



IN SEARCH OF A NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN WORKING CLASS

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THIS ARTICLE, here translated, annotated, and slightly adapted for American readers, was commissioned by the Norwegian magazine *Samtiden*. When first published in a 1984 issue on "The Dream of America: Norway in America—America in Norway," it introduced Norwegian readers to recent concepts in American social history. While such themes as social mobility and the American success ideology have long interested American historians, they had not been applied to the Norwegian immigrant experience.

Drawing upon examples from Minnesota and the East Coast, the article is a general survey of Norwegian participation in industrializing and urbanizing the United States. The author hopes that the new interest in urban Scandinavian immigration—recently expressed on both sides of the Atlantic—will uncover the sources needed to illuminate the lives of these immigrants of an overlooked class and era.

AMERICA in the last decades of the 19th century, Knut Hamsun observed, was "a society in the making." In the turmoil of transition from a land of serene farms to a nation of industrial cities, the Norwegian author found "the feverish rush and to-do that comes of people on the move" in a culture in which "every day is moving-in day for a newcomer."¹ All this activity created a great deal of cultural noise, which Hamsun criticized in his 1889 book, *Fra det moderne Amerikas*

Aandsliv. The sojourner in American history in the 1980s has the same task as the European observer of American society in the 1880s—to cut through the promotional noise to find some substance in the din.

Like Hamsun, foreign visitors and native critics found in American culture of the restless 19th century a penchant for selling, a commerce that was not limited to the hawking of land and peddlers' goods. The commodities of human aspirations and dreams were added to the stock. Their advertisements were myths. To speak of a Norwegian-American working class is to challenge two historical myths. One concerns the popular conception of the Norwegian immigrant experience. The other is the formidable American myth of success.

The popular image of Norwegian immigrants grew out of the circumstances surrounding the celebration in the 1920s of their past. To commemorate the centennial of the beginning of organized emigration from Norway, ethnic leaders called for a widespread program to preserve the group's past, "to assess that event accurately, in all its bearings," as Judge Andreas Ueland of Minneapolis demanded.²

Desperation as well as commemorative nostalgia colored the effort. These early patrons of ethnic history envisioned nothing less than the end of Norwegian-American life. The rate of immigration had dropped dramatically with the onset of World War I and failed

¹ Hamsun, *The Cultural Life of Modern America*, trans. Barbara G. Morgridge (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 5.

² Ueland, *Recollections of an Immigrant* (New York: Milton, Balch & Co., 1929), 193.

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to recover during the short depression of the early 1920s. Economic constraints were supplemented by legislation with the passing of the immigration acts of 1921 and 1924. Although intended mainly to stem the tide of industrial immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, these laws marked the end of the "open door" tradition. While no one could have envisioned the effects of the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II in further curtailing European immigration, the message seemed clear enough to the ethnic leaders of 1925: The great migration was over, and they and their children were the sole custodians of Norwegian culture in America.

There was also some doubt that the younger generation would carry on the traditions. By 1925 the "American transition" was thought to be largely complete. Scholars cited the abandonment of regional dialects, the increased use of English in worship and conversation, and a declining interest in ethnic institutions among the young as indexes of Americanization. "The societies, immigrant journals, and other Norwegian-American institutions appeared hopelessly outdated and obsolete to a majority of the children of the immigrants," historian Odd S. Lovoll noted.³ Members of the older generation, who believed that their Norwegianness had helped give them a personality distinct from the homogeneity of America, looked on in alarm. There was a sense of impending loss, that the rich heritage of the group would be devoured by the new commercial culture represented by assembly lines and department stores, radio and motion pictures.

