

The Origins of Leif Erikson Day:

Celebrating Discovery and Travel in the US

by Trevor Elifritz

In the infancy of writing this, I pitched the idea of a paper on Leif Erikson Day to my history classmates and professor and was met with an unexpected question: What is Leif Erikson Day? To me, being born and raised in Wisconsin, this was a strange question that had never even crossed my mind. I remember as a child in grade school cutting out paper Vikings and decorating them with blonde beards and horns during Leif Erikson Day. I remember learning about the Norse discovery of America and the other less savory Viking escapades. Never had Leif Erikson Day been a holiday to compare to any of the larger ones like Christmas or Halloween, but it was a day of remembrance nonetheless. For my classmates born outside of the Midwest, this was not the case.

There is some sense to this pattern. The Midwest is known for its large population of Norwegians and for its pride in that heritage. Of course, it would make sense that someone born in these areas would have more of an idea about Scandinavian heritage. After all, if you look at the official statement about Leif Erikson Day, it is also a celebration of this heritage. However, when talking to one of my classmates, he mentioned, “Well, I’ve heard of Columbus Day... never Leif Erikson Day.”

This paper is primarily a history of Leif Erikson Day in America, but it started as a question: Why is the first European discoverer of America largely forgotten except in select regions, and what made him survive in these regions over others? However, as you will see, the paper also runs into another question: Is Leif Erikson truly part of Scandinavian heritage? That is to say, did Scandinavian immigrants actually remember Leif Erikson, or was he a more modern American addition?

When looking for the origins of Leif Erikson Day, it seems most likely that through the grip of arising Christianity and the turmoil of the Middle Ages, Leif Erikson’s journey was mostly forgotten about. The first Scandinavian immigrants were devoutly Christian and likely

had no idea who Leif Erikson was during their voyage to America. The true roots of Leif Erikson Day lie in the heart of the Midwest and in Scandinavian-American scholars like Rasmus Anderson and Knut Gjerset. The reality of Leif Erikson Day is that it is not an organic line through time that connects us to the past, but an intentional creation of Midwesterners who rediscovered lost knowledge and revitalized a fading heritage. This creation was as much an attempt to assimilate and appeal to American culture as it was to define themselves not as Americans but as Norwegian-Americans.

Leif's Journey to Vinland

“Leif Erikson called the country Vinland and the cause of this was the following incident: There was a German in Leif Erikson’s party by name Tyrker. He was a prisoner of war, but had become Leif’s special favorite. He was missing one day after they came back from an exploring expedition. Leif became very anxious about Tyrker, and fearing that he might be killed by wild beasts or by natives, he went out with a few men to search for him. Toward evening he was found coming home, but in a very excited state of mind. The cause of excitement was some fruit which he had found and held up in his hands shouting: Weintrauben! Weintrauben! Weintrauben! The sight and taste of this fruit, to which he had been accustomed in his own native land, had excited him to such an extent that he seemed drunk, and for some time he would do nothing but laugh, devour grapes and talk German, which language our Norse discoverers did not understand.”—Rasmus Anderson ¹

The magnitude of a journey to a land that was never known to exist is understandably large. Leif and his crew stood upon land that was entirely new to them, with entirely new flora, fauna, resources, and people. Despite the magnitude of such an event, Leif Erikson’s legacy did not survive through history altogether, was not fully documented and understood, and is only present today due to efforts of scholars in the 19th century.

Leif Erikson and his journey to Vinland is a topic that is still under scrutiny and dispute. There are two primary sources on the topic: Saga of Erik the Red and the Greenlanders’ Saga. Both of these sagas were written independently of each other and are supposed to have been passed down through word of mouth and poetic traditions from the 11th century and written

¹ Anderson, Rasmus. America Not Discovered by Columbus. p. 73

down in the 13th century.² The distance between the events and the written sources raise concerns among historians about the validity of the sources, and the sources themselves contradict one another on a few points. However, in 1960 with the discovery of the L'Anse Aux Meadows, a Norse settlement dated to the 1000s in Newfoundland, any doubt of Norse expeditions in the Americas was put to rest.³

Both sagas tell of Norse peoples settling in Greenland, descending from Icelanders. The Icelanders of the previous generation were from mainland Norway, a ragtag group of sailors, adventurers, and outlaws. Both sagas also talk of 'skraeling', or Native American interactions.^{4 5} Some of the interactions are peaceful and mercantile based, but all interactions end in violence.² It is most likely, through both sagas, that the violence between the Norse settlers and the skraeling made it impossible for the settlers to remain in Vinland for very long.

