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VESTERHEIM

by

J. R. Christianson

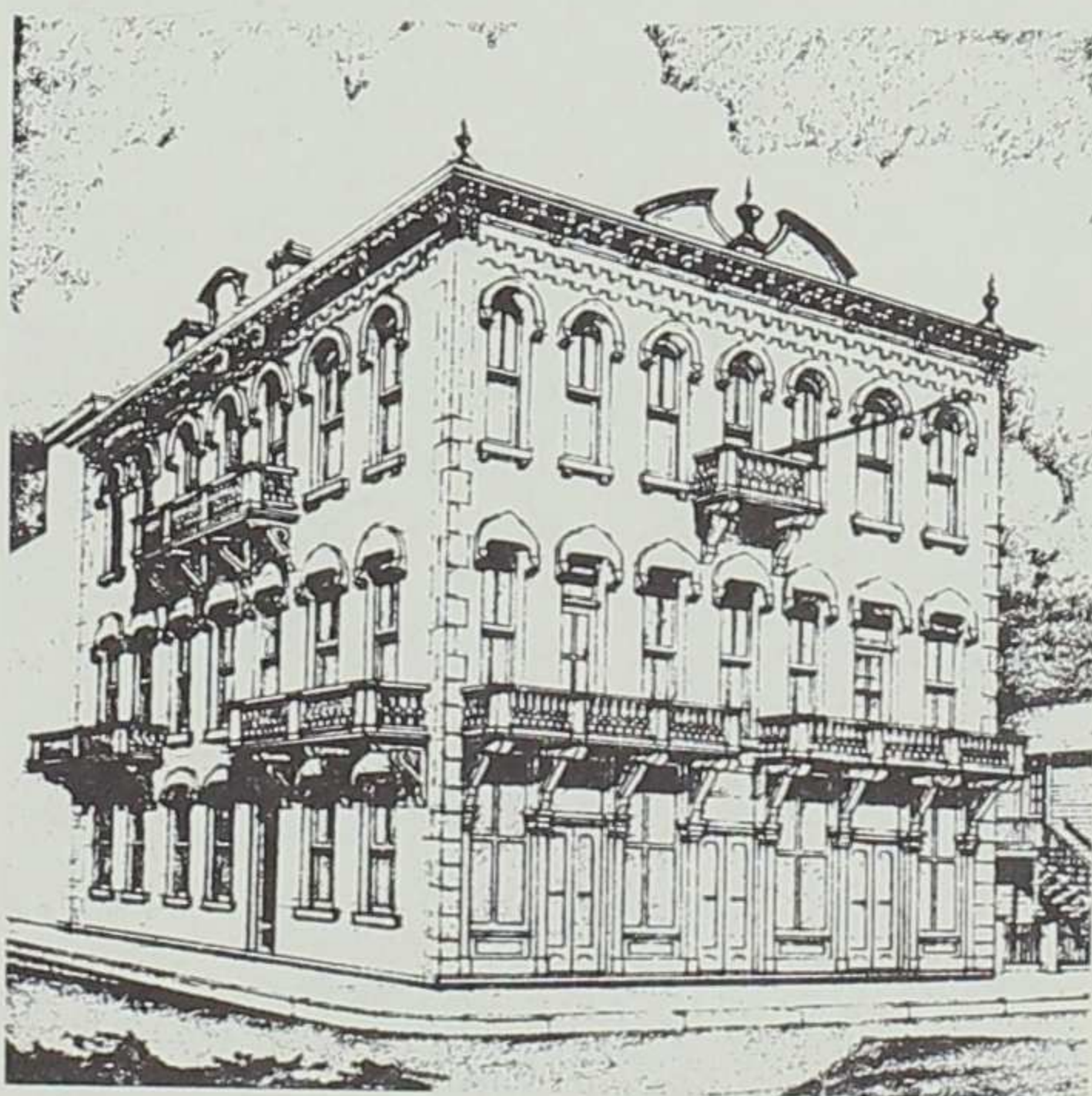
Pioneers in northeastern Iowa were growing old by the middle years of the 1890s. They were turning reflective, thinking and even writing about the past. In the city of Decorah, there was a colony of Norwegians among these aging pioneers, as there were whole parishes of Norwegian-American farms in the surrounding hills and vales. It was their retrospection, coupled with the energy of younger men, that brought the Norwegian-American Museum into being.

During the past half century, members of the Norwegian colony had founded a world of their own. They read the Norwegian newspaper, *Decorah Posten*, as well as locally published books and periodicals in their own language. They attended their own Norwegian Lutheran churches, sent their sons to Luther College, patronized Norwegian merchants, craftsmen, doctors, and liverymen. They had their own clubs and organizations, and even a theater where Norwegian music, vaudeville and drama were performed.