The patricians responded with a flurry of historical activities then unmatched among America's ethnic groups. In 1925 a group of scholars, businessmen, and clergy founded the Norwegian-American Historical Association. Under its aegis immigrant papers were collected, translated, and published. Scholarship appeared in books by such historians as Theodore C. Blegen and Knut Gjerset and a journal, *Norwegian-American Studies and Records*, was launched. In succeeding decades, a wealth of letters, reminiscences, family histories, and church records have been collected and published by the association, the state historical societies of Minnesota and Wisconsin, and independent scholars.⁴

The picture of Norwegians that has emerged from 60 years of history writing has been one of hearty, hard-working, and pious farmers. Keeping with the temperament of the times, writers have celebrated the persistence of sturdy pioneers and the successful rise of great men to positions of power and prominence in the new world. In contrast to the non-Protestant "new immigrants" from Southern and Eastern Europe, Norwegians were not blamed for the complex problems of the urban and industrial society. They were said to have

migrated to midwestern farms before America industrialized. Once here, they fought the Civil War for the Union and against slavery, organized politically, and in the process assimilated easily into American life. On the farms, according to this view, Norwegians achieved a modest level of comfort and economic independence upon which their children could build prosperity. While other immigrants huddled in impoverished ghettos in the city, the Norwegians, it was believed, were fulfilling the American Dream of success quietly.

TO SIMPLIFY the Norwegian experience in this manner is to overlook the dynamics of the social and economic forces that transformed rural immigrant Norwegians of the mid-19th century into rural, urban, and suburban Americans of the mid-20th. A survey of the full scope of the migration reveals how closely Norwegians resembled other industrial immigrants.⁵ Most Norwegians entered the United States during the industrial era: three times as many of them emigrated to America in the 60 years between 1880 and 1940 than had left Norway in the previous six more-celebrated decades of migration. The immigrants of this later era were different from those of the earlier period of family emigration from Norway. Most were men—60 percent of the 308,270 newcomers who arrived between 1880 and 1915. Two-thirds of these men were between the ages of 15 and 30, and a large majority of immigrants of both sexes were unmarried. (Many married men, who emigrated alone, planned to bring their wives and children over to the new country after a couple of years of earning and saving.) Like other immigrants of the period, not all Norwegian newcomers had an ironclad commitment to endure all hardships in America; hard times sent large numbers of them home. It has been estimated that as many as a quarter gave up on the American Dream and returned to the port cities of Mother Norway.⁶

Most Norwegian immigrants were a part of the great migration of peoples from all parts of Europe to industrializing America. While overshadowed in raw numbers by those coming from Eastern and Southern Europe, the flow of workers from Western and Northern

³ Lovoll, *A Folk Epic: The Bygdelag in America* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), 144, 174-175.

⁴ Odd S. Lovoll and Kenneth O. Bjork, *The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1925-1975* (Northfield: The Association, 1975).

⁵ Arnfinn Engen, ed., *Utvandringa: det store oppbrotet* (Oslo: Samlaget, 1978), 36; Norway, Departementet for Sociale Saker (Services), *Utvandringsstatistikk* (Kristiania, 1921); Ingrid G. Semmingsen, "Norwegian Emigration to America During the Nineteenth Century," *Norwegian-American Studies and Records* 11 (1940): 78-80.

⁶ Norway, Statistisk Sentralbyrå (Central Bureau of Statistics), *Ekteskap, fødelser, og vandring* (Oslo, 1975), 218.

Europe did not merely continue, but increased. And for many the lure was the new America of industrial cities. While many newcomers sought out their country cousins at first, they turned increasingly to urban and industrial occupations after 1880. The number of Norwegian and Swedish men engaged in manufacturing tripled in the 1880s, and similar dramatic increases were reported in such untraditionally Norwegian immigrant occupations as the building trades and iron and steel production. Similarly, the number of employed women (excluding farm wives) tripled between 1880 and 1890, the majority of them migrating to cities and towns to work in trades, transportation, and domestic service, a trend not uncommon among other immigrant groups of the time.⁷

These Norwegian immigrants were, in the words of Einar Haugen, "children of a new age in Norway."⁸ They had witnessed vast changes in everyday life wrought by forces of industrialization and urbanization in their homeland. As the 19th century wore on, a great number of Norwegians had experience in the growing cities of Kristiania (Oslo) or Bergen or the sea-ports or farm-trading towns. In the period from 1880 to 1915, nearly one-third of the emigrants had departed Norwegian towns, compared with one-tenth in the period before the Civil War. Even if many of these emigrants were originally from farms and valleys, they arrived not totally unfamiliar with urban life.⁹

