: The Story of Thurine Oleson as told to her Daughter* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1950), 155.
2. Jeanette Lauer and Robert H. Lauer, *Fashion Power: The Meaning of Fashion in American Society* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1981), 36. I tested the applicability of the authors' categories to the study of dress in the Midwest during the late nineteenth century in "The Dress of the James J. Hill Family 1863-1916" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1989).
3. Aagot Noss, "From Norwegian Folk Costumes to American Dress," in *The Viking*, 84:5 (1987), 178.
4. Letter from Gunnar Høst to Agnes Hansen, November 13, 1884, Grand Forks, North Dakota, in Solveig Zempel, ed., *In Their Own Words: Letters from Norwegian Immigrants* (Minneapolis, 1991), 63.
5. B. Lindsay Lowell, "Sociological Theories and the Great Immigration," in *Norwegian-American Studies*, 32 (Northfield, Minnesota, 1989), 59.
6. Peter Munch, ed., *The Strange American Way* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1970), 199.
7. Theodore Blegen, *Land of Their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home* (St. Paul, Minnesota, 1955), 199.
8. Blegen, *Land of Their Choice*, 199.
9. Letter from Andreas Hjørpeland to Ivar Kleiven, July 24, 1878, Lanesboro, Minnesota, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 15.
10. Noss, "From Norwegian Folk Costume to American Dress," 180.
11. Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York, 1984), 62.
12. This is borne out by the collections at the Norwegian-American Historical Association, Vesterheim, the Norwegian-American Museum, and the state historical societies of Wisconsin and Minnesota.
13. Letter from Caja Munch to her parents, November 25, 1855, describing her first home in Wiota, Wisconsin, in Munch, *The Strange American Way*, 15.
14. Letter from Berta Serina Kingestad to her parents, brothers, and sisters, November 11, 1888, Lee, Illinois, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 38.
15. Letter from Berta Serina Kingestad to her parents, brothers, and sisters, September 18, 1889, Malta, Illinois, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 45.
16. Letter from Andreas Hjørpeland to Ivan Kleiven, June 29, 1889, Daily, North Dakota, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 20.
17. Letter from Berta Serina Kingestad to her parents, brothers, and sisters, November 11, 1888, Lee, Illinois, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 38.
18. Letter from Caja Munch to her parents, Wiota, Wisconsin, October 1858, in Munch, *The Strange American Way*, 149.
19. Letter from Gunnar Høst to Agnes Hansen, December 4, 1893, McIntosh, Minnesota, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 74.
20. For the purpose of this study, portraits were first studied in the public collection of Vesterheim, the Norwegian-American Museum, in Decorah, Iowa, the largest collection of

Norwegian-American portraits in America. The museum has been a primary repository for photographs of Norwegian Americans, and the collection included many portraits of prominent Norwegian Americans, as well as some specific family collections. The Iconographic Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin hold a unique collection of Norwegian-American immigrant portraits made by Andreas Dahl in Dane county, Wisconsin. His carefully composed portraits, many of which document the immigrants' material gains in America, made this source particularly rich for examples of immigrant dress. A collection of photographs was also used which belongs to the author. The photographs were collected by Ole Rood, an editor of the publication *Samband*. The photographs were to be used for publication with the purpose of recording the lives of immigrants from the district of Valdres. Other family collections were also sought. Requests for viewing private collections were restricted to Winneshiek county, Iowa, the county surrounding the city of Decorah. The privately held family albums utilized from the Decorah area were well enough documented to ascertain social status and occupation of many of the individuals depicted in portraits. Historical knowledge of the social composition of this largely Norwegian settlement gave these family collections a context which helped in their interpretation. On the basis of them, for example, comparisons could be made between the effect of town and rural settlement on dress. For the photographs chosen, the dates and identification of subject given by the owner, if appearing to be generally accurate, are indicated. Where a photograph has been dated by the dress, an approximate date is given in the caption.

21. Reminiscence by Thurine Oleson of wedding, dated May 26, 1886, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in Xan, *Wisconsin, My Home*, 154.

22. Janice S. Stewart, *The Folk Arts of Norway* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1953).

23. Xan, *Wisconsin, My Home*, 62.

24. Letter from Berta Serina Kingestad to her sister Anna, September 18, 1889, Malta, Illinois, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 44.

25. Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York, 1982), 129. Although relating to demeanor rather than dress, another deceptive impression made by old photographs comes from the consistently sober faces. This was a convention comparable to the convention of smiling when being photographed today. The long exposure times that were required for portrait photographs are usually blamed for the stern appearances. The state of dental care at the time may also have entered in. Thurine Oleson has the following to say about it: "Our teeth were never filled, and we often pulled them ourselves by wiggling the decayed ones until they were so loose that they could be pulled out with fingers or pliers. If they were too big for this, or got to aching too badly, of course we had to go to a dentist in some nearby town to relieve the misery. It was taken for granted that all old people were almost toothless. I never remember anyone having false teeth until quite a few years after I was married." (Reminiscence of Thurine Oleson, who was married in 1886, in Xan, *Wisconsin, My Home*, 143.)

26. Xan, *Wisconsin, My Home*, 61.

27. Elisabeth Koren, *The Diary of Elisabeth Koren, 1853-1855*, trans. and ed. by David T. Nelson (Northfield, Minnesota, 1955), 113.