As these pioneers grew old within their cozy little society, a new generation grew to maturity, a bicultural generation that had grown up with a knowledge of both Norwegian and English. The older generation were patriarchal figures with flowing white beards. The younger men were clean-shaven, wearing derby hats and

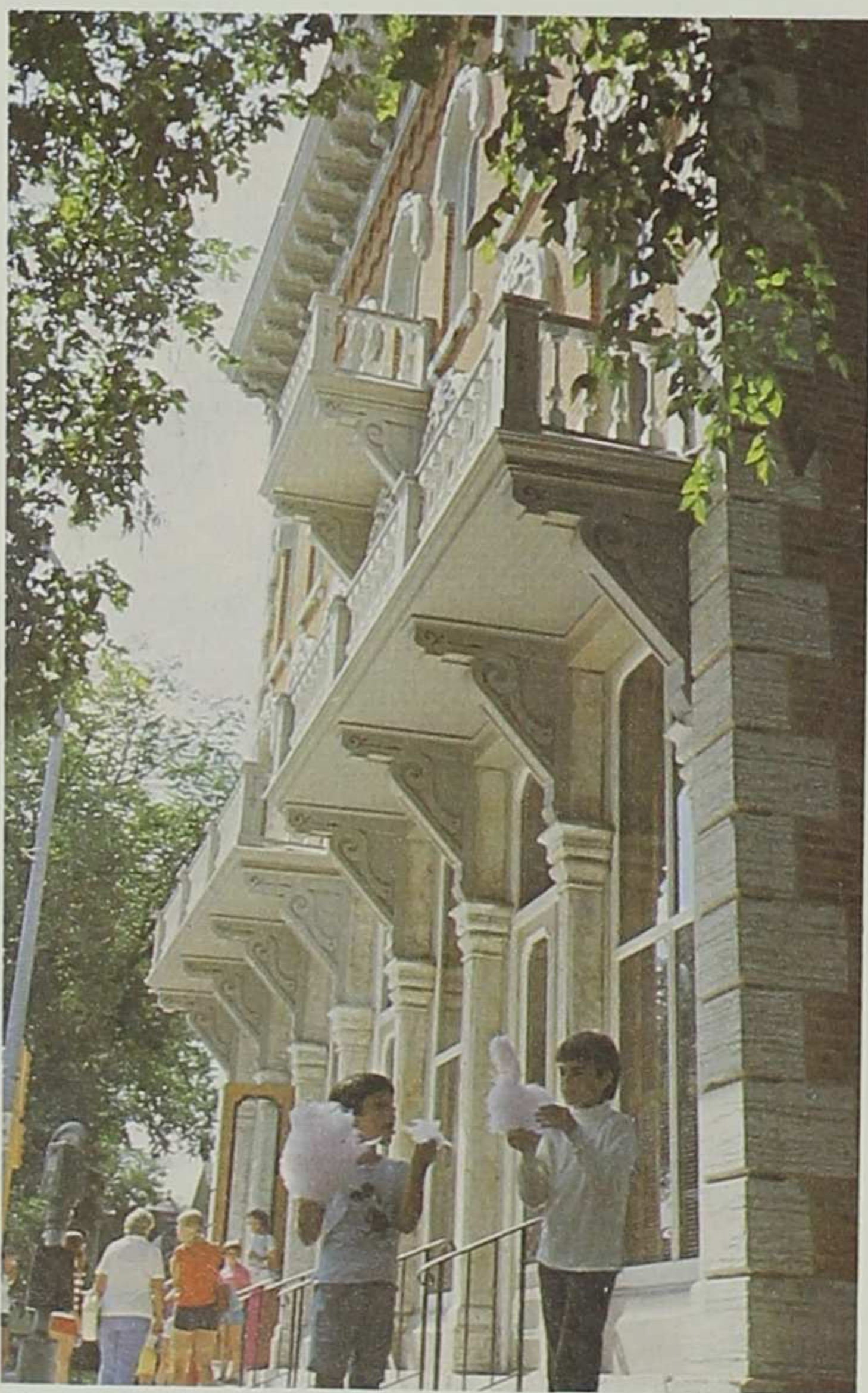
starched collars. They had never experienced the rigors of pioneering. To them, the old walking plows, log cabins, and immigrant trunks of the pioneers, or their bundles of documents in Gothic script, were artifacts out of the past. Some of the younger men saw these things as tangible expressions of the Great Migration and the Passing of the Frontier, the very processes by which a new culture, their own polyglot American way of life, had come into existence.

