IN THE TWENTY-FIVE YEARS after the arrival of the sloop *Restauration* in 1825, more than 18,000 Norwegians settled in the United States, the main migratory stream commencing in 1836. This early movement of people represented only a small beginning of the total Norwegian exodus to the New World, but by mid-century permanent settlements had been established in the states of Illinois and Wisconsin. A number of immigrants had entered Iowa and others were poised ready to move westward with the advancing American frontier.\(^1\)

Chicago became a major immigration center and the gateway to the Northwest; many newcomers passed through the city on their way to regions farther west. It was therefore significant that a sizable colony of Norwegians grew up in Chicago. Extensive co-operation among them, according to Hjalmar Rued Holand, was not always assured within the group, except to a degree in church matters; nevertheless the activities of these immigrants promoted contact with scattered communities as well as with the homeland. Although David Johnson, a sailor who came in 1834, has been credited with being
the first Norwegian in the city, settlement has generally been dated from 1836, only three years after a town had been platted on the marshy lowlands at the mouth of the Chicago River. Among the first arrivals were Nils Knutson Røte and his wife, both from Voss; their coming heralded the development in the next few years of a substantial Vossing colony that asserted considerable influence within the larger immigrant community. The Vossing contingent included several diligent and able letter writers who corresponded with relatives in Norway and stimulated emigration.  

Their "America letters," as the written reports back home to family and friends were called, presented an image of the New World that stirred the imagination and generated an excitement that swept Norway. Often the letters were copied and recopied, sent from neighbor to neighbor, and frequently printed in newspapers. An early writer was Gjert G. Hovland, an immigrant of 1831, whose letters disseminated information about America in the vicinity of Bergen. There are recorded instances of individuals who emigrated as a result of reading them. Hovland's writings also brought news of America to Voss. The America letters might have been overly optimistic. They almost universally emphasized better circumstances and greater opportunity for personal advancement. Many told of freedom and equality; here, the common man need not bow to clergy or secular officials.  

Norwegian authorities became disturbed by the rising tide of emigration in the late 1830s, and they made a determined effort to stem it. Agitation against leaving the homeland appeared in newspapers and pamphlets, official coercion to check it occurred, and ministers thundered against emigration from the pulpit. Well known is Bishop Jacob Neumann's word of admonition to the peasants of the diocese of Bergen in 1837; it appealed to them to remain at home and marshaled evi-
VOSSING CORRESPONDENCE SOCIETY

dence about the perils of the voyage and the difficulties of pioneering.  

Efforts to curtail emigration found support in the letters and writings of discontented immigrants: examples are Peter Testman’s pamphlet of 1839, that gave a rather gloomy account of the hardships a new settler might encounter. The pioneer minister J. W. C. Dietrichson’s letters from the 1840s described vividly the disadvantages of letting oneself “be enticed over here.” These unfavorable reports were used by anti-emigration forces to discourage people from setting out for America. This endeavor was apparently somewhat successful, for by 1840 emigration virtually stopped — but not for long; in the 1840s it resumed on a large scale.  

Immigrant disillusionment with America may in part be attributed to the depression after the panic of 1837, which produced business failures, the closing of banks, and a rapid decline of farm prices. Settlers, however, occasionally as a group, defended the New World against hostile criticisms. The famous Muskego manifesto of 1845 is an example of the faith and self-assertion of the Norwegian pioneers; eighty men in the settlement signed this document protesting the misrepresentation of America in Norway; the manifesto was published in full in Morgenbladet.  

What first spurred the pioneer immigrants from Voss to action was a letter by Sjur Jørgenson Lokrheim from the Fox River settlement southwest of Chicago. Knowledge of this and other evidences of discontent came to the settlers from correspondents in Voss, and in the fall of 1840 Anders Flage sent a letter to the home community in the name of all Vossings in Chicago. It refuted many of the negative statements made in the Lokrheim letter and attempted to describe conditions as they really were among the immigrants.  

The second notable step taken by the compact and
relatively prosperous Vossing colony in Chicago came in response to an official report to the Norwegian government in 1847 by the Norwegian-Swedish consul general in New York, Adam Løvenskjold. This account was based on a visit he made that summer to “Norwegian settlements in the western districts of the United States”; it focused mainly on Wisconsin. Løvenskjold’s report was published in 1848 in Bergen and appeared in various newspapers. It also came to the attention of leading Norwegian Americans, and, although the consul general obviously had striven to prepare an accurate and sober report, his conclusions were pessimistic. Many immigrants regarded it as an argument against emigration.9

Løvenskjold’s allegations became a direct incentive for the Chicago Vossings to organize in 1848 the Vossing Correspondence Society. Its aim was that of giving “systematic enlightenment to the Norwegian people concerning the status of their emigrated countrymen and of refuting false assertions and correcting wrong impressions regarding America and the Norwegian immigrants.” Anders Nilsen Brække became president (ordfører), Endre Nielsen Testdal, secretary. Ivar Larson Boe, a leading Vossing in Chicago, was elected vice-president. The society decided to send one letter to Voss each month. Members would jointly meet the costs “which will ensue upon writing to Norway.”10