The Greenlanders' Saga is the source that is more commonly seen and accepted as the discovery of America. It tells of Bjarni Herjolfsson, a Greenland settler, who is blown off course when sailing west of Greenland. He spots a wide expanse of land, but he never sets foot on it. Leif Erikson hears of this land and is the first to explore it. Many journeys are made throughout generations, all by relatives of Leif Erikson. Ultimately, violence between the Natives and the Norsemen leads to an abandonment of the settlement.⁵

Erik the Red's Saga speaks a great deal about the lineage of Erik the Red and his kin. Leif Erikson plays much the same role as Bjarni Herjolfsson as the person who tells of Vinland. Thorfinn Karlsefni plays the role of Leif Erikson, discovering and settling Vinland. Generations of his kin make multiple settlements in Vinland, but encounter hostilities with the Natives that drive them out of Vinland.⁴

In both sagas, Leif Erikson is a pagan that converted to Christianity when visiting the

² "Greenland Sagas." Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. 2006

³ Wahlgren, Erik. The Vikings and America p.82

⁴ Sephton, J. The Saga of Erik the Red

⁵ Haugen, Einar. The Greenlanders Saga

king of Norway. In various versions and stories, Leif plays a sort of missionary figure who converts Greenlanders and even Native Americans. Leif's father, Erik the Red, remains staunchly pagan despite his wife, also a converted Christian, withholding sex from him. Gudrid, the wife of Thorfinn who plays the role of Leif in Erik the Red's Saga, is said to have made a pilgrimage to Rome and is well-received, and there are suggestions that she was given audience with the Pope.⁶ The tension between Norse Pagans and converted Christians is clear through both of the sagas. We get a sense that the world is changing. The king of Norway had converted to Christianity, sent missionaries with Leif to convert his other kingdoms, and the majority of Icelanders and Greenlanders had converted. With this in mind, the adventurers that discovered Vinland should have been well-received, known, and celebrated within the Christian European world when many of them returned to Europe. But they weren't.^{2 3}

There are few accounts of Leif Erikson's journey beyond the two sagas. This journey is not within popular literature of the next eras like other Germanic tales, such as *Beowulf* or the *Song of Roland*. The most that is seen of Leif Erikson's journey is in 1112, when Pope Paschal the Second proclaims Erik Upsi the bishop of Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland. The final trace of Vinland can be found in papal literature within an account of Erik Upsi personally visiting Vinland.⁷

Why wouldn't a journey and discovery of this magnitude survive through the ages? It is uncertain. Norway, as a power within Europe, faded throughout the Middle Ages and was dissolved into Sweden and Denmark several times. Norway also suffered most drastically from the Bubonic Plague, losing 40 to 50 percent of their population, much higher than in the rest of Europe.⁸ Meanwhile, the written sagas remained in Iceland and they brought doubt to the reality

⁶ "Gudrid Thorbjornsdottir: The First European Mother to Give Birth on American Soil." Norwegian Society of Texas. 2006

⁷ Anderson, Rasmus. *America Not Discovered by Columbus*. p.87

⁸ *The Black Death in Norway*. University of Bergen

of an America discovered by Norsemen. This doubt remained until the 1960 uncovering of L'Anse Aux Meadows, a 1000s era Norse settlement in Newfoundland.³

It seems most likely that through the turmoil of the Middle Ages and the transformation of pagan Norway, the journey was lost in the public mind, but survived ever so slightly in the minds of the scholars and royals near the Papal States. Rasmus Anderson, a scholar I will write of later, suggests that Christopher Columbus knew of Vinland and even had maps of it before his journey to America through connections to the Pope.⁹ Despite this, there is no doubt that the story of Leif's journey faded mostly, if not wholly, until the 19th century.

