

Women's rights, domestic cruelty, civil vs. religious authority, friction between recent immigrants and earlier arrivals—contentious topics that light up today's social media streams. The lawsuit brought by Oline Muus against her husband Bernt, both Norwegian immigrants, illuminate how these issues played out 140 years ago.



# Triple Jeopardy

## THE 1879 *MUUS V. MUUS* CASE

KATHRYN ERICSON

**O**LINE MUUS'S HUSBAND, Bernt, has been cited many times as one of Goodhue County's founding fathers. And we might have seen Oline herself in the one-dimensional image of the stalwart pioneer mother but for an event in 1879 that added substance to perceptions of the Muuses' personalities. In that year, Oline sued Bernt, a Lutheran pastor, for control of an inheritance from her father. She also charged her husband with neglect and cruelty.

The case gained considerable interest as it spread from the civil court into two other forums, the church and the public press. It raised issues of a married woman's rights to a legal identity and to hold property, as well as issues of a husband's authority over his wife. It exemplified the struggle of a state-church tradition to adapt itself to a country that allowed no state church. And it demonstrated the friction that existed between the immigrants and "Americans" of longer standing.

Oline Christine Kathrine Pind was born in 1838 in Norway. Her family was considered upper class and wealthy, and Oline was "well educated, an accomplished pianist, well read in Norwegian literature." Her two sisters married a doctor and a judge. Oline allied herself with the third learned profession when in 1859 she married Bernt Julius Muus, a Lutheran clergyman.<sup>1</sup>

ABOVE: *Bernt and Oline Muus, 1850s*

In the religious revival that was sweeping over Norway, "Christianity became popular." Private meetings were held to sing, pray, and edify in the faith, and by one account, Bernt and Oline met at one of these meetings. Bernt's family was considered just as prominent, but less wealthy. A long line of his ancestors had served as pastors at Snaasen, near Trondheim, and he was brought up in the home of his grandfather, Reverend Jens Rynning, father of the emigrant leader Ole Rynning. Bernt received a classical education, earning a degree in theology from the University of Christiania in 1858 with highest honors.<sup>2</sup>

By all accounts, Oline and Bernt were somewhat mismatched. About Bernt's personality there is a wealth of opinion. He was respected and maligned with equal intensity. He followed the teachings of the Bible to the letter and perhaps beyond, according to some. "A real character . . . uncompromising, and apparently hard as flint." Others noted his "unasailable faith, his stern discipline and self-denial . . . adamant to . . . those who did not conform fully to his teachings."<sup>3</sup>

Some saw a warmer side, finding him "tender to the needy and those in distress." His daughter recalled that "He would not permit us to disturb the mosquito on his hand until it had satisfied its hunger." The sharpness of his mind was unquestioned. "Keen, oh but he was keen." "One does not find a man like Muus in every bush."<sup>4</sup>

Oline's character, too, came in for a somewhat mixed review. One con-

temporary found her to be "Highly gifted . . . she aspired to many things outside the parsonage of those sturdy but uneducated Norwegian farmers." Another described her as "All worldliness, indifference, defiance, intelligence, craving for fun, and in her way just as strong as he is." One biographer pointed out that "She had wealth of her own, was not too much interested in the work of the pastor, loved society, drama, entertainment, and chose to live in the grand style" Others presented a more spiritual side. Muus's wife, said one, "was much interested in the mission

"I got the impression she was in an unfortunate situation; this overly strict husband—she couldn't be herself."

work." In later years she was "Active in economic and religious affairs. . . . A devout Lutheran." Her own writings display a certain feistiness but also show a deep piety and a sophisticated understanding of theology.<sup>5</sup>

But the consensus revealed irreconcilable personalities. "I got the impression she was in an unfortunate situation; this overly strict husband—she couldn't be herself," said one. "It may well be that she was not by nature moulded to blend with the austere idealism of her husband."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps these differences would not have presented as great a problem in the familiar social structure of Norway. But in 1859, shortly after their marriage, the Muuses emigrated to

America, where their incompatibility was aggravated, and eventually the marriage ended.