Their first letter is dated Chicago, September 30, 1848, and what was apparently the last one, May 1, 1849.11 They sent eight letters of considerable length; there is no record of any answers having been received from Norway in return. Directly or indirectly the communications from Chicago provided a biting criticism of social conditions in the homeland, and they expressed considerable bitterness against public officials. Many of the immigrants had belonged to the unfortunate class of
husmenn (cotters), and the Vossing correspondents were obviously eager to demonstrate that when representatives of this hard-pressed group were given an opportunity, they had the ability to succeed. In less than a decade, many of the Vossings in Chicago had purchased land and built themselves homes; some had even entered the real estate business, as Ivar Larson Boe had done. In the third letter, where personal sketches of thirty-two Vossings are given — most likely of the members of the society — it is said of many of them that they had several hundred dollars drawing interest (staaende ude paa renter).12

The sympathy in Voss must have been on the side of the emigrants. One of the addressees was Lars Nelsen Nesheim, a bachelor farmer with wide literary and cultural interests. He gave ardent support to emigration, although he never came to America himself; he made copies of the letters in Gothic script, an art of which he was a master, and circulated them in the community. Further inducement to migrate must have been given by three members of the correspondence society who visited Voss in the fall of 1849 and stayed until the spring of 1850. In that year two ships sailed from Bergen with emigrants from Voss and vicinity.13

The correspondence society did not disband after 1849; it continued with regular meetings, where topics of various kinds were discussed. In 1856 it merged with the Vossing Emigration Society, organized that year to aid “needy and worthy families” who desired to emigrate to America. The activities of this group led to the founding of the newspaper Wossingen in Leland, Illinois, in 1857. The next year more than a hundred copies of it were mailed to Norway. Wossingen was discontinued in 1860, and the difficulties during the Civil War period must also have brought about an end to the work of the emigration society.14
It is common knowledge that the first Norwegian settlers came from Stavanger twenty-two years ago in a sloop which they sailed across the Atlantic Ocean. In crossing, they visited the island of Madeira. These emigrants settled in the state of New York. There are still some of them residing in various parts of the country, as for example Torsten Olsen Mjæva at Koshkonong.

The next emigrants, among them (Ole) Rynning, a student, and Mons Knudsen Otland, settled at Beaver Creek in the state of Indiana [sic] about 1837. Rynning died and with him most of the settlers because the land is very unhealthy. It is believed that several hundred settlers died in Indiana [sic], and those who survived moved away in different directions and left land and house in terror.

The next settlement was at Fox River, near Ottawa in La Salle County (Illinois), where there still are some of those who came with the sloop from Stavanger, among them Gudmund Haugaas, high priest of the Order of Melchizedek in the Mormon Church. (As is known, the Mormons have two orders: Melchizedeks and Aarons.) Later arrivals from Norway settled at Jefferson Prairie in 1838. This settlement is located east of the city of Beloit, partly in Wisconsin and partly in Illinois. It consists of about 100 families from Numedal and Voss. No doubt this is the most prosperous settlement, which is to a large extent explained by the fact that it is the oldest. The climate is said to be very healthy, the soil is fertile, and its location close to Beloit is very favorable. It is still an insignificant city, but, with the speed cities develop here, one must presume that Beloit will in a few years be an important commercial center, so much more so because it is located on the little river Picatonica, which a
short distance downstream joins the Rock River. There is also talk about railroads and canals that will connect Beloit with Lake Michigan and the Mississippi.

1839. Luther Valley, which up to now has been called Rock Prairie, is located a few miles west of Beloit; it has about 200 families from Numedal, Hallingdal, and Land. It is partly cultivated and partly prairie with some woods, and the soil is good, but most settlers must dig wells as much as 40 feet deep to get water.

1839. Koshkonong Prairie stretches northwest from Lake Koshkonong eight to ten miles from Madison. This settlement is the largest in Wisconsin and consists of between four and five hundred families from Telemark, Voss, and Numedal. It contains mostly prairie with some woods. For the time being there is no lack of firewood even for those who live on the prairie, which for the most part has been settled by Irish and Americans. The Norwegians have bought land bordered by forest, where they can cut as much firewood as they need.

The soil is very good, but, according to what experienced and trustworthy people say, it will after some time need careful cultivation with manure. The layer of the soil on the prairie is not as thick as has been asserted, and beneath can be found limestone, which the Norwegians already make use of to build houses. Others, who live closer to Madison, burn it to lime and sell it, and get a good income. There is also here, to some extent, a lack of water.

1839. Rock River west of Beloit consists of about 150 families from Numedal. The soil is good.

1840. Muskego, about twenty miles southwest of Milwaukee at Lake Muskego, consists of about 200 families from Telemark and Voss. The settlement is said to be unhealthy because of the many lakes and marshes. Some settlers live on wooded land where the terrain is higher.

1840. Hamilton or Vejota [Wiot], south of Mineral
Lars Fletre

Point and about fifty miles southwest of Madison, is still a small settlement with ten or twelve families from Voss and Sogn.

1841. Pine Lake, at Lake Pine and Nashota north of Deerfield, consists of about thirty families from different regions of Norway. Here there are woods, open land, and the soil is good. In 1842 some Swedes settled there. A few have made good, especially a couple of blacksmiths, but many are very badly off.

