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Norwegian Newspapers in America: Connecting Norway and the New Land

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Norwegian Newspapers in America: Connecting Norway and the New Land, by Odd S. Lovoll. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010. xiii, 424 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendixes, notes, index. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer James S. Hamre is emeritus professor of religion and philosophy at Waldorf College. He is the author of *Waldorf College: Continuity and Change (1903–2003)* (2003).

In *Norwegian Newspapers in America*, Odd S. Lovoll has added to his extensive list of publications focusing on Norwegian Americans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this volume he deals with the functions of the Norwegian-language newspapers published in America. He indicates that the “role of the foreign-language press in general and the Norwegian-language press in particular has held a special scholarly fascination for me since the late 1960s,” when he wrote his master’s thesis on the Norwegian immigrant press in North Dakota (ix).

According to Lovoll, between 1847, when the first Norwegian-language newspaper in America began publication, and 2010, some 280 Norwegian American secular periodicals were published weekly, semiweekly, or daily in the Norwegian language. He holds that this ethnic press “pursued several roles, functioning not only as a bridge to the homeland but also as both a preserver of Norwegian culture and an Americanizer” (ix–x).

Lovoll offers a comprehensive treatment of the Norwegian-language newspapers established in America, as well as discussions of their founders, editors, and important writers. He indicates that many of the papers were short lived — 181 of 282 papers were published for less than three years. The states of the upper Midwest received the largest numbers of Norwegian immigrants and supported the most Norwegian-language newspapers. However, the East and West coasts also became home to both.

Lovoll divides his discussion chronologically into seven chapters. The first chapter focuses on the “pioneer years,” from 1847 to the Civil War, when a number of Norwegian-language papers came into existence. Lovoll states that “controversy and debate on personal, political, and religious issues characterized the Norwegian American press in the nineteenth century.” He holds, too, that “second only to the Lutheran church, the pioneer Norwegian newspapers represented a basic social and cultural institution in an emerging Norwegian American community” (45).

Chapters two through four discuss developments during the Civil War years to near the end of the nineteenth century. Norwegian-language papers provided news of battles, and a “new and vibrant

Norwegian American community began to claim its rightful place in the nation" (55). Chapters three and four focus on "a flourishing Midwestern Press" and "the rise of a National Norwegian American press," leading Lovoll to state that "hardships and failures notwithstanding, by 1900 a national interactive Norwegian American press was a functioning reality. . . . The press promoted a sense of a Norwegian America" that stretched across the country (202). In addition to the so-called Big Three papers with national distribution — *Skandinaven*, *Decorah-Posten*, and *Minneapolis Tidende* — "regional newspapers rose above failed competitors to become a representative voice" (203).

The last three chapters of the book deal with the Norwegian-language newspapers in America during the twentieth century (1900 to the mid-1970s). In a chapter titled "The Golden Age of Norwegian America," the author indicates that the "third and final mass immigration wave from Norway" took place during the years 1900–1914 (249). The Norwegian American press reached its highest circulation during those years and sought to be of assistance to the newcomers in the changing context. World War I evoked a patriotic spirit in the country and called for an "unhyphenated Americanism" that challenged the use of foreign languages. After the war, the use of English became more widespread, and the readership of foreign language papers declined. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, a number of Norwegian papers ceased publication or incorporated English into their columns. World War II evoked a surge of patriotism toward Norway, providing a new cause for the Norwegian American press. However, post-World War II immigration was not sufficient to sustain the Norwegian-language press for long. By the mid-1960s, virtually all of the Norwegian-language newspapers had ceased publication.

This readable, informative book reflects considerable research and provides helpful insights into the efforts of the newspapers under consideration to inform and influence one ethnic group as it sought to adjust to life in America. Lovoll notes that some have asked whether the immigrant press retarded or promoted assimilation. He supports the position that these two functions — preserver of ethnic identity *and* Americanizer — did not conflict (5).

Some readers may question the value of including discussions of the many short-lived papers that seemed to have little impact. Others, seeking a fuller understanding of factors at work in American culture, especially in the upper Midwest, will appreciate Lovoll's effort to provide a comprehensive picture of the roles of the newspapers in the Norwegian American community. The book is useful in that regard.