**BERNT MUUS WAS ONE OF FIVE** aristocratic, university-trained Lutheran pastors who emigrated in the 1850s and became leaders of the Norwegian Synod in America. Others in the group were H. A. Preus, Jakob Aall Ottesen, U. V. Koren, and Laur. Larsen. They shared a theology that blended personal and devotional pietism with strict adherence to Biblical doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

The wives of two of these men, Elisabeth Koren and Linka Preus, left diaries covering their trip and early years in America. While they cannot speak for Oline as to her reactions, their circumstances were very similar. All three married in Norway and immediately set sail. Although they traveled first class, it was the steerage passengers who would comprise most of their society on the American frontier. Elisabeth Koren found the behavior of the peasant class curious. A few weeks after reaching her destination in Iowa, she remarked, "They are really nature's children, these farmers. There is nothing wrong with that; but it can irk one considerably." She added, "I cannot understand why there is not a spittoon, and a mat for wiping the feet. Apparently that is not done here."<sup>8</sup>

The introduction to frontier living conditions was discouraging to the young Norwegian brides. The Preuses had expected a parsonage to be ready for them, but when they arrived,



#### **From the Archives**

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found only a cellar filled with water. "It had a depressing effect on me—my first view of the parsonage, barely begun," said Linka. The Preuses had to crowd in with one of the farm families until their own home was built.

When the Muuses reached Rochester, Minnesota, they were met by a farmer in an oxcart. He took them to Goodhue County, where they were to be based at the Holden Lutheran congregation north of Kenyon. Like the Korens and Preuses, Bernt and Oline spent their first American winter living with a farm family; they were probably grateful to move into their own quarters the next year, even though in the 18-by-26-foot parsonage, "the snow would blow

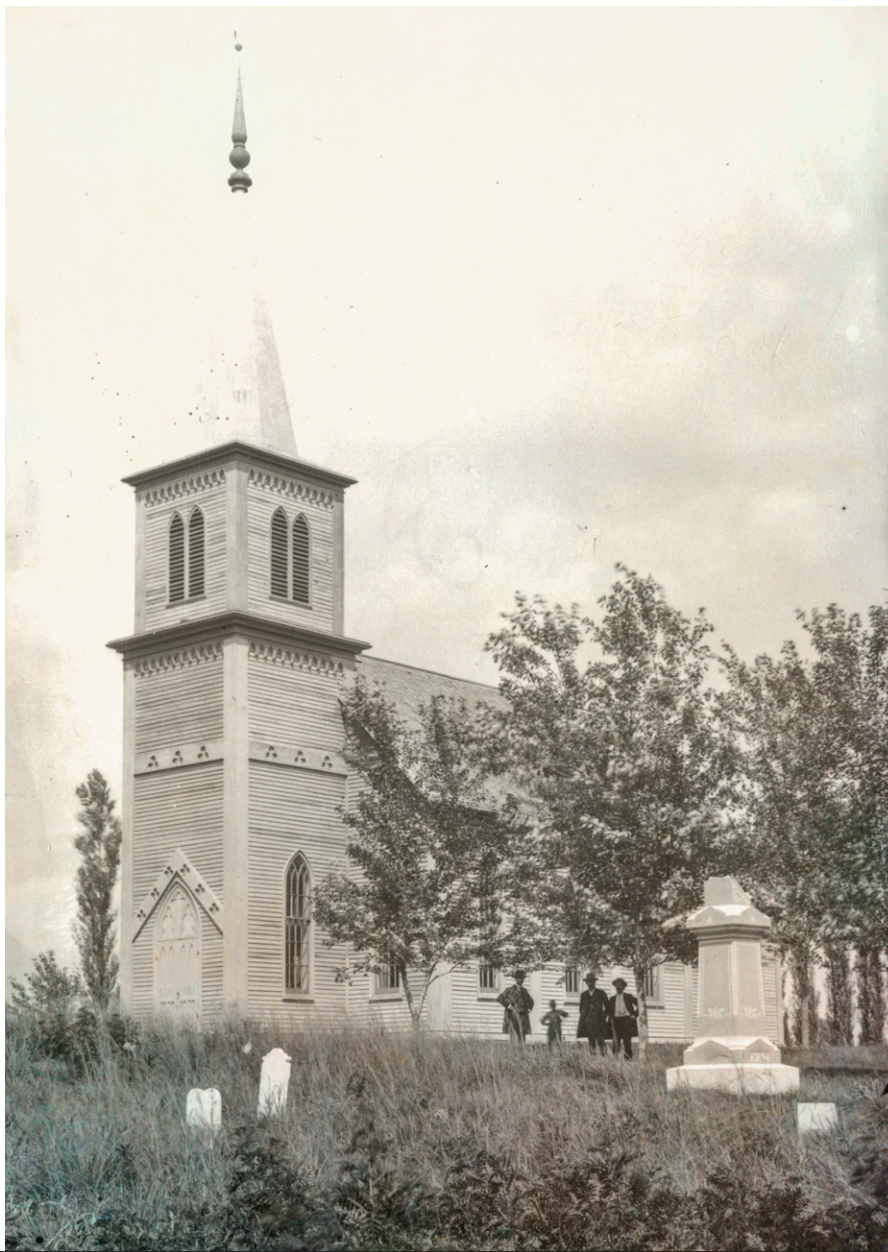
through the walls during the winter time." This building was expanded to accommodate a household which in the 1870s supported 15 people—the Muus children, hired girls, and farm workers. The early parsonages often served as community centers, providing space for choir practice, Ladies' Aid bazaars, and youth programs. The Muus parsonage also housed the early Holden Academy, forerunner of St. Olaf College in Northfield.<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning, Bernt was responsible for all the Norwegian Lutheran congregations in Minnesota, and he served them conscientiously. The first year, he traveled a total of 6,900 miles by ox team, horse, or on foot. The amazing statistics