The idea of a Norwegian-American museum in Decorah came out of just such



A drawing of Vesterheim (Norwegian-American Museum) as it will appear after the final stages of restoration and remodeling are complete (courtesy of Vesterheim).

thoughts in this era of transition around the turn of the century. When A. A. Veblen had come to Decorah 20 years earlier in 1877, there had already been a collection of artifacts at Luther College. Since 1890, these artifacts had filled a whole room in the main building at Luther, "the Museum," lined with display cases and cabinets. It was this collection of "objects . . . given by persons to whom a museum was a curiosity shop," that formed the foundation for something quite new: an ethnic museum. At an 1895 meeting of Luther College alumni, there was much dis-

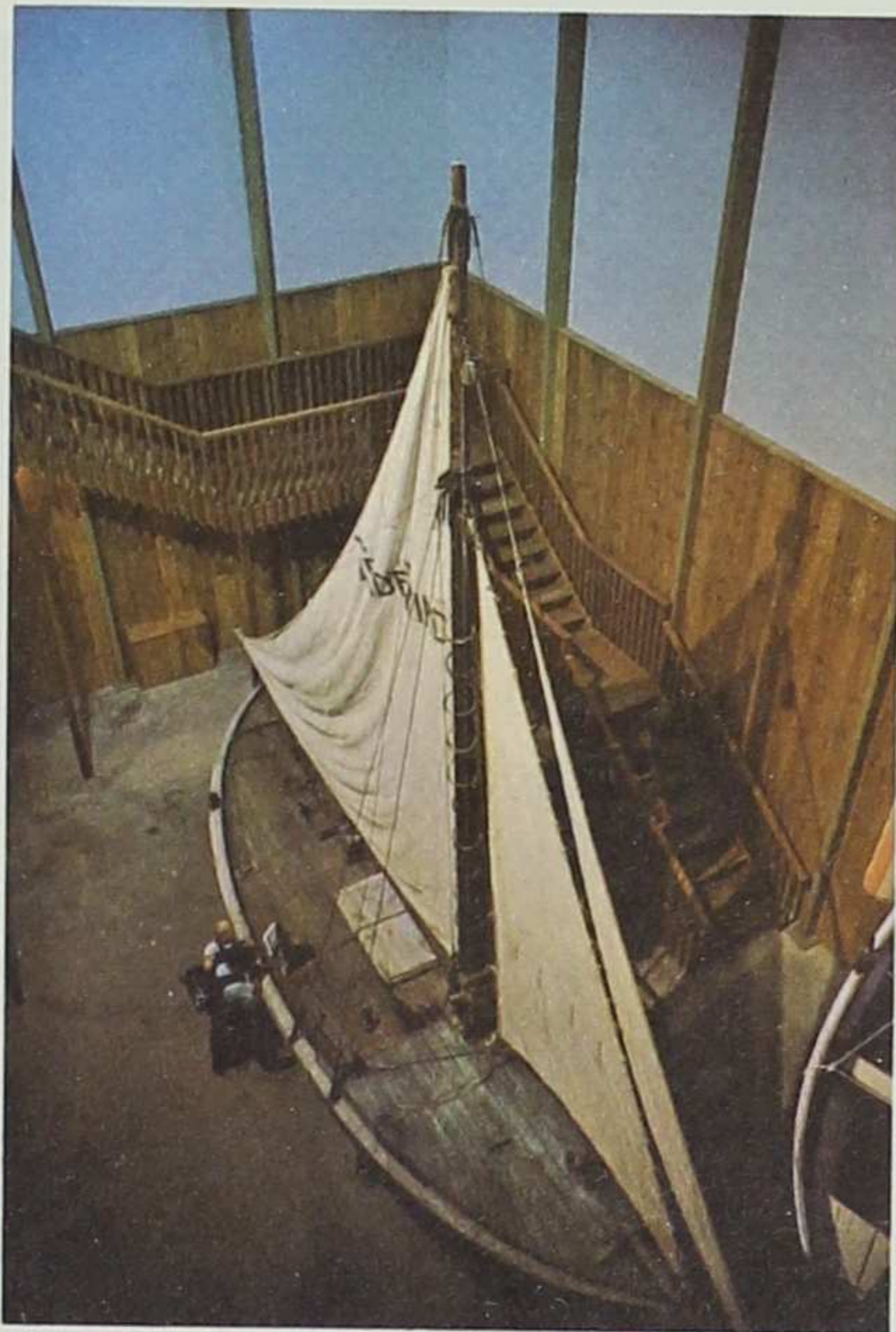


The facade of the restored Vesterheim building, shown during the July 1975 Nordic Fest. The museum with its new exhibits was unveiled for the occasion.

cussion of the need to collect Norwegian-American relics, books, and manuscripts. Older, gray-bearded men like President Laur. Larsen listened to smooth-faced younger men like Adolf Bredesen and J. C. M. Hanson, and the idea of a Norwegian-American museum began to take form.

College museums were commonplace in those days, and pioneer memorials of various kinds were springing up all over, but the idea of a museum dedicated to the accomplishments of a single ethnic group was unusual at that time. In the case of the Norwegian-American Museum, this idea was a synthesis of American tendencies with a new concept of museum coming out of the Scandinavian countries. This was the idea of a "folk museum," representing the life and material culture of common people, rather than the art and treasures of the gilded rich that filled most American museums. People like Anders Sandvig in Lillehammer, Norway and Hans Aall in Christiania had begun to expand this basic concept into another new type of museum, the "open air" museum. Rather than removing everyday artifacts from their normal context, Sandvig and Aall transported whole cottages and farmyards to the museum site, landscaped appropriately, and furnished the buildings both inside and out with a host of everyday objects. This created a total environment through which the museum visitor could wander for hours on end.