⁹ Anderson, Rasmus. America Not Discovered by Columbus. p. 85-89

Restauration and the First Norwegian Immigrants

“Truth may often lay hid for a long time, but that it is like the beam of light from a star in some far distant region of the universe...”—Rasmus Anderson¹⁰

October 9th, 1825 is the day the first Norwegian immigrants arrived in New York harbor on the ship *Restauration*, and it is also the date later selected to be Leif Erikson Day. The question then arises: how is *Restauration* connected to Leif Erikson? Well, aside from the obvious – that these two events are Norwegians going to America – there is no real connection.¹¹

The sloop *Restauration* left from Stavanger, Norway with 52 people aboard. The backdrop for this emigration is within the turmoil of Napoleon Europe. Norway was a dependent nation under Denmark, which was allied with Napoleon; this made Norway an enemy of Napoleon’s enemies. Many Norwegians were captured by British forces and held prisoner. In prison, the Norwegians made acquaintance with British Quaker prisoners. Upon being released, the Norwegians went back to Norway and attempted to make Quaker communities. The Norwegian authorities persecuted and threatened the Quakers because they did not allow any other religion but Lutheranism.¹²

In 1821, the Norwegian Quaker community sent two of their members to America on a British ship to learn of opportunities in America. One member died, but the other returned in 1824 and told of the many Quaker communities in America and the good prospects for them. The Quaker community decided to travel to America and bought the ship *Restauration*. They set out in early 1825, and after many misdirections, they arrived in October 9th of 1825.¹²

Upon arriving in New York harbor, the Sloopers, as they began to call themselves based

¹⁰ Anderson, Rasmus. *America Not Discovered by Columbus*. p. 93

¹¹ Hansen, Chris. "91. Leif Erikson Comes to the Front." In *My Minneapolis*

¹² "The Sloopers: Pioneers in Norwegian Emigration." *Norway Heritage*. 1997

on the ship they sailed in, were arrested for violating the 1819 Passenger Act which didn't allow that many passengers on such a small ship. Seven days later, the Sloopers were personally pardoned by President John Quincy Adams, likely due to their connections with the Quaker community. The Sloopers then moved to upstate New York, where they formed the first Norwegian communities.¹²

During the next century, Norwegian immigration continued with the majority of Norwegian immigrants moving to the rural upper Midwest. The reasons for immigration vary between farmland scarcities in Norway to greater opportunities in America.¹³ However, there is nothing to suggest that neither the original Sloopers nor the subsequent immigrants were following in the footsteps of Leif Erikson or even had any idea who Leif Erikson was.¹¹ The connection is instead made years after the first immigration by Rasmus Anderson and later again by Christian Hoen, both Wisconsin based Scandinavian scholars. The connection would be brought up again by Calvin Coolidge in 1925 as a way to celebrate Norwegian-American heritage.

¹³ Gjerset, Knut, and Ludvig Hektoen. *Becoming American, Becoming Suburban: Norwegians in the 1920s*

Rasmus Anderson

“Let us remember Leif Erikson, the first white man who turned the bow of his ship to the west for the purpose of finding America.”—Rasmus Anderson¹⁴

Rasmus Anderson was born in Dane County, Wisconsin to Norwegian immigrant parents. His parents were part of the first wave of Sloopers that arrived in America in the 1820s. In his adult life, he graduated from both Luther College and University of Wisconsin-Madison and became a professor at the latter. He founded the department of Scandinavian Studies, the oldest department of its kind, which is still running at the University. Among his other lifeworks are: founding of the Norrøna Society which published vital works on Northern European mythology, editor of the Norwegian newspaper *Amerika*, and United States Ambassador to Denmark.¹⁵

Chief among Rasmus Anderson’s achievements is his popularization of the idea that Leif Erikson was the first European to discover and explore America. Rasmus’ book *America Not Discovered by Columbus* explores this idea as well as the likelihood that Columbus knew of Leif Erikson’s journey before he made his own. Ultimately, the book stresses that Leif Erikson’s discovery should be common knowledge and that to reach this state of knowledge, there must be a day to celebrate the discovery: Leif Erikson Day, October 9th.