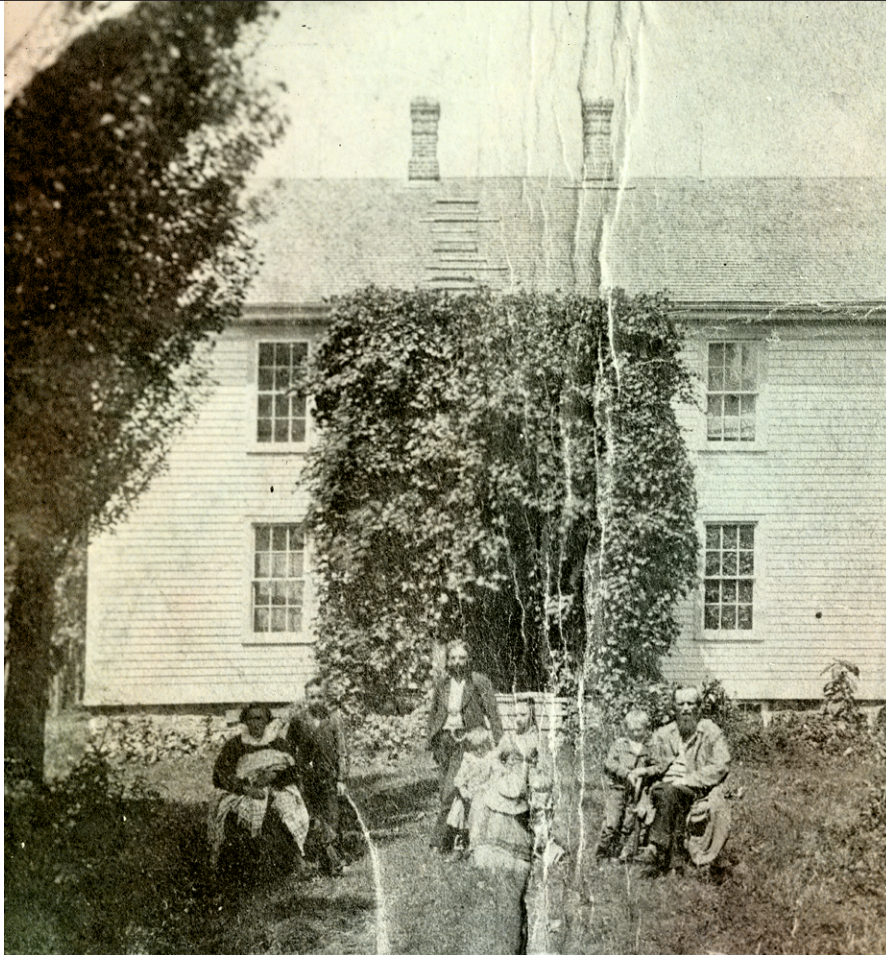
of his ministry display an unusual energy and organizational skill. He baptized 9,377 people, married 1,268, and buried 3,909 during his 40-year career. He was the main force behind the founding of St. Olaf College and an enthusiastic fundraiser for the cause of Christian education. He felt that a liberal arts education was important for girls as well as boys, and his daughter received the same private tutoring as his sons. At a time when other church groups were giving contributions counted in hundreds of dollars, Muus's congregations gave around \$10,000 to Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.<sup>10</sup>

For Oline, Bernt's work meant that she was often left home alone. It has been suggested that for frontier women, left alone to manage the homestead while their husbands served as soldiers or scouted for land farther west, the experience, rather than being overwhelming, was an empowering one. When a woman discovered she could indeed cope on her own, she gained confidence. If so, the situation must have been doubly galling for Oline when Bernt was at home, for she described him as a somewhat controlling personality. She had little contact with other women of her background and complained that "I have been to Decorah twice in 20 years, those are all my pleasure trips except once in a great while to the nearest towns."<sup>11</sup>

**THE ONLY ACCOUNT OF THE** events leading up to the lawsuit is Oline Muus's; Pastor Muus did not choose to discuss in public the charges made about his home life. In a long statement issued in 1880, Oline wrote about the first 20 years of her life at Holden.<sup>12</sup>



*The Holden church, 1891.*



The Muus family, in front of the Holden Parsonage, 1878; Oline is at left, holding new baby Harald, and Pastor Muus is shown at the far right with son Paul.