1844. Ashippun, northwest of Pine Lake, some twenty miles northwest of Milwaukee, consists of about thirty families, mostly from the parish of Gjerpen (Telemark). This settlement is exclusively wooded land that requires hard work. Many of these settlers I knew personally from Norway, and I therefore had an opportunity to note how very old they had gotten in the few years they had been there. The cause of this decline is certainly sickness and hard work in a warm climate. The houses, by the way, are better and cleaner than they are in most settlements. In the woods grow wild fruits, especially good plums and cherries. You also find maple trees. From its sap the settlers make sugar, not only for the household but also for sale. Water is scarce; wells must be dug as deep as twenty to thirty feet.

1844 or 1843. Rock River, east of Water Town, a few miles west of Ashippun, had about fifty families from Modum, Setesdal, and Gausdal in Gudbrandsdalen.

1844 or 1843. Skoponong, five miles northeast of White Water, has twenty to thirty families from Voss and Telemark.

1844. Heart Prairie, five miles southeast of White Water, has fifteen or sixteen families from Holden in Telemark. The settlement consists of open land and prairie.

1844. Long Prairie in Illinois has about ten to fifteen families from Sogn and Telemark.
1844. Sand or Spring Prairie has about fifty to sixty families from Sogn, Telemark, and Voss.

Besides the above-named settlements there are immigrants from Numedal and other regions of Norway at Dodgeville and Mineral Point, forty miles southwest of Madison. Most of them work in the lead mines.

Blue Mounds, twenty-five miles west of Madison, has about eight or ten families from different regions.

Washington County, twenty miles north of Milwaukee, has about seven-eight families.

From the above information, and by adding the given number of families, one will see that there are about 1,500 families. And if one assumes that each family consists of five persons, one arrives at a total population of 7,500. To these must be added a considerable number of scattered Norwegians, partly in the countryside, partly in cities in the western states. There is a settlement of considerable size in the southern part of Michigan and in Indiana. There are also many Norwegians in Chicago in Illinois. The number of Norwegians in the western districts of North America may be estimated to be 10,000 to 12,000.

The religious circumstances are in a sorry and bewildered state in these settlements. Without far-reaching measures, there is a possibility that the Norwegians in a short time will be lost to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. There are three ordained ministers: the Lutherans [J. W. C.] Dietrichson and [C. L.] Clausen, and the Episcopalian [Gustaf] Unonius. Dietrichson lives at Koshkonong, which is his main parish, and also serves Rock River near Water Town, Skoponong near White Water, and Heart Prairie. Dietrichson occasionally also performs ministerial functions at Muskego. Clausen lives at Luther Valley, which is his home parish, to which belong the annexes of Hamilton, Jefferson, Long Prairie, and Dodgeville at Mineral Point. Unonius is a
Lars Fletre

minister at Ashippun and he has as an annex the Pine Lake settlement. The immigrants at Muskego are at this time negotiating with a Norwegian candidate whom they wish to engage as their pastor. The rest of the settlements are without a minister. At Koshkonong Prairie, there are two so-called churches, six miles from each other. They look like barns from the outside, but the inside is arranged tastefully. I was present at a worship service together with a large gathering in one of these churches. Pastor Dietrichson officiated in a dignified manner, and it appeared that this zealous man had gathered a godfearing congregation around him.

Luther Valley is no doubt the best-organized settlement in Wisconsin, thanks to the bold and dignified Pastor Clausen. The kind and human manner in which this amiable young man deals with the public makes him loved by all.

There are no churches in the other settlements except at Muskego. At Ashippun the foundation for a church has been laid.

In the Norwegian settlements one can also find followers of most American religious sects. One Elling Eielsen travels around and performs so-called divine services at night, conducted either by himself or by his wife.

Last summer when I visited the Norwegian settlements, the health conditions were very good, and consequently everyone was content. But many told me what terrible ordeals they had had to endure the year before, when sickness was their lot, and consequently they compared their condition with the good health they had always enjoyed in Norway.

Their financial circumstances vary greatly. Some are wealthy, others are very impoverished. Concerning the latter, I must add that the main reason for their poor circumstances is either lack of initiative, or, more com-
monly, sickness. Few immigrants escape the fever, the so-called fever and ague [ige]. Even though the disease seldom results in death, it is very burdensome for the wretched settlers, for they are not able to work. Last year the suffering was great among the Norwegians in Wisconsin. In many houses husband, wife, and children were in bed unable to help one another. One can imagine how welcome a merciful neighbor, who was lucky enough not to be ill, was in such a house. The worst enemy for the immigrants is the fever; mainly in the cities one finds signs of another enemy, namely liquor, which is extremely dangerous in this climate. . . .

It is, of course, most difficult for older men to adjust to new working methods, while younger men catch on to them quite rapidly. In the cities one can meet a lot of Norwegian workers who are almost all very content because of their high wages, varying from two thirds of a dollar to a dollar a day. But then they pay ordinarily half a dollar for room and board per day, and their income is thus greatly reduced. The rest is spent on clothes. Out in the country, the daily wages are lower, and it is often hard to receive cash in payment. And when workingmen are compelled to be paid in goods, we know what the outcome will be. . . .