America Not Discovered by Columbus is really the genesis of Leif Erikson Day. The primary concern of Rasmus is worn on the sleeve in this book... or a chapter, in this case: “Norse literature has been neglected by the learned men of the great nations.”¹⁶ Rasmus explains that the manuscripts or sagas that tell of Leif Erikson are genuine based on their dating,

¹⁴ Anderson, Rasmus. *America Not Discovered by Columbus*. p. 93

¹⁵ Knapland, Paul. "Rasmus B. Anderson: Pioneer and Crusader."

¹⁶ Anderson, Rasmus. *America Not Discovered by Columbus*. p. 41

writing, and location.¹⁷ He also does a great deal to retell of the Norsemen, their journey, and their tools in order to give validity to their discovery. The second concern of the book is Columbus. Rasmus pursues the idea that Columbus was well-aware of the Americas because of documents kept at the Vatican. He gives five reasons for this being a fact, which I will summarize below.

1. Columbus, while writing of taking a trip to the west, visited northern Europe and Iceland in 1477.
2. Gudrid, the wife of Thorfinn in *Erik the Red's Saga*, made a pilgrimage to Rome, making it likely that she gave information and maps of Vinland to the Romans.
3. Vinland was known to the Vatican, as shown by their allocation of Vinland to Bishop Erik Upsi.
4. Recent discoveries and journal entries of Columbus (which discoveries he doesn't make clear) make it likely that the Vatican had maps of Vinland, which Columbus had in his possession.
5. Adam of Bremen wrote a canonized book in the late 1000s titled *On the Propagation of the Christian Religion in the North of Europe* in which he lists the realms of Scandinavia and includes Vinland, and says "this we know not by fabulous conjecture, but from positive statements of the Danes." This makes it likely that the knowledge of Leif Erikson survived among kings, nobles, and scholars.¹⁸

Rasmus' book would spark the beginning of Scandinavian-American studies as well as the push to make Leif Erikson Day a holiday.¹⁵ But why? Where does Rasmus' apparently vigorous drive to push Norwegian pride and Leif Erikson to the front come from? There is the first and most apparent reason as stated by Rasmus himself: "The interest manifested by the reader of history is always greater the nearer the history which he reads is connected with his

¹⁷ Anderson, Rasmus. *America Not Discovered by Columbus*. p. 65

¹⁸ Anderson, Rasmus. *America Not Discovered by Columbus*. p. 85-89

own country or with his own ancestors”.¹⁹ Rasmus is a Norwegian. Rasmus is a historian. There was reason there enough for him to study his own beloved people. But then why not centuries earlier in Norway by some other Norwegian scholar pushing Norwegian heroes to the front during an era of nationalism and kingdoms?

It seems that the key to Leif Erikson Day’s genesis is its location in the discovered land itself, America, among fellow frontiersmen and travelers. Rasmus must have had some great epiphany that he, a son of the Norwegian people, stood there in America more than 800 years after Leif Erikson did and so little there was to be found of his ancestor. In this light, Rasmus’ writing seems more of a cry of shame for a fellow traveler than a wave of a nationalist flag, which is fitting given that Rasmus’ parents were aboard the *Restauration* to the promise land of America.¹² These sentiments seen throughout his writing were not shared by him alone, but with generations of Norwegians in America who would have the same epiphany and feel the same feeling that they *were* the modern Leif Erikson. They were the new Vikings: the Norwegian-Americans.

¹⁹ Anderson, Rasmus. *America Not Discovered by Columbus*. p. 35

The Early Years of Leif Erikson Day

“A great deal of energy and effort has been given to obtaining general recognition of Leif Erikson as the Discoverer of America.” – Carl Hansen¹¹

Carl Hansen, a Norwegian journalist from Minnesota, writes in his 1956 book *My Minneapolis* that Rasmus was the “prime mover in the Leif Erikson cause”.²⁰ However, this is not to suggest that after Rasmus’ book *America not discovered by Columbus* in 1877 there was an explosive Scandinavian-American movement for a holiday of their own. Carl Hansen suggests a slower moving, steady progress by local Norwegian groups to the eventual bill in 1929 that would make Leif Erikson Day a holiday in Wisconsin.²⁰ Carl Hansen describes the first local Leif Erikson Day festival for Minneapolis:

“(It) took place at Normanna Hall November 11, 1906. The sponsors, I believe, were the Sons of Norway lodges. The main address was delivered by Prof. Julius E. Olson of the University of Wisconsin. The Norwegian Dramatic Society put on a very creditable performance of Ibsen's "Hærmændene paa Helgeland" (The Vikings at Helgeland).”²⁰

Hansen explains that beyond the first few Leif Erikson Day festivals, not much was heard for several years. In 1918, the Sons of Norway, a fraternity organization for peoples of Norwegian heritage which was founded in Minneapolis in 1895 instructed all of their local lodges to “observe a Leif Erikson Day at such time as each lodge finds it most suitable”. With that, the push for Leif Erikson Day mostly died down and became just privately held festivals.²⁰

This was the atmosphere of the early days of the push for Leif Erikson Day. Norwegian newspapers like the *Scandinaven* in Chicago would bolster a certain author like Rasmus Anderson’s work, and then small Norwegian organizations like the Sons of Norway would rise to

²⁰ Hansen, Chris. "91. Leif Erikson Comes to the Front." In *My Minneapolis*

the occasion and hold festivals.²¹ Beyond these special interest peoples and groups, the whole of Norwegian-Americans remained rural and outside of the push for Leif Erikson Day.²⁰ Later in the 20s, though, Leif Erikson Day would change from a scholarly-like cause created by the likes of Rasmus Anderson to one of wide-reaching appeal to Norwegian-Americans.

²¹ Øverland, Orm. "Skandinaven and the Beginnings of Professional Publishing."

Calvin Coolidge to the first Leif Erikson Day

“The Norse-American celebration will be like a river of living water, like Mimer’s fountain of Norse mythology. Those who drank of this fountain received knowledge and wisdom. Odin himself, king of the Gods of Norse mythology, came and begged a draught of this water, which he received, but he had to leave one of his eyes in pawn for it.” – Gisle Bothne²³

Following the roots of Leif Erikson Day leads away from the work of Rasmus Anderson in Madison and to some of his contemporaries in Minneapolis, where major Norwegian-American ‘noise’ was taking place. *Becoming American, Becoming Suburban: Norwegians in the 1920s* by Knut Gjerset and Ludvig Hektoen engages the tension between so-called ‘old Norwegians’ and ‘new Norwegians’, or Norwegian immigrants and a new breed of Norwegian-Americans. This struggle and transformation is fundamental to understanding Leif Erikson Day’s placement in American culture and history and why it would change from a relatively stagnant, scholarly cause to a Norwegian-American cause.

In one part of their novel, Gjerset and Hektoen recount the 1925 Minnesota State Fairgrounds, a festival involving 60 to 100 thousand Norwegian immigrants and Norwegian-Americans celebrating the centennial of organized Norwegian immigration. In particular, they note the importance of President Calvin Coolidge’s speech on a hot June day, which was addressed to the Norwegian-Americans and concerned the nature of Norwegian immigration and Norwegians in the future of America.

Evoking the familiar idea of the “melting pot,” Coolidge told Norwegian Americans that their qualities fused with those of other ethnic groups to create “a spiritual union accompanied by a range of capacity and genius which marks this nation for a preeminent destiny.” Since 1825 the Norwegians had transformed America, but perhaps more importantly, the President claimed, America transformed the Norwegians. “They have been rapidly amalgamated into the body of citizenship while contributing to it many of its best and characteristic elements.” Despite their European origins, the President concluded, the group’s historical identity was “in its essence and its meaning . . . peculiarly American.”²²

The two authors note that most prominently among those who cheered on Coolidge during his speech were young Norwegian-American leaders and children. What the authors and President Coolidge himself were seeing was the growing difference between new American culture and the older Norwegian culture upheld by immigrants. For Coolidge, the obvious solution to this problem was to push Norwegian-Americans to the forefront and encourage older world immigrants to assimilate. For others, Coolidge seemed to be ringing the death knell of Norwegian immigration and calling for a start of a straying and deformed Norwegian-American culture.