Although Bernt was generous with money for certain causes, Oline described a home situation of extreme frugality: she and the children had no furniture for storing their clothes, but had to keep them in a box out in one of the farm buildings. Her six-year-old son had to walk two miles to school in the winter in boots Oline said “should have been discarded long ago.”

The condition of the parsonage was another sore point. “At night, garments hanging on the wall froze stiff, and during the day when they thawed, water ran down the walls and also dripped from the ceiling onto my bed where I lay ill.” The family had only a box for a dining table for several years. When their clock broke, Bernt would not pay to have it fixed and told her that the sun was a good enough clock. He allowed only one room besides the kitchen to be used

in the winter in order to conserve wood. When the congregation offered to improve the house, Bernt would refuse their help. “Even a summer kitchen, which is something almost every farmer has, I was not allowed to have.” The frontier parsonages have been described as “little centers of culture and refinement,” and Oline was perhaps embarrassed to find that her house was in even worse shape than those of the farmers.<sup>13</sup>

Although Oline attributed her ill health to their living conditions, she said she had not experienced physical maltreatment in the form of slaps and beatings. But she said her moral and spiritual ill treatment had been as great as the physical. “My heart cringes within me when I think of the icy cold manner I have encountered, the miserliness I have had to fight, the indifference I’ve met.”<sup>14</sup>

Most of the Norwegian ministers’

families made a trip back home in the 1860s and 1870s. Anyone who needed a rest or more medical care than was offered on the frontier went to Norway. But when Oline wanted to go back to Norway for the sake of her health and to visit, Bernt told her that “both I and other wives who demanded such unreasonable things should be sent to [the insane asylum at] St. Peter. . . . But my husband could afford to go to Norway.” (He went around 1870.)<sup>15</sup>

Oline felt that Bernt was unfair when giving her spiritual counsel. “Many times I have been advised not to go to Communion for . . . the most trivial, everyday matters . . . one time because I didn’t appear at the church . . . as *Indgangskone* (refers to the rite of a new mother coming to church for the first time after the birth of a child) although I can name many pastors . . . who never require this ceremony of their wives. Likewise because occasionally I have been so unfortunate as to forget to empty water containers in the bedrooms at night and they froze and cracked, such disobedience could not be punished in a more considerate manner than to be refused Communion.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1877, Oline broke her leg when her team of horses bolted. She begged Bernt to get a doctor from Cannon Falls or Zumbrota, as Dr. Christian Gronvold, who lived next door, was away. But Bernt was reluctant to send for a doctor at night and thought they could wait until Dr. Gronvold returned. Oline recalled with some bitterness that Bernt told her to “let patience be your liniment” and that he would not buy her a crutch, but told the hired boy to cut a stick from the woods for her.

Oline had augmented her finances over the years by giving musical instruction, sewing and knitting, selling hops, and gathering herbs for medicine. She had brought from

Norway a supply of medicine and medical equipment from her brother-in-law, a doctor, from whom she had learned bloodletting. The Holden community called upon her for medical help, and she received money and gifts for her service. But after her leg was broken, Oline's health declined, and she was not able to earn any money on her own. She needed her husband's written permission to buy anything at the local store. Although her father's estate, probated in 1869 in Norway, had settled on her a legacy of about \$3,700, Bernt had taken charge of this money and had not allowed her to use it.

For both Bernt and Oline the years 1877 and 1878 were very stressful. Bernt was at the height of his professional prominence. He had direct charge of seven congregations and 18 parochial schools. The year 1877 saw intense debate over the merits of the common school for all children in a district versus the parochial school, which was vigorously promoted by Bernt. He was also deeply involved in the beginnings of St. Olaf College, about to move into its first permanent building. And a major theological controversy in the Norwegian Synod, in which the pastor was involved, was rending the synod apart.<sup>17</sup>

For Oline the cold, damp winter after her leg broke coincided with her sixth pregnancy, at age 39. The baby was born in the summer of 1878, and in the fall, Oline broke her leg again. In November, on the very day that Bernt was in Northfield dedicating St. Olaf's Old Main, their 12-year-old son died of typhus.<sup>18</sup>

These events appeared only to heighten the couple's estrangement. The conditions that Oline cited seemed to straddle a line between cruelty and austerity, conditions bearable to someone propelled by great purpose and vision, but beyond endurance for those accompanying the