President Laur. Larsen, steeped in Norwegian history since his own student days, found just the right man to make these ideas a reality. In 1895, a young teacher of music, Haldor Hanson, was appointed to take charge of the college museum in addition to other duties. Hanson trans-



One of the major exhibits of Vesterheim is the "Tradewind," a small vessel which was sailed across the Atlantic (without modern equipment) in 1933. Even though this boat was launched in conjunction with the Chicago World's Fair and later given to the Museum, it does give visitors an idea of the conditions many immigrants contended with during the ocean voyage (courtesy of Vesterheim).

formed the miscellaneous college collections into a Norwegian-American museum. He collected printed materials, building up the nucleus of what is still the most extensive collection of Norwegian-American newspapers, in Preus Library at Luther College. He collected all kinds of objects made by Norwegian immigrants or brought by them from Norway. He collected photographs by the hundreds and paintings by Norwegian-American artists. He transferred these and the general collections from a single room to a small, two-story building on campus. By 1900, he had ten wall cases and seventeen show cases

full of artifacts. By 1901, he was running out of room. By 1902, the faculty found it necessary to resolve that a fireproof library-museum building was the first need of the college.

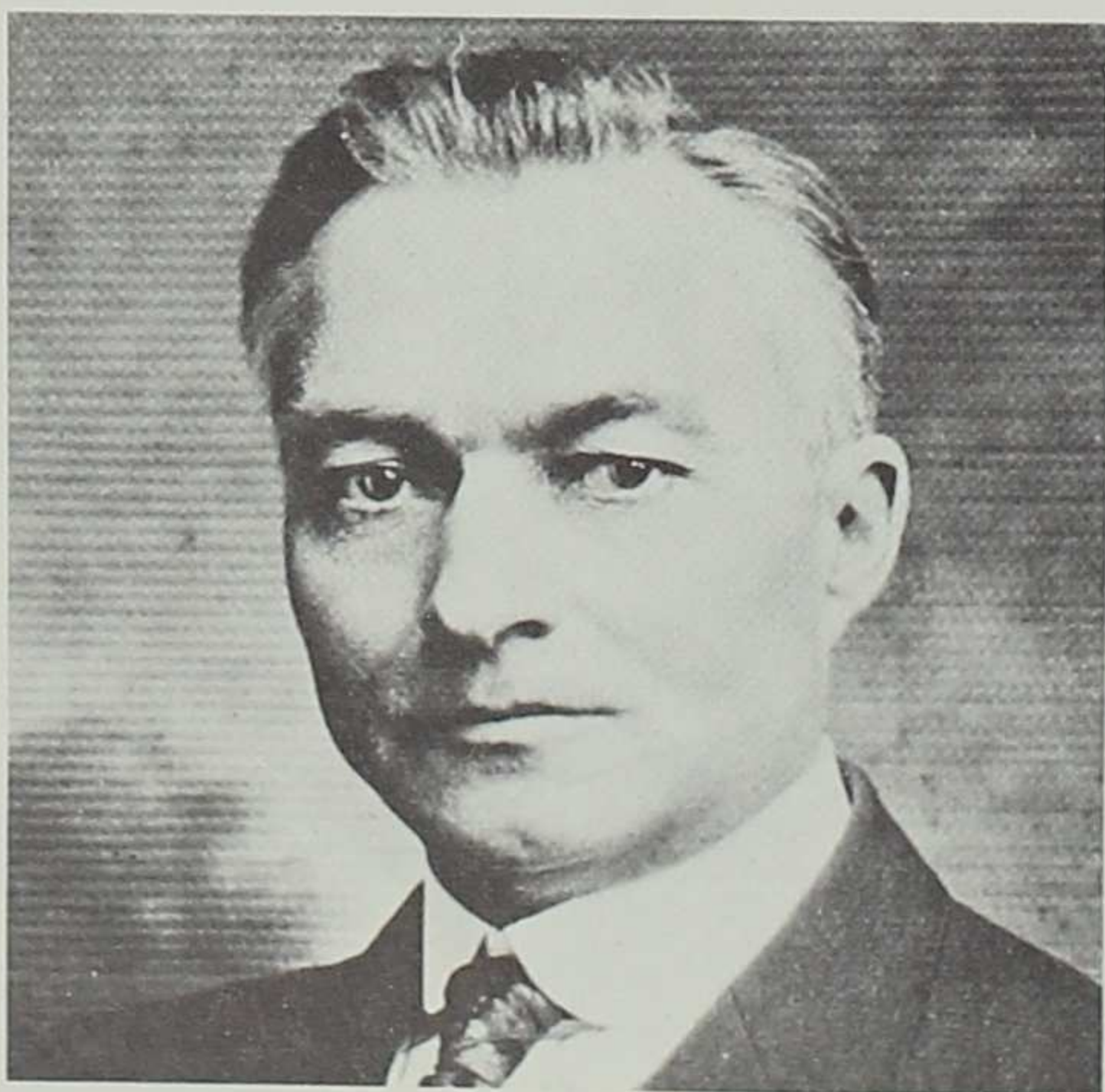
Within weeks of that resolution, Hanson's patron and supporter, President Larsen, was forced out of office. Haldor Hanson himself resigned and departed from Decorah.