Norwegian America became increasingly urban after 1880. The percentage of Norwegians residing in four major urban centers—Brooklyn, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Seattle—grew from 6 to 13 percent in 1900, to 20 percent in 1920. Chicago served as the first major urban center for the group, to be rivaled by Minneapolis and Seattle in the 1890s. These three cities became the cultural centers for Norwegians in their respective

regions: Chicago for the Great Lakes states, Minneapolis for the Upper Midwest and the Great Plains, and Seattle for the transplanted midwesterners in the Pacific Northwest. After the turn of the century, greater numbers of Norwegians made it no farther into the new land than New York City. There they found residence and work among their compatriots in Brooklyn, the emerging center of Norwegian culture on the Atlantic coast.¹⁰

In these four places immigrants joined the descendants of the rural pioneers who were leaving the farm settlements of the Midwest to seek work in the rising industrial centers. Visible evidence of ethnic community life appeared among the urban Norwegians—churches and their subsidiary charitable and social associations, fraternal and athletic clubs, singing societies, Norwegian-language newspapers, and ethnic business ventures. Smaller *kolonis* (settlements) sprang up in the port cities of Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. In addition, Norwegians appeared in smaller industrial cities in Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. By 1930, most Norwegian Americans, like most Americans in general, were classified as urban. Within a century of migration and settlement, they had made the transition from the countryside to the city.¹¹

THE AMERICA that the new Norwegian immigrants encountered in such large numbers was a land held in thrall by an ideology of success. Native and newcomer alike were bombarded with sermons, political speeches, biographies, popular songs, and novels celebrating the "self-made man" and prescribing ways of achieving upward social mobility.

The ideology of success was stamped into American culture from the time of its founding. Benjamin Franklin, for example, was a major popularizer of this ideology. In his *Advice to Young Tradesmen*, *Autobiography*, and *Poor Richard's Almanack*, Franklin advised his countrymen on "the Way to Wealth" through hard work, frugality, and good character. In the 19th century, Russell H. Conwell, a Baptist minister who founded Temple University in Philadelphia, traveled from city to town, preaching that there were "acres of diamonds"—financial rewards—everywhere for the taking. But novelist Horatio Alger was the ideology's most prolific propagandist. In his many popular novels, which sold over twenty million copies, Alger passed the ideology of success on to America's youth.¹²

So pervasive was the idea in American culture that the immigrant press parroted it back to its readers. As vehicles for Americanization (which was often thought to be synonymous with upward mobility), the newspapers saw it their duty to educate the newcomers in ways of succeeding in the new land. *Skandinavian* of Chicago

⁷ E. P. Hutchinson, *Immigrants and their Children, 1850-1950* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1956), 135, 150-151; United States, *Census*, 1890, *Population*, 2: 484-518. In the 19th century U.S. census reports made no distinction between Norwegians and Swedes. Census statistics from this period, when applied to either group, therefore lack precision, but are still useful to illustrate a general trend.

⁸ Einar Haugen, *The Norwegian Language in America: A Study in Bilingual Behavior* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1969), 29.

⁹ Ingrid G. Semmingsen, "Family Emigration from Bergen, 1874-92: Some Preliminary Results of a Statistical Study," *Americana-Norvegica III* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971), 38-63; Rolf Kåre Østrem and Peter Rinnan, "Utvandring fra Kristiania, 1880-1917: en studie i urban utvandring" (Hovedoppgave i historie, Universitetet i Oslo, 1979).

¹⁰ U.S., *Census*, 1920, *Population*, 2: 926, 928, 934, 940, 942, 947, 959, 961, 963.

¹¹ U.S., *Census*, 1930, *Population*, 2: 232.