“So a cloud of fatalism hung over the centennial, a morbid feeling that the 1925 festivities represented a ‘last rally’ of the Norwegians before the group sank into the American mainstream.”²² This was the perspective of the old world Norwegians, as Gjerset and Hektoen wrote. This tension had been growing throughout the previous decades in outlets such as ethnic newspapers, businesses, and ethnic community leaderships. Major companies started placing ads in Norwegian, such as Coca-Cola’s “Drikk Coca-Cola” and Camel cigarettes’ “Vær saa god, en Camel.” Baseball star Bob Musell urged Norwegians to smoke Lucky Strike cigarettes by repeating its slogan in Norwegian. This was the setting just before Leif Erikson Day’s 1930

²² Gjerset, Knut, and Ludvig Hektoen. *Becoming American, Becoming Suburban: Norwegians in the 1920s*.

adoption in Wisconsin and the atmosphere that would make Leif Erikson's Day an essentially Norwegian-American holiday.

Calvin Coolidge, during the 1925 Minnesota Fairground, was the first American President to mention Leif Erikson's discovery of America in a formal speech. He connected this discovery to the innate 'Nordic traits' of individualism and industriousness. He also equated the arrival of *Restauration* in 1825 with the Mayflower, placing the Norwegian immigrants as equals to Americans in terms of 'Americanism'.

One could easily pin Coolidge's intentions as an attempt to garner the decidedly progressive Norwegian-American vote from rival Progressive Presidential Candidate Robert La Follette. After all, the Minnesota Fairground was the place where Theodore Roosevelt, the father of the Progressive Party, first uttered "Speak softly and carry a big stick". Only years before, the Fairground was styled as a celebration of the centennial of the Norwegian Constitution Day, Syttende Mai, a decidedly old world Norwegian holiday. If Coolidge was a reader of Rasmus Anderson, as he must have been given the contents of his speech, he would sense the division between the old world Norwegians and the new Norwegian-Americans and pit Leif Erikson Day against Syttende Mai as the Norwegian-American's own holiday.

Regardless of Coolidge's intentions, it is certain that his intervention into the relatively stagnant push for Leif Erikson Day completely invigorated it. Carl Hansen, the author of *My Minneapolis* who wrote of Leif Erikson's Day's earlier years, also writes of it post-Coolidge. He writes that "(the president) did much to kindle interest in this subject among the heretofore luke-warm."²⁰

The following year in Minneapolis, there was a large celebration of Leif Erikson in "the auditorium". More American political figures such as Idaho Senator William E. Borah, who was a sort of national figure at the time, arrived for the event. Non-Norwegian Harvard professor Dr. Harry A. Bellows gave a speech directed at the superintendent of schools in Minneapolis titled "Why Leif Erikson Interests Me."¹¹

Hansen tells of how Norwegian organizations began to rise to the front of Norwegian-American life. “The Norwegian National League from its rebirth in 1927 became quite a factor in the Leif Erikson movement locally.” Because of these organizations, in 1928 the first Leif Erikson Day festival was held on the actual Leif Erikson Day: October the 9th. Many other celebrations would be held throughout the years following Coolidge’s speech and up to the official recognition of Leif Erikson Day in Wisconsin.

Governor Walter Kohler would make Wisconsin the first state to officially recognize Leif Erikson Day. In 1929 he lent his signature to a bill by the legislature that would make October 9th Leif Erikson Day. He stated that “on such a day one half hour may be devoted in the school to instruction and appropriate exercises relative to and in commemoration of the life and history of Leif Erikson and the principles and ideals he fostered”.¹¹ This description matches my own experience with Leif Erikson Day in the Wisconsin school system some 70 years later, showing some amazing longevity in a relatively obscure ethnic tradition.