*Birthplace of St. Olaf College, Holden Lutheran Church house, 1959 view.*

visionary. In the end, Oline found her patience exhausted and felt compelled "to free myself from such tyrannical narrow-mindedness such as I have endured for over twenty years."<sup>19</sup>

**BOTH OLINE AND BERNT** had taken pains to keep their differences from becoming known in the community, but these became public in December 1879, when Oline brought suit against Bernt in Goodhue County District Court to get the inheritance money from her father's estate. (Ironically, the pastor had always insisted that his parishioners come to him to adjudicate disputes among themselves, rather than resort to the civil courts.) Oline said her motive in bringing suit against Bernt was not to discredit him, but she sued because she needed the money and she thought he had not supported her or the children adequately. A central complaint in Oline's lawsuit was that she had in 1878 the same \$15 a month to supply her large household that she had ten years earlier. She felt she had a right to use the inheritance to alleviate her poor living conditions. "What wife, who has seen better days in her life, and who also owns several thousand dollars, should adjust to this?" she asked.

"Pardon me that I am convinced that I have a right to oppose such tyranny, such stinginess."<sup>20</sup>

Bernt replied in court that he had made no attempt to conceal the inheritance from Oline and that he acted in good faith, believing it to be his own property. The Muuses were still Norwegian citizens, and under Norwegian law, Bernt was well within his rights.

This Norwegian code of law had been in effect for 200 years and was not unusual by European standards. The English common law similarly contained the principle of "civil death" for married women. This meant that a married woman had no legal identity and could not sign contracts, own property, keep her own earnings, make a will, or have guardianship of her children. The law stated that "a married couple became one, that one being the husband."<sup>21</sup>

A Norwegian legal opinion issued in 1880 contained the remark that new legislation in this matter was pending. In America, a change had already taken place. The English common law had held in colonial America, but its provisions for married women's legal rights were constantly challenged as women became active in business and home-

steading. Territories on the western frontier began drafting law codes in preparation for statehood, and more rights for women were implemented. As early as 1851, women in Iowa had the right to control their property. A bill passed in New York in 1860 secured to married women "their own inheritance absolutely, to use, will, and dispose of as they see fit; to do business in their name, make contracts, sue and be sued." By 1900, three-fourths of the American states allowed a wife to own and control her separate property; in every state she could make a will; and in the great majority, she could make contracts and bring suit."<sup>22</sup>

The opinions given by Norwegian legal experts in the Muus case read like a feminist's nightmare. "The wife is . . . entirely unentitled to dispose of the joint estate." The husband "and only he at full liberty conducts the whole joint estate . . . without owing his wife any responsibility or account whatsoever." The wife's property "so to say, is swallowed up by that of the husband. . . . A married woman is an entirely minor and the husband is her entitled guardian." (A related provision, which may have suggested a possible remedy to some married women, stated that "a widow is always of age.")<sup>23</sup>

In Minnesota, by 1879, a married woman's inheritance became her separate property, and the issue in Oline's suit became one of jurisdiction. The judge ruled that since the Muuses had lived in Minnesota for 20 years, they were subject to Minnesota law. The inheritance money had arrived in two installments, and on the first payment, the statute of limitations had elapsed. But the judge ordered Bernt to pay Oline the amount of the second installment, about \$1,118. Both Bernt and Oline appealed the case to the Minnesota Supreme Court, which affirmed the original decision in May 1882.<sup>24</sup>

**WHILE THE CIVIL TRIAL** was under way, an equally involved process was running its course within the Holden church. Oline in this case became a defendant before the congregation in church discipline proceedings. In its best use, church discipline is an act of kindness toward an erring fellow church member to warn that person that he or she is walking a path leading away from God, a kind of "tough love" for the soul. Excommunication is used as a final step only after extensive private counseling has failed to discourage the offending behavior. Oline felt that in her case, however, the practice had been abused.