¹² On Conwell, see *Encyclopedia Americana* 7 (Danbury, Conn.: Grolier, Inc., 1982): 713.

filled the pages of its English handbooks with samples of business letters that stressed politeness and punctuality. *Nordisk Tidende* of Brooklyn went further, from prescribing the proper methods of success to encouraging the proper attitudes. Early in 1920 the paper printed "The Business of Making a Living, or Ten Steps to Economic Success," by Arthur M. East of the Young Men's Christian Association. The ten keys were: work and earn, budget, record expenses, get a bank account, buy life insurance, prepare a will, own your own home, pay bills promptly, invest in government securities, share with others. Intended to secure the immigrant a place in the mainstream of American middle-class life, East's ten commandments repeated the success ethic that young Benjamin Franklin had penned nearly two centuries earlier. But for most Norwegians, as for most urban Americans, the first commandment was the key to the other nine. In order to procure insurance, government securities, or a home, one first had to be able to "work and earn." And education, skills, and luck in the wild boom-and-bust fluctuations of immature American capitalism were more responsible for success or failure than an individual's character.¹³

But according to the ideology of success, the American economy was a neutral and constant environment, an open arena that offered a fresh start to hard-working and innovative people from the farms and towns of the Old World. "For two hundred years America has made human beings out of Europe's worst spawn," Knut Hamsun paraphrased the belief. "[I]t has turned idlers from every corner of the earth into steady workers. We have been told wondrous tales about people who went shuffling about in wooden shoes here suddenly becoming light-footed there," Hamsun wrote.¹⁴ America, it was promised, freed the immigrants from the old bounds of class and status and allowed them to succeed on their own individual character traits. This view is reflected in Agnes M. Larson's study of John A. Johnson. She describes that Norwegian-American industrialist's success as having occurred "[i]n a fluid society and in a dynamic country where notable individual achievement was possible."¹⁵

The shattering of old class systems, the myth acknowledged, did entail the development of new class systems. Racism and the course of Southern agriculture had created a permanent American subclass, the black slaves, whose poverty and lack of civil rights were passed on from one generation to the next. And there was an upper class whose status was established by wealth and reinforced by visible consumption. The acceptance and admiration of these people by those less prosperous stem in large part from the belief in the accessibility of success. America's aristocracy was supposed to have risen from rags to riches through good

character, shrewdness, or luck. Besides, it was further preached, the land of unlimited resources and technological marvels ensured that "there is always room at the top." In the early 1920s *Nordisk Tidende* published a series of laudatory profiles of Brooklyn's prosperous Norwegian Americans. Though vague concerning the skills and advantages these men had begun with, the newspaper assured its readers that most had started "*med tomme hender*"—with empty hands. The message to the working people was clear.¹⁶

THE INTERACTION of the success ideology with economic and social realities can be seen by examining Minneapolis and St. Paul at the turn of the century. In the 1890s the Twin Cities seemed to symbolize the promise of America, a new world where new cities sprang from the wilderness in the course of a few years. Immigrants whose previous urban lives were led in the shadows of Kristiania's Akershus Fortress or Bergen's Rosenkrantz Tower encountered in Minneapolis and St. Paul cities which a half century earlier had been dirt paths lined by ramshackle mills, taverns, and cabins. Expansion of the flour-milling and lumber industries linked by railroads to the rest of the country attracted masses of Yankees and immigrants to the young towns after the Civil War. From 2,500 persons in 1860, the population of Minneapolis soared to 13,000 in 1870, and to almost 47,000 in 1880. St. Paul experienced a parallel growth, doubling from approximately 20,000 in 1870 to 41,000 in 1880.¹⁷ The industrializing decade of the 1880s brought even wilder expansion. By 1890 Minneapolis had some 165,000 inhabitants, while St. Paul had over 133,000. A large portion of these residents were immigrants—60,588 of the Minneapolitans and 53,177 of the St. Paulites. Over 16,000 Norwegian immigrants lived in the two cities in 1890—3,521 in St. Paul and 12,624 in Minneapolis.¹⁸

This was the setting for Olof Nickolaus Nelson's two-volume book, *History of the Scandinavians and Successful Scandinavians in the United States*. Published in Minneapolis between 1893 (volume I) and 1897 (volume II), the book contains nearly 300 biographies of men in the fields of business, education, law, medicine,

¹³ *Norsk-Amerikansk Haandbog* (Chicago: John Anderson Publishing Co., 1883, 1889); *Nordisk Tidende*, Jan. 8, 1920, p. 6.

¹⁴ Hamsun, *Cultural Life*, 6.