After Wisconsin’s adoption of Leif Erikson Day, the Norwegian National League set its sight on Minnesota, importing the Wisconsin bill to Minnesota legislation. Senator Devold of Minnesota, an immigrant from Sweden, championed the cause, and the bill was adopted in 1931. Following this, the Norwegian National League gave speeches in high schools around the Midwest during Leif Erikson Day.¹¹

One might stand back and wonder at this point: What caused such sudden backing of the Leif Erikson Day movement, a movement which had remained relatively quiet in the fifty years prior to the 1925 Minnesota State Fairground? Surely pointing to President Calvin Coolidge’s championing is the best answer. A president that came from English ancestry and was among some of the oldest American roots, Coolidge was the least likely to endorse a Norwegian cause, but he did. There were perhaps veiled political reasons behind Coolidge’s actions as discussed above, but nevertheless Coolidge invoked a cultural and yet native spirit among the Norwegian-Americans that drove them to wider acceptance in the American public.

There is a broader historical current present beyond just Coolidge's endorsement. Following World War 1, the Norwegian-American population faced nativist ridicule and scrutiny due to their progressive, anti-war sentiment. Major schisms in the community were formed due to nativist pressure where in one camp were the Norwegians who wholly did away with Americanization and in the other were the Norwegians who sought to become Americans or at least Norwegian-Americans.²³

Gisle Bothne, the president of the Centennial Committee during the 1925 Minnesota Fairground, knew well of this schism in the Norwegian community. In a newspaper article just before the State Fair, he made his position known about the Fairgrounds purpose: "Instead of weakening their allegiance to America, the Centennial is certain to make all citizens of Norse blood or birth better Americans than ever before."²³

Perhaps, then, it can be seen that the argument about old Norwegians and new Norwegians made by Knut Gjerset and Ludvig Hektoen was not just a concept gleaned from historical review, but a heated topic that most Norwegians, rural and city-going, knew well of. The American media had caught onto this schism and chose to portray this conflict to the nation. American businesses were choosing to advertise to the Norwegian youth. Even baseball stars were joining in the Norwegian frenzy.¹¹ If this is the case, it might be said that while Coolidge was a major factor in pushing Leif Erikson Day to fruition, the majority of the Norwegian community was ready in the mid 1920s to become the Norwegian-American community. Leif Erikson Day was the easiest way to show this change.

²³ Schultz, April. The Pride of the Race Had Been Touched: The 1925 Norse-American Immigration Centennial and Ethnic Identity

Later Days

“As a Nation, let us carry forward the spirit of Leif Erikson and seize the future together.”

—Barack Obama²⁴

Several major achievements in the way of Leif Erikson Day took place after the initial Wisconsin and Minnesota success. In 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt signed a congressional resolution that made October 9th Leif Erikson Day nationwide. Roosevelt urged that the day be celebrated in all states of the Union. A parade of five thousand followed this address as well as a speech given by Norway’s Minister, Wilhelm Morgenstierne.

The years following Roosevelt’s resolution had large Leif Erikson Day celebrations in Minneapolis. In 1942, a committee was formed in Minnesota to create a statue of Leif Erikson at the state’s capitol. This effort was largely hampered by the Second World War, but sufficient funds came in by the end of the War. In 1949, the Leif Erikson statue was unveiled by sculptor John Karl Daniels only a stone’s throw away from the Christopher Columbus statue risen a decade earlier by Italian-Americans.¹¹ It still stands there today.

Leif Erikson Day was celebrated yearly in the Midwest, but would not be fully recognized as a nationwide ‘day’ until 1963 when US Representative John Blatnik, from Duluth, drafted several bills to again observe Leif Erikson Day as a federal observance. A year later, congress voted unanimously for the bill. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson made the first annual proclamation of Leif Erikson Day. Every president since has followed suit.²⁵

Looking at this year’s proclamation of Leif Erikson Day by President Barack Obama gives an idea of the larger picture of its history. The proclamation addresses both Leif Erikson’s journey and of the *Restauraton* and the first Norwegian immigrants, erroneously tying the first immigrants to Leif Erikson. It then mentions the 200th anniversary of Syttende Mai or the

²⁴ "Presidential Proclamation -- Leif Erikson Day, 2014." The White House

²⁵ Blatnik, John. "John Blatnik Congressional Papers."