I heard expressed in private by older, respectable people that if they had known the hardships they would have to endure after their arrival in America, they would never have deserted the fatherland. During the early years, they had many a time wished they were back in Norway, and they had damned the people who had used alluring language to mislead them to come over here. If they had had an opportunity to return, they gladly would have taken it, but their resources had been spent. They had thus been forced by circumstances to stay, and after they had become accustomed to their new way of life, they patiently accepted their fate. They live in the hope
that their children will be better off. Their opinion was that they had gained nothing personally by changing fatherlands.

A man from Bergen came over with his wife and six children last spring and traveled to Illinois, where he wanted to settle. A few weeks ago he came back to New York on his way to Norway. He told me that he would be happy when he was back in Norway, even though most of his money would be gone. A well-to-do man from Wisconsin, who should have no reason to report the situation worse than it was, told me on his way through New York to visit Norway, that in all the years he had spent in America, he had never heard so many expressions of dissatisfaction as this fall, but he was not able to explain it.

In politics the Norwegians have no influence, as they do not master the English language, and they lack knowledge about American affairs. Their general ignorance has caused Americans to call them "Norwegian Indians." No Norwegian has served on a jury, nor has any one of them won a legal case over an American. The Norwegians have only once so far shown interest in politics; that was last year when a new Wisconsin constitution was up for approval, which they voted against.

The price of land that still belongs to the government in the western regions is one and a quarter dollars an acre, or four dekar; consequently the settlers can purchase a big area for a small amount of money. The difficulties are to cultivate and fence in the new land. It is too expensive to hire help to do this.

Because of the high cost of fences, the cultivation of the land is expensive and most of the Norwegians have no more than ten to forty acres. Generally they cannot afford to hire help. Accordingly, their progress depends exclusively on their health the first years after their arrival, as all work has to be done by themselves.
All in all, experience has shown that the Norwegian who came here with capital is worst off. In a few years he has spent all he had because he did not understand how to use it moderately. . . .

Because cattle are not fenced in, they graze on the prairie at all times. As only a small area is fenced in, it costs practically nothing to keep cows, hogs, and sheep during the summer. The pastures diminish as more and more land is fenced in, and everyone — as is the case in Europe — has to depend on his own property to feed his cattle; then the disproportionately large number of hogs that all settlers now keep will be considerably smaller.

The Norwegians raise mostly wheat, maize, and potatoes, but few grow more than is needed to feed themselves. Some have begun to grow flax; others, but very few, have started with sheep. In the future this practice may prove a good source of increased income. When factories are built, the wool, after being sheared from the sheep, can be exchanged for half its weight in finished woolen goods. . . .

Some Norwegians have other products to sell, like butter and cheese, but the Americans are not very eager to buy such goods from them, as the immigrants are not considered to be especially sanitary. . . .

As is common knowledge, the Norwegians in Wisconsin live in small log cabins, where there is only one room in which they sleep, cook, and generally are assembled. . . .

The immigrants put their milk, butter, and cheese on a shelf beneath the roof, and this practice of course poisons the air. Doing this can be bad enough in cold Nordic countries, but it is intolerable in the warm climate here, not to mention the bad effect it has on health. The high prices that were paid this year for wheat did not profit the Norwegians much, first because they had
very little to sell, and second because they were forced to sell before the prices went up. Wheat that is grown in the western districts is used exclusively in the eastern part of America. Wheat which is to be exported across the ocean must be dried properly by machines, and this cannot be done in the western regions.

Wildlife is found all over Wisconsin. There are plenty of deer, but the number declines as the land is cultivated; the same holds true for the so-called prairie chicken. There are also quail, which look like our jerpe and have the same sharp flight but are not as large. In the forests there are several kinds of large squirrels that taste very good. A great many wild ducks and wild doves are common in Wisconsin; likewise one finds in the forests grouse and partridge, which resemble our agerhøns or rapphøns. The Norwegians do not hunt much, as they have no time for it. There are also rabbits, and the immigrants have learned to make use of game for domestic food. Of destructive animals, there are few in Wisconsin. The worst enemy of the wheatfields is the so-called ground squirrel, which lives underground or in a hollow tree. These animals swarm everywhere.

From what has been said above, one will understand that the situation among the Norwegians in America in general is not as bad as many claim, but that it is far from as good and enviable as others insist. Some already complain that in many ways there is not as much freedom as they had expected. Because cattle are hampered by the neighbors’ fences, many settlers, even those who live in very populous communities, are talking about moving farther north in the country.
VOSSING CORRESPONDENCE SOCIETY

Excerpts from the Letters of the Vossing Correspondence Society

FIRST LETTER. OUR TRUE REPORT ABOUT AMERICA*

Chicago, September 30, 1848
To Our Dear Fatherland and Old Norwegian Friends:

Since many erroneous impressions exist in our fatherland concerning the political as well as the religious situation in America, and also in regard to the conditions of the Norwegian emigrants, we are of the opinion that it can only be corrected by information from Norwegians living here. The best means by which this can be brought about is through a systematic correspondence. We have therefore agreed as follows:

First, that to attain this goal we have formed a Correspondence Society of Chicago, Illinois, for the mutual purpose of meeting costs which will ensue upon writing to Norway and, possibly, of obtaining correspondence in return.