¹⁵ Larson, *John A. Johnson: An Uncommon American* (Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1969), 273.

¹⁶ *Nordisk Tidende*, Oct. 13, 1921-June 22, 1922, p. 1. (The articles did not appear in every issue.) See also "Hvem er Hvem?" (Who's Who?), *Nordisk Tidende*, Sept. 7, 1922, p. 1.

¹⁷ U.S., *Census*, 1870, *Population*, 1:178, 1880, *Population*, 1:538-541. Figures have been rounded off.

¹⁸ U.S., *Census*, 1890, *Population*, 1:370, 670-671.

and politics in the Midwest. Eighty-two of the subjects were Norwegians residing in Minneapolis or St. Paul.

Although Nelson did not define precisely what he meant by "successful Scandinavians," he attempted to explain the success of the men whose stories he told through ethnological determinism. He invited his readers to recall the Vikings, whom he characterized as stubborn, firm, and determined, but courageous, honest, and hospitable. The noblest Viking trait to Nelson was a strong sense of individual self-reliance. Armed with this quality, Nelson thought, it was inevitable that those with the "Scandinavian personality" would succeed in America, a new fluid society that allowed men of good character to accomplish whatever they set out to do. Believing that Scandinavian institutional life in America was very poorly developed, Nelson concluded that "Whatever is accomplished in the political, social, or financial spheres by any Scandinavian-American, is accomplished by the individual." In other words, the successful men in his book were self-made men whose success was neither aided nor hindered by society.¹⁹

Most of the successful Norwegians Nelson found in Minneapolis and St. Paul could hardly be considered self-made. Nine were born in America, and 19 had emigrated at an age too early for a career. The remaining 54 had hardly begun with empty hands. Ten had had private tutoring and 17 had attended the university in Kristiania. Eleven had gone abroad—to Copenhagen, Paris, or Germany—for further education, while 12 had had professional training. While many young immigrants had benefitted from an elementary education in Norway, most did not begin the contest for success in America with the educational head start of most of Nelson's heroes.

Their previous status, education, and skills set the "successful" apart from their neighbors in the Minnesota cities. One such fortunate person was Andreas Ueland. Son of Ole Gabriel Ueland, liberal leader in the Norwegian parliament in the mid-19th century, young Ueland became a prominent lawyer and judge in Minneapolis. K. Kortgaard from the Hamar region had a wealthy father who "gave his son a liberal education." He had been sent to Fredrikstad to learn the lumber business, to England to learn the English language, and to Germany and Holland to learn business practices. Shortly after arriving in Minneapolis, he became a banker, city official, and consul for Portugal. John H. Field brought a commercial education and business experience with him from Kristiania. Arriving in Minne-

apolis during the boom period of the 1880s, he "at once found employment in Scandia Bank." Within ten years he was a bank president and prominent citizen.²⁰

Occasionally individuals appeared who, from the information available, seemed to have been self-made men. Banker A. C. Haugan was "accustomed from childhood to hard labor" on a farm near Trondheim. "Haugan had not enjoyed the advantages of an extensive education," Nelson reported, "but, being diligent and energetic, it was his ambition to enter upon a business career." From his start as a common laborer in a Minneapolis lumberyard, Haugan somehow rose to become a proprietor of a grocery store, member of the city council, and president of a local bank. Here, indeed, was the dream of America. The biography of attorney Henry J. Gjertsen tells the story of a young man who left his parents' farm to study law and achieved professional and economic success. "For a young man he has come to the front rapidly," Nelson concluded.²¹

So mobility, rags-to-riches or rags-to-respectability, was possible in the maelstrom of American industrialization. But it was exceptional, even in the boom years of the new cities of the New World. Nelson's group of successful Norwegians included 14 ministers, 10 lawyers, 9 bankers, 9 doctors, 8 journalists, 5 government officials, 2 artists, 2 engineers, and 2 businessmen, as well as a dentist and an architect. By contrast, most urban immigrants did not enjoy such a high-bourgeois status. Of the 16,310 Scandinavian men in Minneapolis in 1890, only 151 were engaged in the professions, a category that included law, clergy, and medicine. The largest number, 6,382, were in domestic and personal service, a group dominated by laborers. A nearly equal number, 6,124, were engaged in the manufacturing and mechanical industries. Nelson also overlooked immigrant women. Of the 5,363 Scandinavian women counted in Minneapolis and St. Paul in 1890, a remarkably high number—3,731—were listed as "servants." Others were identified as dressmakers and laundresses. All of these people, who did not qualify for inclusion among Nelson's "successful Scandinavians," comprised the majority of the Norwegians in Minneapolis and St. Paul. They were a Norwegian-American working class.²²