"I have experienced church discipline's preliminary torture a-plenty," she said, "because I found it necessary for the cold winter and the poor house to get a floor carpet in the living room and a stove in our bedroom

voted, with only one dissenting vote, to have Bernt continue as pastor until the matter could be resolved."<sup>26</sup>

Another meeting was called in March to decide whether Oline should be excommunicated for disobedience to her husband. She had prepared a long statement to be read at this meeting. In it, she detailed the privations she felt she had endured and the reasons she felt it necessary to file her lawsuit. She also questioned the church teaching that a wife must obey her husband at all times. "That I have taken a stand against the Synod's teaching of a wife's blind and absolute obedience and subjection, does not cause me any self-reproach," she stated. "If God had created woman to be in all things a blind tool and slave, he certainly would not have given her independent intellectual and spiritual abilities and powers."<sup>27</sup>

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. . . and dared to get this despite my husband's opposition." Bernt's role as pastor of the congregation was also called into question. Although in his court statement, Bernt had denied any inhuman treatment of his family, the allegations of neglect and cruelty in Oline's complaint had stirred up great interest. An estimated crowd of 1,000 people attended a meeting held in February 1880, called mainly to discuss whether Bernt should continue as pastor.<sup>25</sup>

At this meeting, Oline expressed her regret that the matter had to become public. She said that it was a last resort for her, because she had to have the money and that she had no intent to attack her husband's character as a minister. The congregation

The church took no action against Oline at this time, and the matter dragged on throughout the summer. An attempt was made to prove or disprove Oline's charges, with little success. A committee was appointed to meet privately with the Muuses. The newspapers, much to their chagrin, were not allowed to cover the activities of the committee or the congregational meeting at which it reported its findings. There is no account of anything further happening until 1882 because the church records up to then are lost. By that time, Oline was living in Minneapolis, and it was reported that her connection with the church had ceased as a result of a meeting of the Holden congregation. It seems likely that the

termination of her membership was by mutual consent.<sup>28</sup>

In February 1882, the congregation, described as being “very much divided,” voted “at the end of a long and tedious discussion” that Bernt should continue as minister by a vote of 73 to 37. Oline was not bitter toward the congregation. In a letter to a Norwegian-language periodical in the early 1900s, she wrote, “Holden Congregation was severely criticized by some who opposed my husband; this was most unjust; the congregation could not have acted differently under the circumstances. My husband was respected and loved by the congregation; it was natural that they would be on his side; they had no knowledge of the situation between the two of us.”<sup>29</sup>

And she was pragmatic about her treatment by the Norwegian Synod. “That I was so entirely trampled upon in the 80s is probably not so strange. My husband, who was at that time a bishop in the Synod, for the sake of the Synod had to be washed free of every blemish, and that it had to involve me was self-evident. I well understood this, and that is why I took the whole matter rather quietly; I thought time would be my best advocate—as it has turned out to be—and when I finally am at rest in the grave, the whole truth will emerge into the light of day.”

**THE CIVIL AND CHURCH** proceedings attracted widespread interest both in the immigrant and American press. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Norwegian dramatist, politician, and social critic, and Kristofer Janson, Norwegian author and later Unitarian minister, toured the United States in the period between 1879 and 1881, and each wrote about the Muus case.

Locally, Oline’s complaint was introduced to the public when her lawyer, Andreas Ueland of Minneapo-



LEFT: Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Norwegian dramatist, politician, and social critic. RIGHT: Kristofer Janson, Norwegian author and Unitarian minister. Both wrote about the Muus case.

lis, submitted it to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* on January 26, 1880. The newspapers in Red Wing, the Goodhue County seat, gave the case extensive coverage. A dominant theme was the perceived unwillingness of the Norwegian immigrants to become Americanized. “The relations existing between the native American citizens of this country, and the Norwegian immigrants are in a certain sense, exceedingly slight,” wrote one editor. “They hold aloof from the distinctive American element, and place themselves in a position of distrust.”<sup>30</sup>

The idea of the church as arbiter seemed to provoke particular resentment. “The Norwegian Lutheran church seems to aim at the introduction of the Ecclesiastical courts into this country where no such courts exist,” said one Red Wing editor. “It will be curious to see whether the church authorities will shield the criminal from the courts of the State on the plea that the church is the proper body in which to try him.”<sup>31</sup>

A hint of sarcasm comes through in another report. “Mrs. Muus had some day chanced to hear that accusation is not conviction and the

supreme law of the land allows the accused a full and fair trial before an impartial jury and she further seems to have got an idea that this rule ought to work in controversies of a religious cast.” Bernt’s failure to become an American citizen was also suspect. “Let no man, though he refuse for twenty years to become a citizen of the United States, attempt to obstruct the course of civil justice here, by vexatious church proceedings.”<sup>32</sup>

The press held the church, in particular the Norwegian Lutheran Synod, accountable for the immigrants’ isolationism. “No religious body has more consistently carried out these views [regarding its distrust of the American public education system] than the ‘Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Synod;’ and it has been able to do this, by restraining the intelligences of its followers and stunting their reasoning capacities.” Another paper described “the congregation . . . as a flock of subdued beings, having no principle, no will, excepting those of their master. The majority of them are empty bottles which are filled by Muus.”<sup>33</sup>

The charges of anti-Americanism had been exacerbated by the synod's stand on two earlier issues. Immediately following the Civil War, the synod refused to disavow a stand taken by the German Lutherans based in Missouri, namely, a statement that the Bible does not specifically forbid slavery. The synod's position, not surprisingly, was unpopular in the North.