Second, the society’s officers shall be a president, a vice-president, a secretary, and an assistant secretary, who together shall form a governing board or committee.

The president’s duty shall be to preside at the meetings. If he is absent, the vice-president shall preside. The secretary or the assistant secretary shall keep accurate minutes of the meetings and correspondence, and make these public when asked to do so by the society. It shall be the governing board’s duty to appoint a qualified man each month to write a letter to Norway concerning such matters as are decided upon by the committee. All letters must be accepted by the committee and signed by same on behalf of the society.

Third, the society shall meet once every month and

*All eight letters were sent to an organist, David L. Lemme, and to Lars N. Nesheim.
oftener if necessary for the transaction of urgent business. It shall also be the duty of the governing board to make public any correspondence received from Norway.

Fourth, anyone having anything that might contribute to the society's goal should bring it to the board. If it is found to be useful, it shall be forwarded, but if not so considered, it shall not be sent in the name of the society. All proceedings must have the approval of the society.

In accordance with what has been said above, we will request that the organist David Larson Lemme and Lars Nelsen Nesheim be so kind as to publicize our letters as soon as you receive them and make them known to our relatives and whoever wants to have information. We would also appreciate having letters from you each month in which you would be so kind as to inform us about the political, statistical, industrial, and commercial situations in Norway, as well as of any occurrence that could be of interest to know. We will pay the postage both to Norway and back again to America.

The first piece of land bought by Norwegians in Chicago was in 1842. It was purchased by a man from Stavanger. At present there are seventy-five to eighty families who have purchased lots and built their own houses. All in all there are one hundred [Scandinavian] families with a total of about 650 people — mostly Norwegians with a few Swedes and Danes.

In all of the North American United States there will be held elections next November 7 to select a man who will occupy the presidential chair for the next four years. Great care is taken to seek the most able man who could increase the nation's happiness and progress as well as contribute to the equality and union inside the nation's borders.

In our next letter we will call your attention to a report the Norwegian consul general, Adam Løvenskjold,
VOSSING CORRESPONDENCE SOCIETY

presented to the Norwegian government, dated October 15, 1847. It is about his visit during the past summer to the Norwegian settlements in the western districts of the North American states. We will refute the many erroneous assertions that he has made, possibly because of ignorance of the true conditions of the Norwegians, or possibly because he has let himself be influenced to give such wrong and distorted impressions.

We should be happy if you would contribute to our goal by yourselves forming a society, so that you by mutual effort could see to it that a letter is sent every month. We have decided to send a letter the first day of the month, and we hope you will do the same.

There is no important news to convey from here concerning the Norwegians. All are in good health. No deaths have occurred this summer, except for David Mølster, of which you perhaps already know. He was on a boat that was shipwrecked and none was saved. We have no information where the ship was when the accident happened.

On behalf of the society,
Anders Nilsen Brække
Ivar Larson Boe
Endre Nielsen Testdal
Ole Thormodsen Gjerdager

SECOND LETTER. ANSWERING ADAM LØVENSJKJOLD

Chicago, November 1, 1848

Esteemed Friends:

In this communication we will briefly look into a report by Consul General Adam Løvenskjold which he sent to the Norwegian government, October 15, 1847. It is an account of a visit to the Norwegian settlers in North America made public and printed in Bergen in 1848. Neither time nor space permits us to investigate Mr.
Lars Fletre

Løvenskjold’s report. However, we cannot refrain from pointing out certain erroneous inferences which show clearly how difficult it is for a person, either in Norway or after a short visit, to form an idea of the position of the common man in the Norwegian settlements.

Although we hope Mr. Løvenskjold does not actually wish to paint America in false colors, we want to call our friends’ and the public’s attention to the fact that he is employed by the Norwegian government and as such must win favor and reverence with same and do the employer’s wishes.

This is no mystery. Friends of the ordinary Norwegian have for a long time noted with sorrow how the government, both directly and indirectly, has tried to discourage the common man from emigrating to America. It knows full well that the official class thus could keep its subjects and secure for itself unrestricted and undisturbed comfort. But we hope that the time is not far off when everyone, high or low, will speak the truth to his fellowman. Mr. Løvenskjold is far from the truth concerning the size of the Norwegian population in America. Instead of a population of 12,000, as Mr. Løvenskjold finds acceptable, it is more certain that the Norwegians in the United States of America total from 25,000 to 30,000. It is known from the census of last winter that Wisconsin alone has 15,000 Norwegians. In regard to Illinois, we will only mention Chicago, which Mr. Løvenskjold found best not to mention in his count. After a careful investigation, we find that the Norwegians in Chicago are about 600 to 700, and they are generally well satisfied. Yes, we have reason to be grateful. Many of us did not own our clothes at our arrival. We are now in an independent position — many even have several hundred dollars drawing interest. And this is not because of good luck, but is a result of diligence and industry.
The next matter Mr. Løvenskjold mentions is religious conditions. In a later letter we will give more extensive information; we only state at this time that Mr. Løvenskjold’s report is also unreliable on this point.