SCANDINAVIANS across America in 1890 worked in the same occupations as their countrymen in the Minnesota cities—domestic and personal service, and the manufacturing and mechanical industries. Although farming, fishing, and mining formed the largest single category of work in the census reports, more than half of all Scandinavian workers were engaged in urban or industrial labor. Of approximately a half-million total workers only 5,000 were in the professions.²³ As in the case of Minneapolis and St. Paul, it is the professional

¹⁹ Nelson, *History of Scandinavians*, 1:19-22, 2:x.

²⁰ Nelson, *History of Scandinavians*, 1:624, 462, 396.

²¹ Nelson, *History of Scandinavians*, 1:424, 406.

²² U.S., *Census*, 1890, *Population*, 2:694-695.

²³ U.S., *Census*, 1890, *Population*, 2:484-489.



LAUNDRY workers, Minneapolis, about 1920

one percent of whom so much is known, and the huge majority about whom we know so little. Few working-class Norwegians, like their neighbors and coworkers of other ethnic groups, have had biographers and journalists to celebrate their lives and careers. They did not leave a profusion of personal papers to archives. The little that is known about their lives has been gleaned from a few letters and diaries and through a careful reading of elite writings. From these scant sources a picture of the majority immigrant experience begins to emerge.

Workers' institutions were one means of expression for the urban majority. Abandoning the ideology of

success, immigrant workers developed their own radical responses to American capitalism when they realized that their status might be permanent. There is every indication that Norwegians participated in working-class organizing. Norwegian workers, for example, were employed at the Pullman factory south of Chicago in the 1890s; unfortunately, very little is known of their role in the 1894 strike that, in drawing the battle lines between management and government on one side and industrial unionists on the other, set the pattern for industrial conflict up to World War II. In the beginning of the 20th century, such unions as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the International Seamen's Union of America included thousands of Norwegian lumbering and shipping workers. Norwegian-American labor leader Andrew Furuseth's crusade for seamen's protective legislation is well known, but the role of Norwegians in the more radical IWW is a largely unwritten chapter of American labor history.

Every city with a large Norwegian population had ethnic socialist organizations, such as Chicago's Scandinavian-American Workers' Society Karl Marx. Each major urban center also produced radical newspapers in the Norwegian language. One of the longest lived was Minneapolis' *Gaa Paa* (*Go Forth*), edited and published by Emil Lauritz Mengshoel and his wife Helle from 1903 to 1914. The role these organizations and publications played in binding Norwegians to American radicalism has yet to be analyzed adequately.²⁴

When the history of Norwegian-American labor radicalism is written, it will probably be discovered that most members of the working class did not participate in the organizations. Like the American working class of which they were a part, Norwegian workers were a class on the move. A lack of residential permanence has been documented by a generation of historians studying rates of persistence—the ability of people to stay in one place from one decennial census to the next. Surveying the results of studies in over 30 cities, historian Stephan Thernstrom calculated that persistence averaged between 40 and 60 percent. In other words, roughly one-half of the people in industrializing America were on the road, without stable work or residence during any ten-year period. The image of the static small town, the timeless family farm, and the stable ur-

²⁴ But see Odd-Stein Granhus, "Scandinavian-American Socialist Newspapers with Emphasis on the Norwegian Contribution and E. L. Mengshoel's *Gaa Paa/Folkets Røst*," in *Essays on the Scandinavian-North American Radical Press, 1880s-1930s*, ed. Dirk Hoerder (Bremen, Germany: Labor Newspaper Preservation Project, University of Bremen, 1984), 78-99, published after this article originally went to press.