The second issue dealt with education. In the 1870s, many of the synod's pastors felt that the American common school, taught by people of diverse or no religious persuasion, was inadequate training for Christian children. They proceeded to establish parochial schools, and Bernt Muus was among the most vigorous supporters of parochial education. Others felt the common school was necessary in forming a cohesive American society and called the support of religious schools "nothing less than treason."<sup>34</sup>

The transfer of the Lutheran church from Norway to America had necessitated a profound change in structure for the church. Under the Norwegian state church system, the

pastor was an appointed civil authority, whose responsibility it was to administer his local parish. When the pastors—for the most part, young and inexperienced—migrated to America, they were met with a situation unparalleled at home. No state church existed under the American system, and a free-church arrangement evolved in which the ultimate authority (subject to the Scriptures) rested with the voters of each congre-

gation, or with the synod, a voluntary confederation of congregations. This process was not always smooth. Some immigrants welcomed the vestiges of the old system and relied on the pastor not only in religious matters, but also for help in business matters, writing English, and arbitration of disputes. Others resented the role played by pastors such as Muus, who was referred to as a "czar."<sup>35</sup>

In family matters, both Janson and Bjørnson felt that the synod pastors imposed their views on husbandly authority to the detriment of the wife and children. Bjørnson commented on Oline's situation, "I have seen with regret how she is captured in the foolish dogma of these ignorant priests (which they call spiritual liberation!) and how she sprawls in the net without being able to emancipate herself from twenty years' imprisonment."<sup>36</sup>

## The press held the church accountable for the immigrants' isolationism.

The press reflected conflicting views of family duty. One newspaper correspondent supported the husband's responsibility for the behavior of his family: "there is no reason to think that he has not been led by a sense of his responsibility. . . . He is aiming at discipline and frugality, knowing, that if he succeeded in impressing these points upon the minds of those who are committed to his care, he would have done a great deal towards securing their welfare." Another writer advised that what's sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose. "Perhaps it is the rule that if a rich woman marries a less wealthy man, that she can collect her fortune back from him at any time, whether he has anything left to support his family or not. If that is the case, I suppose the old saying is true that 'a good rule works both ways,' so that a rich man who marries a poor woman, can at any time exclude her from being partner in his wealth and keep it all to himself."<sup>37</sup>

But others felt that Oline had received a poor shake. "[T]he wife and mother, who left home and native land at the behest of her priestly spouse, who, far from home



Oline's attorney, Andreas Ueland, in his law office, about 1905.



Pastor Bernt Muus, 1888.

and friends, stripped of the property which the love of a father had won for her, stands alone in her weakness, poverty and ill health, thinking herself compelled to appeal to the courts for that which [is protected by] the laws of the country in which she has lived, labored and borne her children."<sup>38</sup>

The controversy in the press was still going on 20 years later. A letter written by Oline to the Norwegian-American publication *Amerika* sometime after 1902 responded to an unnamed correspondent: "You deserve my heartiest and most sincere thanks for your defense of me in 'Amerika' against Gulbrandson's sharp and reckless judgment of me."<sup>39</sup>

**IN THE AFTERMATH** of the trial, Oline's status in her family was somewhat uncertain. She is listed as part of the household in the census taken in June 1880, but by July 28, a newspaper reported that she had gone to Minneapolis to stay. A letter written by Bjørnson to his wife in March 1881, expressed his opinion that it was important that Bernt and Oline be separated from each other,

implying that they were still together. By January 1882, two of her children had been put in the custody of a farm family some distance from the Muus home, and Oline moved away. She defended her decision to leave. "What meaning would there have been for me to sit in a room at the parsonage, when the housekeeping, the children and everything had been taken from me?"<sup>40</sup>

She received help from Georg Sverdrup and Sven Oftedal, professors at Augsburg Seminary in Minneapolis, operated by the Norwegian-Danish church group known as the Conference. She wrote that "I would have hardly escaped this prison had not Professors Sverdrup and Oftedal sent me money to come to Minneapolis, where they made provision for me until I finally got enough of the inheritance from my parents so that I could take care of myself without being a burden to anyone else."<sup>41</sup>

The appeal to the Minnesota Supreme Court was not decided until May 1882. Meanwhile, in January, Oline had filed in Hennepin County for a separation from Bernt and had asked for temporary alimony, which was denied. The separation proceedings continued until January 1883, when Oline was granted what Ueland called a limited divorce. She received \$2,500 as compensation for the money used by Bernt from her father's estate and \$150 a year for ten years. Bernt received custody of the minor children."<sup>42</sup>