We will now call our readers’ attention to Mr. Løvenskjold’s report concerning the working class and its wages. He admits that wages are high, but he increases the cost of living as if a common worker would live in the most fashionable hotels, of the kind Mr. Løvenskjold and his like frequent. No one must come to the conclusion from this statement that the living conditions of the workers in America are inferior to those of the so-called privileged classes. The poet has described this condition when he sings about America: “Here meat and wheat are daily bread, here everyone sleeps in a lucky-star bed.” The latter sentence is as far from common as the first one; here as everywhere luck is like a turning wheel: “It turns this way and that way, anyone can experience it; he who depends on luck is a poor man.” We are not talking about unpredictable luck, but about what we have experienced. The daily wages here vary from 75 cents to one and a half dollars, and the weekly cost of room and board and laundry is from one and a half to two dollars. This is different from what Mr. Løvenskjold claims.

Concerning the dissatisfaction among the Norwegians which he talks about, we can state that there are very few who are not content. We can say for certain that this is the case for ninety-nine out of a hundred, and it is the one who does the complaining. And this is, without exception, the individual who has counted on living an easy life at the expense of others. To make his assertions palpable, Mr. Løvenskjold calls on a man from the vicinity of Bergen who returned to Norway. This is a poor evasion. The man in question was Ole Viste from Etne; the writers of this letter and others talked personally
Lars Fletre

with him several times. He was one of the most unreasonable persons in his demands, a fact which we all can testify to. The same man has spread the most vicious rumors about America and the Norwegians here since he went back to Norway.

We will mention only one instance: When he returned to Norway, he was once asked about a man from Stavanger, Mr. Endre Olsen, and he answered that Mr. Olsen had difficulties in providing for himself and his family. The incident came to our knowledge from a man who came over here this year and who had talked to Ole Viste. We can also report that Mr. Endre Olsen sold more than one hundred bushels of wheat the same year Ole was here, and that Ole wished to buy Endre Olsen’s farm. When he could not get it for the money he had, he became offended, and in exasperation he went back to Norway. This is the secret of all dissatisfaction.

Mr. Løvenskjold says on page 12 [of his report] that because of the general ignorance among Norwegians here, the Americans call them “Norwegian Indians.” What a shameful assertion! What if a reasonable man should consider the educational system? Would an enlightened American think that we were more civilized at the time we were in Norway than we are here and now? Here is plainly an attempt to maltreat us for no reason, and not only us but also you there at home, for then you would be held in no better esteem by the Americans than we are. The above assertion is a great distortion of the truth about our character, and we would hope that Mr. Løvenskjold in all fairness would correct this and other instances where he has distorted the truth and reduced us in the eyes of our fatherland. Some other time, if he should wish to pay a visit to the Norwegian settlements in the Midwest, he should give the public in Norway a true account of our status and conditions as they really are.
VOSSING CORRESPONDENCE SOCIETY

THIRD LETTER. IMMIGRANTS DO WELL IN AMERICA

Chicago, December 1, 1848

To Our Norwegian Friends:

It occurs to us that our relatives and friends would like to know what our employment is and about our economic situation. We will here give you an adequate appraisal of a few Norwegians — their business and trades here in Chicago — not for the purpose of elevating or degrading but only to give you a true account, so that no one who respects the truth can refute it. . . .

Editor’s note: Here follow the names of thirty-two persons who must be assumed to be members of the society. Their employment and wages are given; the list includes those who have their own business, and gives their financial status; it indicates those who own homes and property, or who are in the process of building houses for themselves. Three Vossings who farm in the vicinity of Chicago are mentioned, with the size of their crops in the fall of 1848 and prices on the Chicago market.

The letter concludes with the following: It has come to our knowledge that Ivar Pedersen Grovehagen has, in your presence, painted America in different colors — mostly black — and also Sjur Holmen in Ulvik and Sven Malen from Lote in Sørfjorden. We are acquainted with these persons, and we know that they cannot tell the truth unless it happens against their knowledge and will. They can speak and write about America whatever they like; it is easier to make a living here than in Norway. When you write, kindly let us know about everything that goes on. Also ask about anything you wish to know, and we will answer to the best of our knowledge.

We send our best regards and wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.
Lars Fletre

FOURTH LETTER. ALL ARE ON AN EQUAL BASIS
Chicago, January 1, 1849

Dear Countrymen:

Our purpose with this letter, in short, is to point out certain matters concerning the customs and the order of American society, and the equality and the spirit of freedom that characterize the American people.

The unreasonable circumstances in this area that exist in Norway we need not describe for you, and we do not wish to refresh our memories thereof. We believe the differences will become clearer to you when we fully describe conditions as they really exist in America, although it may well be only a superficial reflection of the situation. Here every vat must stand on its own bottom. A man — rich or poor — is honored as a man, so long as he does not degrade his character by unbecoming conduct. Is this the case in Norway? Is it not true that the educated class, which ought to be an example for the less learned class, diligently has taken advantage of its more enlightened position to subdue and limit the common man? Yes, members of this class have in a way created a certain rank, as if they alone have won a special advantage from the Infinitely Good Providence. As a result, one privilege in the social and civil order finds a greater distinction in many respects than that existing between “civilized” and “uncivilized.” This is not so in America. The minister of a church, the attorney, the professor, the storekeeper, or the farmer mingle together and enjoy equal respect as long as they are morally good citizens.