ban neighborhood dims in importance when confronted with these studies. American workers, Thernstrom concluded, constituted a floating proletariat.²⁵

This mobility is reflected in documents from the Norwegian working class in America. The diary of an anonymous immigrant has found its way into the Norwegian-American Historical Association archives in Northfield. Throughout the second half of 1901, this unknown worker stopped to record in a small pocket notebook the events of his daily life and his reactions to the American working milieu. In search of factory work, he traveled up and down the East Coast, across New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania: "12 Aug. Have been around all morning, first in Elizabeth [New Jersey]; before there I went to New York and to Newark to look for work, but none was to be found. 13th [Aug.] Today I was in Brooklyn and New York, but with the same result."²⁶

The search for work was the paramount concern for such immigrants as this diarist. It took precedence over family, friends, or a hospitable Norwegian *koloni* in the

²⁵ Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 220-225.

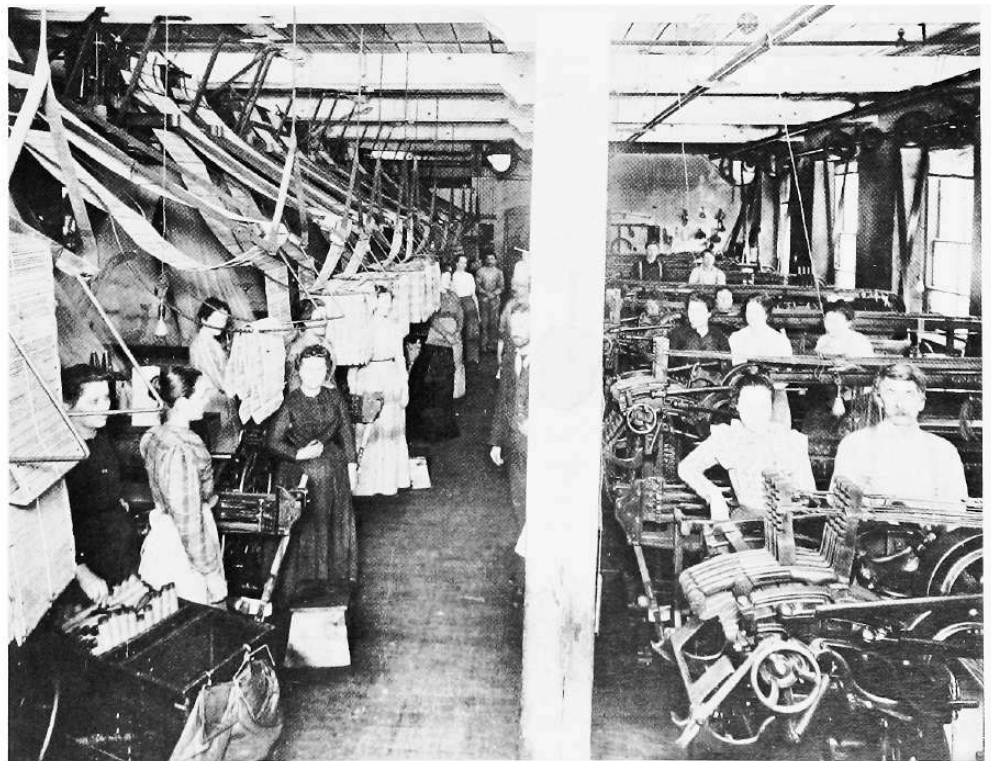
²⁶ Anonymous diary, 1901, Norwegian-American Historical Association Archives, Northfield, (hereafter cited as Diary, NAHA).