28. Munch, *The Strange American Way*, 149.

29. Xan, *Wisconsin, My Home*, 63.
30. Letter from Caja Munch to her parents, December 25, 1855, Wiota, Wisconsin, in Munch, *The Strange American Way*, 27.
31. Berta Serina Kingestad to her sister Anna, April 27, 1890, Malta, Illinois, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 47.
32. Letter from Berta Serina Kingestad to her sister Anna, April 14, 1889, Malta, Illinois, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 46.
33. Gunvor Ingstad Trætteberg, *Folk Costumes of Norway* (Oslo, Norway, 1966), 30.
34. Carol Colburn, "Immigrant Handweaving in the Upper Midwest," in Catherine Cole, ed., *Norwegian Immigrant Clothing and Textiles* (Edmonton, Alberta, 1990), 61.
35. Xan, *Wisconsin, My Home*, 63.
36. Joseph Schroeder, ed., *The Wonderful World of Ladies' Fashion 1850–1920* (Chicago, 1971), 70.
37. Letter from Caja Munch to her parents, March, 1858, Wiota, Wisconsin, in Munch, *The Strange American Way*, 135.
38. Ingeborg Gravjord, *Votten i norsk tradisjon* (Oslo, 1986), 35, and Noss, "Tradition and Transition: Norwegian Costume from Norway to the United States, 1840–1880," in Cole, *Norwegian Immigrant Clothing and Textiles*, 25.
39. Trætteberg, *Folk Costumes of Norway*, 5.
40. Six examples of this form of black apron used over a black dress were found during the course of this study. Other photographs show dark aprons without the velvet trim.
41. Ole E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York, 1927), 79.
42. The use of colorful silk scarves was also seen in fashionable dress of the late nineteenth century, so the appearance of these scarves on portraits of Norwegian Americans cannot be considered a unique dress feature retained from folk dress. However, the frequency of their appearance on portraits of Norwegian Americans, distinctive methods of tying the scarves in the folk dress tradition, and the use of the scarves in combination with Norwegian jewelry items distinguish their use by Norwegians from the use of similar scarves as part of fashionable dress.
43. Kjersti Skavhaug, *Norwegian Bunads* (Oslo, 1982), 82.
44. Barbara Schweger, "The Farvolden Collection of Norwegian Costume and Textiles," in Cole, *Norwegian Immigrant Clothing and Textiles*, 99.
45. Koren, *The Diary of Elisabeth Koren*, 111.
46. Xan, *Wisconsin, My Home*, 133.
47. Letter from Caja Munch to her parents, June, 1857, Wiota, Wisconsin, in Munch, *The Strange American Way*, 100. Her diary also refers to children's and men's shoes sent from Norway, 108, 138.
48. Letter from Berta Serina Kingestad to her sister Anna, April 14, 1889, Malta, Illinois, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 41.
49. Letter from Berta Serina Kingestad to her sister Anna, February 14, 1890, Malta, Illinois, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 46.
50. The Skree blacksmith shop that was moved to Vesterheim from rural Houston, Minnesota, had a considerable amount of wooden-shoe-making equipment. Marion Nelson of Vesterheim tells of having been given a pair of early "clogs" worn by the Norwegian immi-

grant grandfather of the giver in Willmar, Minnesota.

51. Letter from Berta Serina Kingestad to her sister Anna, April 14, 1889, Malta, Illinois, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 41.

52. Letter from Berta Serina Kingestad to her sister Anna, March 10, 1891, Malta, Illinois, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 50.

53. Stewart, *The Folk Arts of Norway*, 134.

54. Stewart, *The Folk Arts of Norway*, 136.

55. Carlton C. Qualey, "Seven America Letters to Valdres," in *Norwegian-American Studies*, 22 (1965). Quoted in Noss, "Tradition and Transition," 35. A series of photographs in Noss's article serve to demonstrate the differences between traditional and fashionable men's wear.

56. Xan, *Wisconsin, My Home*, 62.

57. Claudia B. Kidwell and Margaret C. Christman, *Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America* (Washington, D.C., 1974), 111.

58. Jo B. Paoletti and Ira Block, "Changes in the Masculine Image in the United States 1880-1900: A Content Analysis of Popular Humor about Dress," in *Association of College Professors of Textiles and Clothing Proceedings* (Burke, Virginia, 1980), 81.

59. John Berger, "The Suit and the Photograph," in *About Looking* (New York, 1980), 27-36.

60. Xan, *Wisconsin, My Home*, 62.

61. Diana de Marly, *Fashion for Men: An Illustrated History* (New York, 1985), 101.

62. David Mandel, *Settlers of Dane County: The Photographs of Andreas Larson Dahl* (Dane county, Wisconsin, 1985), 8.

63. Olaf M. Norlie, *History of the Norwegian People in America* (Minneapolis, 1925), 202.

64. Munch, *The Strange American Way*, 204.

65. Munch, *The Strange American Way*, 210.

66. Pastor Paul Hasvold, Decorah, Iowa. Telephone interview of January 23, 1992.

67. Munch, *The Strange American Way*, 78.

68. Reference to "preacher's cap" is made by the photographer Andreas Larsen Dahl, as reported by Mandel, *Settlers of Dane County*, 78. Aagot Noss, Curator at the Norsk Folke-museum, Oslo, reported on the use of the cap in Norway in a letter to the author, May 23, 1991.

69. Letter from Caja Munch to her parents, August, 1856, Wiota, Wisconsin, in Munch, *The Strange American Way*, 51.

70. Letter from Berta Serina Kingestad to her sister Anna, June 20, 1887, Norway, Illinois, in Zempel, *In Their Own Words*, 33.

71. The collection at Vesterheim has many woven and braided bands and the looms on which they were made.

72. Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth*, 81.

73. Heather Prince, "The Tradition in Alberta: A Case Study of Valhalla Centre," in Cole, *Norwegian Immigrant Clothing and Textiles*, 69; and Mary Ann Jacobsen and Ruth E. Gates "Norwegian-American Ethnicity and Ethnic Clothing, Textiles, and Household Objects," in *Ethnicity*, 6 (1979), 218.

74. Xan, *Wisconsin, My Home*, 222.