Here you are not asked what or who your father was; the question is: What are you? Do you have a good moral character? Are you imbued with a true patriotic spirit and do you have the required qualifications to pursue your lawful vocation — whether it be as a farmer or as a man in public office? Thus all are placed on an equal basis.

This situation gives a great advantage to the common
man. Many public offices are occupied by ordinary folks, as anyone can be elected or appointed. This opportunity promotes general enlightenment. . . .

The spirit of freedom is, in a sense, an element that is absorbed with the mother's milk; it seems to be just as indispensable to the citizen of the United States as the air he breathes — and here lies the secret of general equality. It is high time that the civil, as well as the religious, organization makes justice, freedom, and equality a common measure also in Norway. . . .

It is far from our intention to propagate a rebellious spirit, but as American citizens who have tasted the satisfaction of being liberated from the effect of all yoke and despotism, we now say to you who live among Norway's rocks: We have this in common with you — courage, warm hearts, and love of liberty. Show yourselves worthy of being sons of the North. Stand up as one man for your freedom. Let freedom and equality be your claim, truth and justice your assertion, and the truth of God will bring you victory.

FIFTH LETTER. WE ENJOY RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Chicago, February 1, 1849

In the last letter we wrote about equality, which is so prominent here in civil and public life. We will now inform you about the religious situation in general and church conditions in particular.

First, there is full tolerance and religious freedom. Any church congregation worships the Almighty according to its own conscience, and in a manner which the congregation finds most appropriate after the word of truth. Although this principle may at first seem strange to you, it is no doubt as it ought to be, and it is what all northern countries long for and to a great extend need. When all maxims are given an opportunity to develop freely, one can best learn to know the true virtues and
dignity of a creed, as well as erroneous and heretical abominations. This is what is needed in all aspects of life, in order to enable one to choose the true and good and reject that which is deceitful and evil. The nature of a tree can only be known by its fruit. All erroneous doctrines experience what Gamaliel said to the Jewish Sanhedrin in Acts 5:38–39: “If the work be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it be of God, ye will not be able to overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to be fighting against God.”. . .

When a person is free to choose the creed that appeals to his conscience and God’s grace, and this not by coercion, it is a power that will not soon be exhausted nor easily conquered. Oh, when will our beloved old Norway rise and go through the purifying fire and come forth in political, civil, and religious liberty as the morning sun’s rays advance to the midday’s glorious radiance!

Being short of space, we cannot give you a description of the many creeds. In the hope that you will be patient and wait until our next letter, when we will give you the reasons why so many exist.

SIXTH LETTER. Farewell To The State Church

Chicago, March 1, 1849

Dear Friends:

We will now take a general look at the different church denominations’ external organization; it must necessarily be superficial. To understand what we present, you must bear in mind that we live in a republic and not a monarchy. In such a form of government, it is acknowledged as the first maxim that the government’s authority is derived from the governed, that is, the state’s citizens. Consequently the power is in their hands, and it can be delegated to whomever they choose.

Now then, even though the state’s and the church’s affairs are separated and independent, both must be
VOSSING CORRESPONDENCE SOCIETY

governed under the same national federation in such a manner that the right of one does not limit the right of the other.

When a congregation wishes to call a minister, the members decide by vote whom they wish to appoint. It is the congregation's own affair, and selfishness and imperiousness have no chance to exercise their destructive might. When a worthy man is selected, an agreement is made concerning the salary, and this agreement needs no sanction from higher authority.

You will perhaps ask: Where does the minister's salary come from? From voluntary contributions, or, as sometimes is the case, by renting the pews in the house of worship. As a rule they are owned by the congregation, not as in Norway, where they are private or government property.

You may ask: How is it among the Norwegians? Many among us have already been deceived by persons who call themselves spiritual leaders. However, the Lord has delivered us. We have laid aside the old Norwegian ceremonies and put into use the custom of the American Lutherans. This exasperates the Norwegian theologians, who try to force the ritual of the Norwegian state church on the people.

You must not think that we have rejected our evangelical Christian faith. It is only the external ceremonies and the authority of the Norwegian state church that we have said farewell to for good. In our next letter we will explain the principle of our church organization in the hope that you will understand our point of view.

SEVENTH LETTER. WE JOIN
THE FRANCKEAN SYNOD

Chicago, April 11, 1849

Esteemed Countrymen:

In our last communication we promised to let you know the basic principle of the Scandinavian Lutheran
Lars Fletre

Church in Chicago, Illinois. We will now inform you about it.

As a result of a preliminary public announcement, many Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish Lutheran brothers and sisters met in the Bethel Chapel in Chicago on February 14, 1848, to organize a regular evangelical church. Mr. Ole Anderson was elected chairman of the meeting and Paul Anderson, secretary. A hymn was sung, a few sentences of the Word of God were read, and a prayer to the Throne of Grace was given. The purpose of the meeting was explained to those present, and the following resolutions were accepted unanimously:

1. Resolved, that we to our own benefit as well as to the general promotion of religion unanimously organize ourselves into an evangelical church in Chicago.