²⁷ Håland to Berthe Gurine Olsen, April 6, 1896, Grimsted Letters, Aust-Agder Archives, Arendal, Norway.

decision of where to settle in America. It determined the conditions of life for the immigrant, as well as his temperament. Finding a job was a satisfying event. "Have today been to work again," the anonymous diarist penciled in his notebook on July 29, 1901. "I am now beginning to enjoy myself better in my new place." Worker J. Håland expressed a similar satisfaction in a letter home from Brooklyn in 1896: "When I have work, I'm in better humor and time goes faster."²⁷

The short and precarious terms of employment the immigrant worker faced were determined not so much by his character as by the changing state of the American economy. These conditions were expressed in everyday life: strikes, conflicts with foremen, workplace conditions, health, and the seasonal nature of hiring. A good job took six days of the worker's week, occasionally seven for some factory and household workers. Largely unregulated by forces outside of the corporation, factories lacked minimal protection against accidents and health hazards. In the absence of widespread unionization and arbitration, the worker had to approach all dealings with management gingerly. "4th Sept. 1901. Began in my new job today and did pretty well with it. My foreman looks tough but was almost moderate after I understood him. Everything is of steel, so it is hard to work with, but one does what one can. The air is gruesome here in the workplace—one finds one's nose and mouth both full of slag." Accidents and poor health conditions caused workers to lose jobs,

PREDOMINANTLY female textile workers at North Star Woolen Mills, Minneapolis, about 1905



or at least miss valuable work hours while seeking medical treatment: "21st Sept. I didn't work today; laid around for most of the whole day." "28th Sept. Didn't work. Laid in most of the whole day. Everything is the same."²⁸

The lives of immigrant workers were made more precarious by the seasonal nature of much of their work. Factories would be shut down during periods when orders were scarce, throwing employees back into the search for work. Unemployment insurance would not appear until the 20th century, and then slowly on a state-by-state basis. "Times are tough here," Jacob Olsen Fevig wrote to his parents from Philadelphia in April, 1896, "but it should soon get a little better when the summer sets in here."²⁹ Konrad Knudsen, a young construction worker in New Jersey, reflected on the impact of the seasons and the health of the economy on his work. "I have been promised several jobs, but nothing has come of them," he wrote home to the Agder region. "Here it has been a really bad winter since New Year's but I think a little work has been begun."³⁰ Like their countrymen in the construction trades, Norwegians in the maritime industries spent several months each year without work. For these workers, the annual cycles of hiring and laying-off meant living part of every year in poverty.

Although the seasonal idleness of the "seafolk" was considered an annual occurrence in the Brooklyn *koloni*, extended joblessness during the short depression of the early 1920s brought confusion and panic. Readers of *Nordisk Tidende* read weekly reports of life among their jobless and homeless countrymen. "There are now over 1000 jobless Scandinavian seamen in Brooklyn and New York," the paper reported in February, 1921. "Many of them have been inland for several months without being able to find work." They had spent their meager savings and there was simply no work to be had. Churches opened their doors at night and charities placed desperate advertisements in the newspapers,

asking for cast-off clothing and blankets, and beseeching the *koloni's* businessmen to create inconsequential jobs for destitute seamen.³¹

The crisis of the Brooklyn seafolk in 1920-21 underscores the position of the working people at the mercy of minor fluctuations of the immature American industrial economy. The experience of most working people did not allow them to find the kind of success Franklin and Alger promised in their books and banker Hansen and lawyer Gjertsen lived in Minneapolis. For most of those who remained in America, success probably meant mere survival, perhaps a modest home, and some savings from a secure job. If these things could be retained and passed on, the grandchildren of the Norwegian worker might advance into business and the professions. But then one must ask whether they made that kind of advancement as Norwegian Americans or as Americans.

The immigrant generation heard the promise of success touted everywhere, but the promise of failure was equally loud. "The same family that lived on two crowns a day here needs a dollar and a half a day there," Knut Hamsun told Norwegians in 1889, "and for the great majority it takes considerable doing to get hold of this dollar and a half; it really keeps you whirling to earn that money," he added.³² Perched precariously on the edge of success or failure in the emerging industrial economy, the Norwegian-American workers were whirling continuously. They were a small and little documented part of that noisy "society in the making" that has become modern America.

²⁸ Diary, NAHA.

²⁹ Fevig to Ole Knudsen, April 6, 1896, Grimsted Letters.

³⁰ Konrad Knudsen to Ole Knudsen, April 2, 1896, Grimsted Letters.

³¹ *Nordisk Tidende*, Feb. 10, 1921, p. 1.

³² Hamsun, *Cultural Life*, 6.

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