Hanson's work as curator of the museum was carried on by a distinguished line of successors. First came C. K. Preus, who combined the office of curator with the presidency of the college in the years 1911-

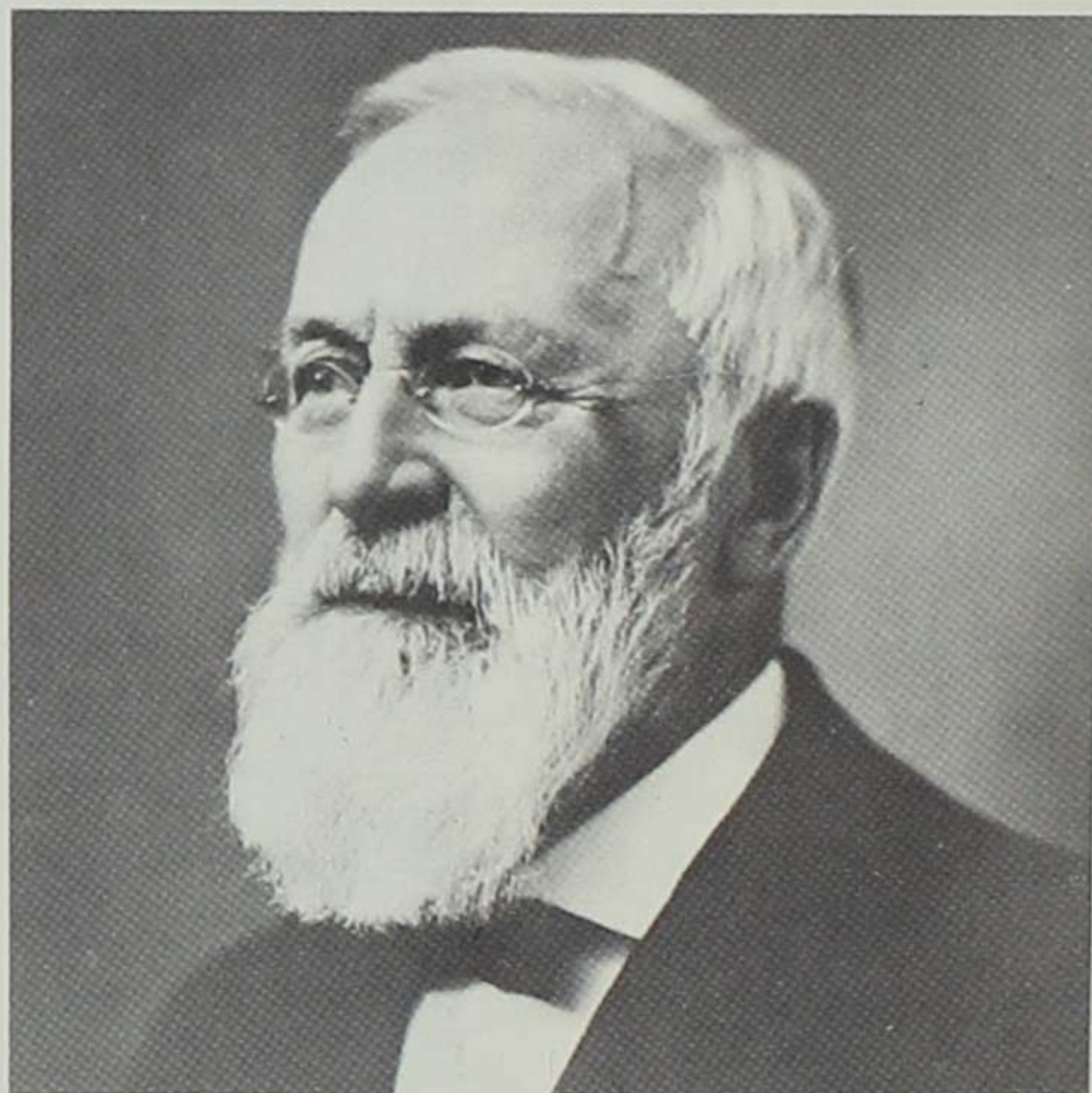
1921. Preus added the monumental Lars Christenson Altar and other objects to the museum collections. He strengthened ties with Norwegian museums during a 1914 tour of Norway by the Luther College Concert Band. Preus saw the beginning of an "open air" division of the museum when a pioneer log cabin was moved to campus. Finally, Preus achieved the construction of a modern library-museum, the Koren building, which was nearly finished when he died suddenly in 1921.