2. Resolved, that only those who satisfactorily give evidence of a true betterment of heart and who live in accord with the Gospel’s principles will be admitted to this organization.

3. Resolved, that we accept the following resolution, which includes our perception of faith and conversion, namely: We hold that the Holy Scripture, the Old and the New Testaments, are the inspired word of God. That it is of highest authority, its content a complete and infallible statement of faith and a rule for mankind. That what is not written or cannot be proved is not necessary for belief or practiced for the gaining of salvation. That the Holy Scripture is the only rule where one can test, examine, and make decisions in all controversies. That no law in opposition to the Word of God, no symbol or opinions of man, are valid unless they are confirmed by the Word of God.

4. Resolved, that we herewith accept the church regimen and discipline of the Franckean Evangelical Lutheran Synod of New York, and that our church will be affiliated with it.

We will here add a resolution introduced by Paul An-
derson, that even though we affiliate with the Franckean Synod, we make the reservation that Luther’s Little Catechism and Pontoppidan’s Explanation, which constitute the main references for our children in religious matters, must not be taken from us. Neither will we tie ourselves longer than we see the Synod walk in accordance with the way of the Lord.

From the above you will know where we stand and from what source we draw our enlightenment. . . .

We believe it will be of interest to you how we spend our Sundays. At 9:00 a.m. we have Sunday school in English, which everyone can attend. At 10:30 a.m. the public service begins. At 2:30 p.m. there is another service, and sometimes one at 7:00 in the evening. Every second Sunday we have worship in English. Every Thursday evening we have a prayer meeting, and every Friday evening we have instruction in song. Those who are teachers in the Sunday school meet every Saturday with the minister to discuss what is to be the topic for the children on Sunday. This is very important for the well-being of the church in the future, for what is impressed in the child’s heart and mind — if it is good seed — will bear fruit after we are counted among those who have gone yonder.

EIGHTH LETTER. NO LETTERS FROM NORWAY

Chicago, May 1, 1849

Esteemed Countrymen:

Our patience is almost gone because of the long time that has passed since we began our correspondence, without yet having received an answer. Still, we have decided to continue to write to you in the hope that you will respond and take the opportunity that this present communication gives you. In this letter we will write about different subjects that we have not given you information about before.

Editor’s Note: Here follow the names of thirty-two
Lars Fletre

states and territories, and for each the number of inhabitants and how many bushels of wheat they harvested according to the 1847 census. The letter also contains “a little of everything.” Mention is made, for example, of the fact that the finding of gold in California is more than a rumor, and that a few Vossings have left for the west coast.

When we compare the number of letters received from Norway by immigrants living here with those mailed to Norway, we find that the latter outweigh letters from the homeland by 20 to 1. It occasionally occurs to us that our mother has forgotten her emigrated children. Oh, Norwegian friends! When we look back with a thoughtful glance, it is as if we in our minds fly on the wings of love and embrace you with emotion — yes, and with a longing to know how you are faring in life’s struggle. These fascinating thoughts have been, to a certain extent, what has spurred our correspondence and our willingness to give you all the information about conditions here as far as our ability has allowed.

We hope, dear countrymen, that, from what has been said above — you do not think we look with sorrow at the day we left our beloved fatherland. Oh no, thanks to God, that in his wisdom He led us to this land where freedom and liberty prevail. Here we can enjoy the privileges to which all men are entitled.

Give our kind regards to our relatives and friends. In the meantime, we hope to hear from you.

Friendly greetings,
Anders Nilsen Brække
Ivar Larson Boe
Endre Nielsen Testdal
Ole Thormodsen Gjerdager
VOSSING CORRESPONDENCE SOCIETY

NOTES


2 Hjalmar Rued Holand, *De norske settlementers historie: En oversigt over den norske indvandring til og bebyggelse af Amerikas nordvesten fra Amerikas opdagelse til indianerkrigens i nordvesten*, 100–110 (Ephraim, Wisconsin, 1908); Rasmus B. Anderson, *The First Chapter of Norwegian Immigration*, 194 (Madison, Wisconsin, 1906); *Vossingen*, December, 1924.


5 Blegen, *The “America Letters,”* 11–12.


10 *Vossingen*, June, 1925.

11 The letters sent to Norway are printed in full in *Vossingen*, 1925 and 1926. The original secretary’s book of the society, with copies of the letters and the constitution, has been preserved in the archives of the Norwegian-American Historical Association.

12 *Vossingen*, December, 1925.


15 The author received a copy of Consul General Løvenskjold’s report from Universitetsbiblioteket in Oslo. See also Knut Gjerset, tr., “An Account of the Norwegian Settlers in America,” in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 8:77–88 (September, 1924).

16 Beaver Creek settlement was located in Iroquois County in Illinois near the Indiana state line. Some settlers took land on the Indiana side.

17 The letters have been translated from *Vossingen*. The author wishes to acknowledge that copies of the letters in handwritten Gothic script by Lars Nelsen Nesheim were provided by Voss Folkemuseum.