Norwegian constitution day. Finally, the proclamation ties Leif Erikson Day to the spirit of exploration, “The far reaches of our universe and the depths of our oceans remain unexplored, and the next frontiers in science, medicine, and technology await a new generation of innovators and entrepreneurs. As a Nation, let us carry forward the spirit of Leif Erikson and seize the future together.”²⁴

Some historical inaccuracies aside, the President’s proclamation does well at summing up the history of Leif Erikson Day. However, there is a major portion of the picture missing. What is it? The scholars! Rasmus Anderson, Knut Gjerset, Ludvig Hektoen, Chris Hoen, Gisle Bothne, Carl Hansen and all of the other academics who spent their lives documenting the flow of the past and wrestling with the turmoil of the present. *This* is the history of Leif Erikson Day. Without these men and women, Leif Erikson Day would not exist.

Why, then, is Columbus Day so widely known while Leif Erikson Day remains on the peripheries, scarcely known outside of the Midwest? Perhaps this issue was best personified in the events written above: In 1949 when the statue of Leif Erikson was unveiled at the Minnesota State Capitol, there was already a statue of Christopher Columbus there... in the most densely Norwegian place in America! The story of travel and discovery in America is written by the scholars who talk about it the most and talk the loudest, with the largest audience. More importantly, Leif Erikson Day teaches us that the ‘thing’ that is traveling and discovery is completely and inseparably tied with those who write about the ‘thing’ over generations. For instance, we have as much to thank to Homer for blinding the Cyclops as we do Odysseus. In the same way, Leif Erikson Day is as much about Rasmus Anderson as it is about Leif Erikson himself.

The roots of Leif Erikson Day lay wholly entangled in Scandinavian-American scholars like Rasmus Anderson. We cannot talk about remembering Leif Erikson without talking through Rasmus Anderson and his contemporaries. In this way, we can understand that Christopher Columbus and his day would take center stage because his voyage was well-documented, talked

and written about in thousands upon thousands of books from every different angle since the beginning of America. Leif Erikson on the other hand is a relatively new insertion in the historical picture with only a few murmurs in the academic community by Scandinavian studies specialists. If Leif Erikson and Leif Erikson Day are to be understood by the whole of America then more scholars have to talk more often, much louder and to a greater audience.

Primary Sources:

Anderson, Rasmus. *America Not Discovered by Columbus*. Chicago, IL: S.G Griggs, 1887.

Blatnik, John. "John Blatnik Congressional Papers." Minnesota Historical Society. 1991.

<http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00366.xml>.

Gjerset, Knut, and Ludvig Hektoen. *Becoming American, Becoming Suburban: Norwegians in the 1920s*. Northfield, Minnesota: Norwegian American Historical Association.

Hansen, Chris. "Leif Erikson Comes to the Front." In *My Minneapolis*. Minneapolis, MN, 1956.

Haugen, Einar. *The Greenlanders Saga*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Øverland, Orm. "Skandinaven and the Beginnings of Professional Publishing." Norwegian American Historical Association.

http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/nas/volume31/vol31_08.htm.

Sephton, J. *The Saga of Erik the Red*. Saga Database, 2001.

Secondary Sources:

"Greenland Sagas." Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. 2006.

<https://www.mnh.si.edu/vikings/voyage/subset/greenland/sagas.html>.

"Gudrid Thorbjornsdottir: The First European Mother to Give Birth on American Soil."

Norwegian Society of Texas. 2006.

Knapland, Paul. "Rasmus B. Anderson: Pioneer and Crusader." Norwegian American Historical

Association. 2000. http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/nas/volume18/vol18_2.htm.

"Presidential Proclamation -- Leif Erikson Day, 2014." The White House. Accessed May 14,

2015. <http://m.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/10/08/presidential-proclamation-leif-erikson-day-2014>.

Schultz, April. The Pride of the Race Had Been Touched: The 1925 Norse-American

Immigration Centennial and Ethnic Identity. *Journal of American History*, 1991.

The Black Death in Norway. Bergen: University of Bergen, Norway, 1990.

"The Sloopers: Pioneers in Norwegian Emigration." Norway Heritage. 1997.

http://www.norwayheritage.com/articles/templates/norwegian_settl.asp?articleid=31&zoneid=17.

Wahlgren, Erik. *The Vikings and America*. Thames and Hudson, 2000.