Professor Knut Gjerset, who already had an international reputation as an historian of Norway and Iceland, followed Preus as curator. He renovated the old museum building for some exhibits and moved the rest to the new building by 1923. The collections had grown to fill more than 60 cases and cabinets, besides the pioneer Egge cabin, and a whole room furnished like a Norwegian peasant home.

No sooner was the museum established in its new quarters than a major civic event loomed on the horizon of the 850,000 Norwegian immigrants to America and their



Knut Gjerset (courtesy of Vesterheim).



Laur. Larsen, President of Luther College and a moving force behind the organization of the museum.

descendants. Historians had determined that Norwegian-American mass migration had begun in 1825 with the arrival in New York harbor of the sloop "Restauration." Elaborate centennial celebrations were planned for 1925 in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Knut Gjerset was asked to direct the organization of a great centennial exhibition. He did so with resounding success, drawing much of his material from the Luther College Museum. The success of this exhibition transformed the museum into an ethnic institution of national prominence, and it was duly renamed the "Norwegian-American Historical Museum." Inspired by Anders Sandvig, a committee of Norwegian museum authorities donated five truck loads of Norwegian folk materials which arrived in Decorah in 1927.

By this time, the collections far exceeded the space available. A temporary building was erected on campus in 1931 for some of them, and A. A. Veblen's old home, "Sunnyside," was filled with artifacts. Then



Prof. Haldor Hanson in the College museum around 1897. The collections as of that date were small and varied, not yet focused on the Norwegian heritage (courtesy of Vesterheim).

the college acquired a three-story brick building in downtown Decorah, built as a hotel in 1877 and later remodeled to serve as a printing office. This large building was refurbished under Gjerset's supervision, and most of the museum exhibits were moved into it during the summer of 1932, with formal opening ceremonies in 1933. Meanwhile, the open air collection, the oldest museum of its type in North America, was augmented with another log house, a schoolhouse, and various other pioneer buildings, and moved to a new site on the Luther College campus.

Gjerset died in 1936, leaving a legacy of tremendous growth and accomplishment for the museum. Three years later, Crown Prince Olav and Crown Princess Märtha

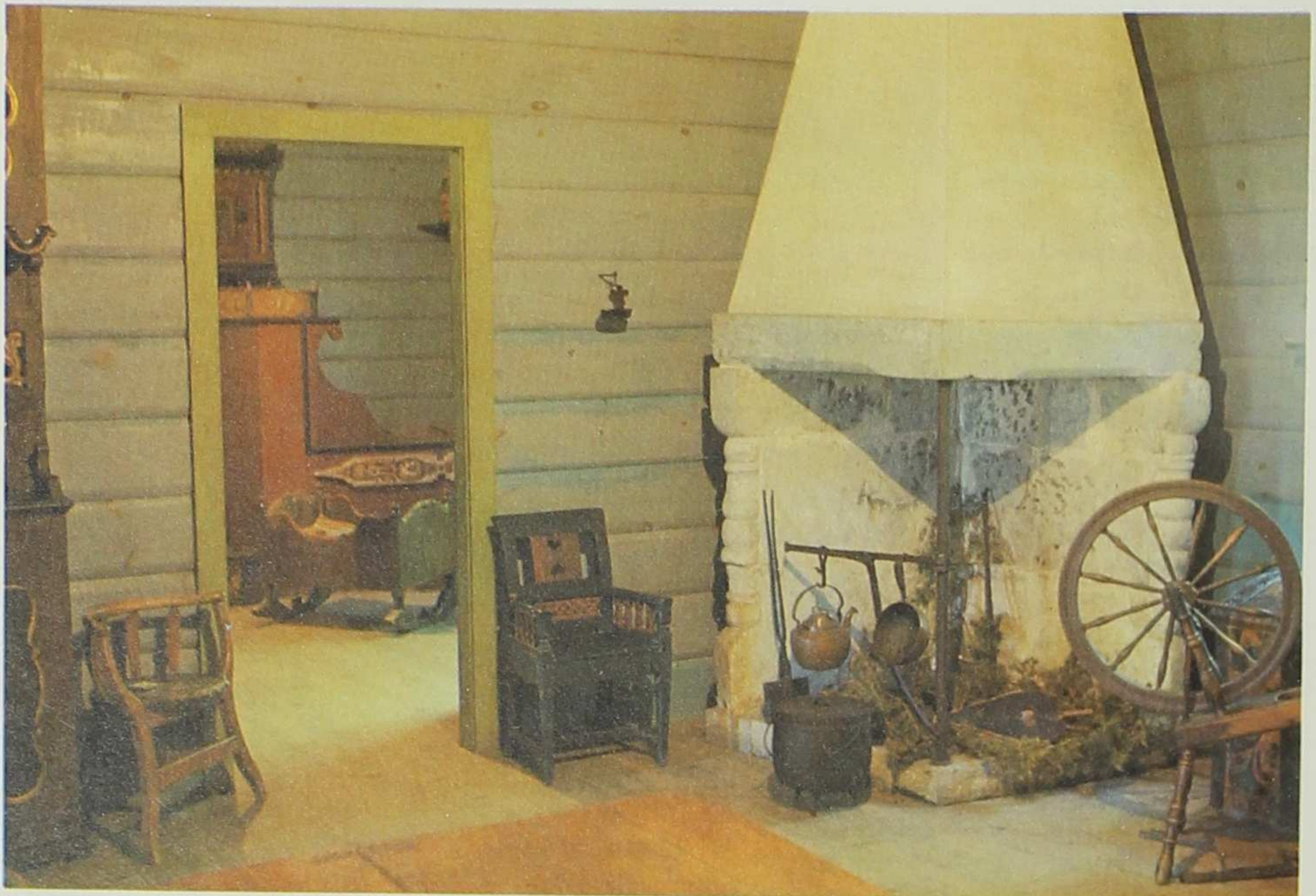
of Norway visited Decorah and presented the museum another handsome gift of artifacts from 47 museums in Norway.

