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UW professor Harald Naess, with a map of Norway in the background, says many Norsk traits have merged with Yankee ones almost to the point of unrecognizability.

Norwegian myths

How much tradition is genuine?

By CATHERINE STOVER
Special to The Capital Times

STOUGHTON — At first glance, pride in its Norwegian heritage seems to be what this city's all about.

Norwegian rosemaling is painted on everything that doesn't move — including the city garbage cans and the local McDonald's. The aroma of krumkaka and rosettes comes from Fosdal Home Bakery; imported gjetost cheese comes from the Super Valu Store. Even Stoughton's banks add a piece of flavor: They fly the Norwegian flag.

Look at this: According to the 1980 U.S. Census, only 25 percent of Stoughton's population is full-blooded Norwegian. It never was an all-Norsk town, for that matter. Its founder, Luke Stoughton, was a seventh-generation Yankee.

Last but certainly not least, this little city of 8,684 hosts the largest Syttende Mai celebration on this continent. The event, scheduled to run next Friday through Sunday, has brought as many as 100,000 visitors to town in past years.

Chamber of Commerce Executive Secretary Myron Wilcox says that everyone in the city helps out "unless they're in a hospital or a nursing home."

When asked if residents of non-Scandinavian descent feel compelled to contribute, Wilcox said, "There are only two kinds of

people in Stoughton: those who are Norwegian and those who want to be."

But is Norwegian fervor Stoughton's driving force? Is what passes for Norwegian culture here something someone from Norway would still understand?

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It never was an all-Norsk town, for that matter. Its founder, Luke Stoughton, was a seventh-generation Yankee. He created a town that as late as 1870 looked exactly like a New England village.

It is true that a large number of Norwegians settled in Stoughton in the 1880s and '90s. But because they settled in a Yankee town, they had to work hard to keep their ethnic traditions from blurring into the local status quo.

Were they able to isolate their customs and keep their heritage intact?

According to two experts on Norway — Trond Sjovoll, a Norwegian citizen, and Harald Naess, a Scandinavian studies professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison — the answer is both yes and no. Many Norsk traits, they say, have merged with Yankee ones almost to the point of unrecognizability.

Just look at the festivities surrounding Syttende Mai, or 17th of May — the day in 1814 when Norway adopted a constitution that declared independence from Sweden. (The country did not, however, become independent until 1905.)

In addition to the afternoon-long parade, there's a race, a walk, an arts and crafts fair, the Wisconsin State Rosemaling Exhibit, an ugliest troll contest, folk dance performances and more. The city also operates 18 concession stands.

Norway celebrates Syttende Mai with parades also. When comparing them to Stoughton's, however, the Yankee influence becomes clear.

According to Sjovoll, there are no floats in Norway's parades. No bands. No commercialism of any sort. And it is actually celebrated on May 17 — not on the closest weekend, as in Stoughton.

They traditionally have two parades in Norway. The one in the morning is for schoolchildren, and the afternoon parade is called the Citizens' Parade. People in clubs carry banners and national dancers wear costumes.

Naess reacts to Stoughton's parade this way: "To most Norwegians from Norway, it looks like a businessman's ploy. It's commercialized."

More so than Norway's parades, Stoughton's festivities generate revenue. According to Rae Van Wye of the Wisconsin Tourism Development Department, a conservative estimate is that between $1.25 million and $2 million is spent during the three-day festival here.

But the Yankess had influence in areas other than capitalistic ones. They also had a social influence, and particularly a knack for creating social events.

An example of this is the lutefisk and lefse church suppers seen in Stoughton and other area communities with Norwegian roots, such as Mt. Horeb.

According to Naess, the church in Norway is not a social institution. Though friendlier than it used to be, it's still a place where you go to be mildly chastised by the minister. The Lutheran Church — which is the state church — still tells people off. The American churches, on the other hand, are much more uplifting.

The Norwegian churches don't have basements used for social events. Actually, if there is a basement, it is most likely full of ancient corpses.

Unlike the American church basement, Ness said, "it's not a place to eat, drink and maybe sell a car."

In Norway, the old saying is, "Ninety-five percent of Norwegians belong to the church. Ninety percent of them don't go."

When Norwegians hear about Stoughton's lutefisk and lefse church dinners, they are surprised for two reasons: first, because it's in a church, and second, because of the lutefisk and lefse.

This menu is one Norwegian tradition that has survived for the last 100 years in Stoughton — but not in Norway.

According to Sjovoll, the lefse here is made the way it was in Norway long, long ago.

And lutefisk? "Norwegians have electric freezers today. They don't need to have dried cod that's been steeped in lye," said Naess.

Another Norwegian custom that has survived better in Stoughton is rosemaling — the decorative painting found on wooden dishes or wooden beams near the ceiling.

"You'd see rosemaling in historical situations, like a historical-cultural exhibit," said Sjovoll.

Naess feels that too much emphasis is placed here on rosemaling as a living Norwegian tradition. It is not practiced widely today, and rarely as a hobby by Norwegian women. Women in Norway seem to have "much bigger tasks — to get their rights, for example."

Rosemaling in Norway is not associated with commercial enterprises. Gift shops in cities the size of Stoughton don't sell it, for example. Fast-food restaurants certainly don't harbor rosemaling — including the McDonald's in Oslo.

It's clear that the art, food and a national holiday of Norway have been subjected to Yankee influence over the years. What about Norwegian personal traits? Have their deep-rooted characteristics survived unchanged?

The foremost national traits, according to Naess, are pride in heritage, being reserved, having an international outlook and respecting education.

Watching children march in Norwegian costumes in the parade gives one the feeling that the town is full of pride in its heritage.

Then the Cambodian children — also in Norwegian costumes — walk by.

The freedom to choose which heritage to celebrate may be an extension of the Yankee notion that we are all free and equal in every respect. We are even free to choose our ethnicity.

Sjovoll has a hard time with the notion that such a choice exists. "When I say that I'm Norwegian, they say, 'Yeah, so am I.' Then I ask, 'Aren't you an American?' "

So even the pride in heritage here has a Yankee flavor.

What about being reserved? This may be the quality that has evolved the most.

According to Naess, "Norwegians don't touch. This embracing — all this 'have a nice day' — is unknown to Norwegians. They react against it. One would never say, 'That's a nice brooch you're wearing.' It's too personal. It's beyond your bounds."

There is no objective way to compare the degree of reserve in Stoughton to that in other area communities to see how much Norwegian influence lingers. But it is safe to say that this trait has blurred into Yankee friendliness quite readily over the years.

In terms of international outlook, however, there is evidence of Norwegian influence.

Norwegians have a strong interest in knowing more about other countries, said Naess.

Probably the best way to do that is to study foreign languages. Stoughton High School offers four-year courses in French, Spanish and German. By all accounts, this is unusual for a school district of only 2,750 students.

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