Times changed rapidly after that, and the course of world events seemed to leave the museum behind. World War II engulfed both Norway and America. Melting pot ideologies ran rampant to discourage ethnic identities, and the use of the Norwegian language declined rapidly in America. The museum did not lack leadership during these years, but it lacked support as the nation, the college, and Americans of Norwegian descent all grappled with more immediate problems. At one stage the college seemed on the verge of giving the whole museum away.

Then the museum, like some slumbering



The magnificent altarpiece carved by Lars Christenson of Benson, Minnesota between 1897 and 1904. Inspired perhaps by baroque altars in Christenson's native Sognal, Norway, the handcarved panels refer specifically to a popular Norwegian-American Bible of the 1890s. The Christenson Altar is a major work of religious folk art and is often cited as an example in major works on American woodcarving (courtesy of Vesterheim).



Within Vesterheim itself is recreated a typical Norwegian house of the mid-nineteenth century. The furnishings date from about 50 years earlier and are the gift of the Maihaugen Museum in Lillehammer, Norway. The corner fireplace was a feature of most traditional Norwegian homes (courtesy of Vesterheim).



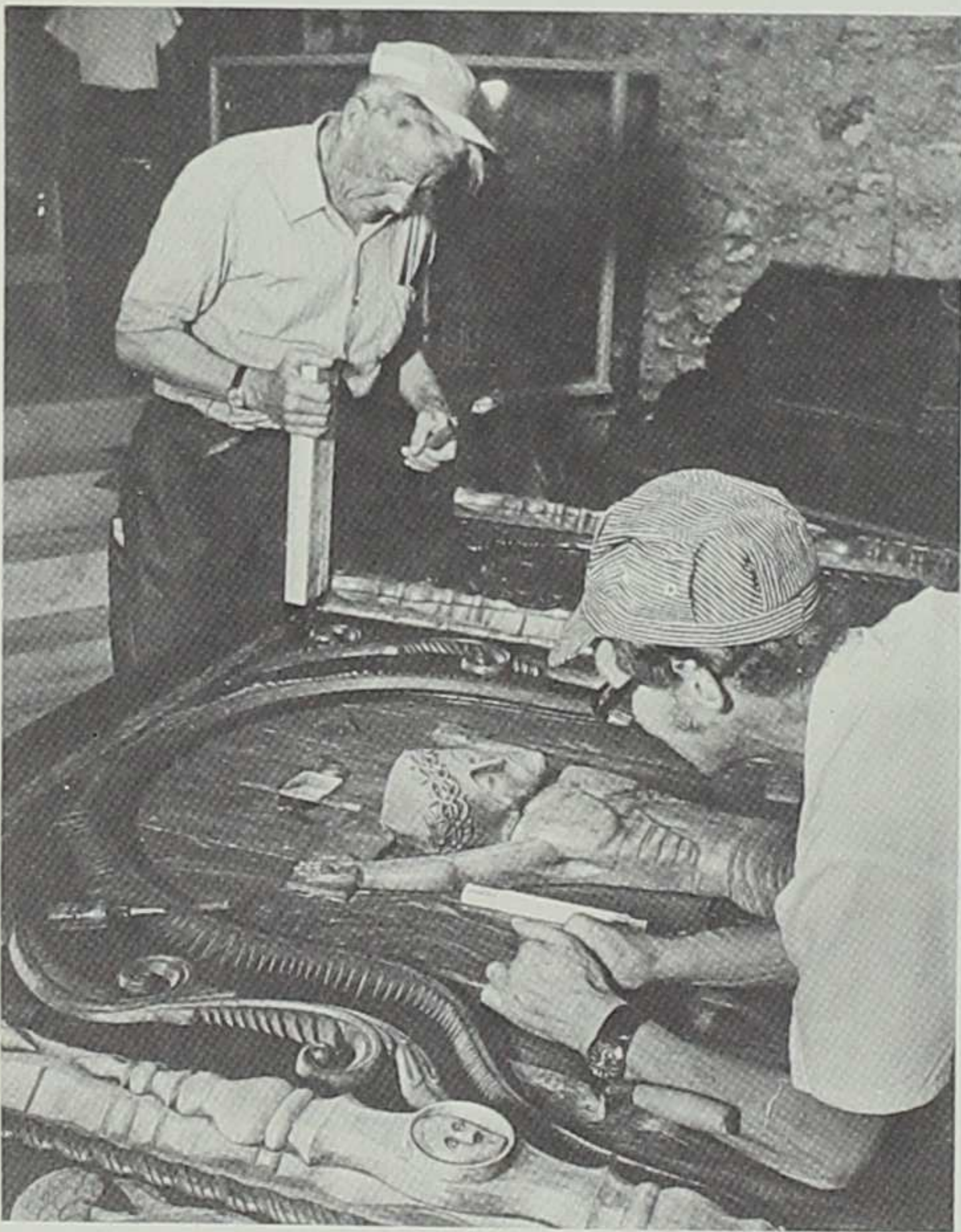
A mounted, silver-chased drinking horn made in the late nineteenth century as a presentation piece. The design is based on early Norwegian drinking horns, but is more elaborate (courtesy of Vesterheim).



A carved wooden drinking vessel, used communally and passed from hand to hand during a beer-drinking session. The animal-headed double handle design dates from the Middle Ages, but was still used well into the nineteenth century in northern Europe. This example came to Dawson, Minnesota with an early immigrant and thence to the museum in 1924 (courtesy of Vesterheim).



Another example of a carved drinking vessel (courtesy of Vesterheim).



Craftsmen from Norway at work on the restoration of the Lars Christenson Altar (courtesy of Vesterheim).

troll of old Norse folklore, seemed to shake off its indolence and come alive. Inspired by a distinguished faculty member and former student of Gjerset, Professor David T. Nelson, the Regents of Luther College resolved in 1964 to change the name of the museum to "Norwegian-American Museum" and incorporate it as a separate not-for-profit corporation with its own staff and Board of Directors. Dr. Marion J. Nelson of the University of Minnesota was engaged to survey and catalogue the collection during the summer of 1964, and that fall, he was named Director of the museum. In 1965, the December issue of *The Palimpsest* was devoted to a history

of the museum by David T. Nelson. Crown Prince Harald of Norway visited the museum in 1965, and King Olav V of Norway visited in 1968.

In 1969, a new contract was negotiated with Luther College, giving the old, three-storied building to the museum corporation for a consideration of one dollar and allowing that corporation to acquire other properties and artifacts. At the same time, the college loaned the total collection of artifacts to the museum corporation for a period of ten years, subject to renewal.

Under the terms of this agreement and the leadership of Dr. Marion J. Nelson, the museum entered a period of phenomenal growth. Luther College appointed Professor J. R. Christianson as Assistant Director to represent the interests of the college under the new contract, and Darrell D. Henning, a graduate of the Cooperstown program, became Curator in 1969. A Museum Studies program at the college has given academic support to the museum. In 1973, the museum became one of the early institutions to be accredited by the American Association of Museums.

During the last decade, the museum has published an impressive series of books, pamphlets, brochures, recordings, posters, and cards, as well as issuing a regular newsletter and maintaining a book store and gift shop. Numerous special exhibits, demonstrations, conferences, and musical programs have been sponsored by the museum, and it has played an important part in Decorah's annual Nordic Fest during the last weekend of July. Traditional Norwegian crafts have been revived through

classes in rosemaling, woodcarving, embroidery, weaving, and other skills. Memberships have been established, with special categories and newsletters for rosemalers and genealogists. In short, the museum has become a place to do things, as well as to see things. This has been symbolized by a new name, "Vesterheim," the Norwegian-American immigrants' name for their home in the New World.

Collections have grown no less dramatically. A stone mill from the 1850s and a Norwegian Methodist church from the 1860s have been acquired and restored. Several other historic buildings near the museum have been acquired. A pioneer smithy and a dwelling from Valdres, Norway have been added to the open air collection. During the past year, in celebrating the Norwegian-American Sesquicentennial, the main museum building has undergone a \$500,000 restoration and modernization, and all exhibits have been redesigned.

When King Olav V of Norway officially reopens the main building on October 14, 1975, as part of his sesquicentennial tour of Norwegian America, he will witness the fact that Vesterheim has grown into an institution attuned to the "New Ethnicity" of a new generation. It has become a center for all who value vitality, craftsmanship, cultural diversity, simple quality in domestic furnishings, and an honest, natural way of life. □



A smith at work attracts a crowd to the restored Norwegian-style blacksmith's shop, part of Vesterheim's open-air exhibit (courtesy of Vesterheim).



The restored mill, now a museum of Norwegian-American agriculture, and the smithy (courtesy of Vesterheim).

Two of the cabins originally gathered on the Luther College campus to form one of the first open-air museums in the United States. This year, the cabins will be moved to the site of Vesterheim.