At Holden, Bernt Muus remained as pastor and raised the children with the help of servants and friends. He arranged to have two of his sons stay with a family in Northfield while the boys attended St. Olaf Academy because "he felt they very much needed a mother's care." A son of this family described a visit to the Muus household, which included Bernt



Oline Muus in her later years.

and his children, a bachelor school-teacher, several women servants, a hired man who took care of the farm and animals, and a woodchopper who kept the parsonage and church supplied with fuel. "It was a rather quiet and sober group as all of them had great respect for the head of the household."<sup>43</sup>

But Bernt was also portrayed with warmth as he abandoned his study in the evenings to play chess with the boys and took them in the sleigh to buy them Christmas gifts at the country store. He seemed to have mellowed in the years after Oline left. He began to lose influence within the Norwegian Synod, and perhaps he gained in sympathy as he lost in power. A neighbor said "Muus was a man of sorrow in his later days. He was indeed a lonesome man. Few came to see him. Many were afraid of him."<sup>44</sup>

The whole Holden congregation turned out to say goodbye when Bernt returned to Norway for the last time in 1899. A stroke had ended his active ministry, and he was going to live with his daughter, who had married a Norwegian. Bernt could not speak, "but he pointed toward heaven as

to say, meet me there, tears running down his cheeks." Later, he was taken up and down the streets of Kenyon for a last look. Although hundreds of people had come to the depot, Bernt asked that they not come up to say goodbye, as it was too hard for him to part from them. Then he was helped onto the train and he departed for Norway, where he died the following spring. During that last year he told a friend, "All I have left of my theology is: I know I have a savior."<sup>45</sup>

**UNTIL 1888 OLINE LIVED** at various locations near Augsburg Seminary. She earned some money teaching music, and her name appeared as the accompanist to violinist Jacob Seeman, who played at a Norwegian Women's Society program featuring Kristofer Janson as the speaker. Aasta Hansteen, the noted Norwegian reformer and a pioneer in the women's movement in Norway, visited at Oline's residence during a Minnesota speaking tour.<sup>46</sup>

In 1896, Oline moved to Fruithurst, Alabama, where she bought and oper-

**"Muus was a man of sorrow in his later days. He was indeed a lonesome man. Few came to see him. Many were afraid of him."**

ated a hotel. The leg she had broken apparently never healed properly. She wrote in the early 1900s, "Since I am crippled for life, it is difficult for me to earn anything myself: by teaching music I have earned a little most of the time and have had some students (at 25 cents an hour), and together with the \$12 a month which I have been getting since 1902, I can manage without going into debt."<sup>47</sup>

Oline spent her last years crippled with rheumatism, confined mostly to her bed or wheelchair. She was cared for by her daughter, Birgitte Kluver. A woman whose family supplied milk to the household in Fruithurst around 1920 wrote that Oline "always seemed so happy and interested in people." The same woman described a gracious house with heavy draperies and beautiful furniture and a yard with plenty of seats and swings for people

to rest on. She also mentioned the frequent gatherings of Scandinavian people at the house.<sup>48</sup>

Oline's circumstances at some time seem to have deteriorated, for the mayor of Fruithurst, at an undetermined date, inserted a notice in a Norwegian-American newspaper, asking for donations of money for Oline. He called her a "noble and good-hearted old lady" and said that she was "very old, poor, and so rheumatic that she can barely get around." She died in Fruithurst on September 4, 1922.<sup>49</sup>

**OLINE'S ORIGINAL INCLINATION** had been to keep her problems to herself; she was moved by what she felt was economic necessity and unfair treatment to present her case in a public court. The disclosure of her private situation initiated a great deal of public debate, and while Oline was not a leader in the growing women's movement, her example must have been noted by other immigrant women caught between the Old World and the New.

After their case was heard judicially, theologically, and in the court of public opinion, the Muuses found differing solutions to the dilemma, he returning to his homeland, and she moving on to a new home in her adopted country. The conflict between Oline and Bernt Muus illuminates a dilemma faced by all immigrants: whether to adhere to the laws and traditions of the mother country or to conform to a new and sometimes alien society. ▣



Members of the St. Olaf band laying a wreath at the grave of Bernt Muus, college founder, Nidaros Cathedral cemetery, Trondheim, Norway, 1906.

## Notes

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7. Odd S. Lovoll, *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 99.
8. Here and below, see David T. Nelson, trans. and ed., *The Diary of Elisabeth Koren, 1853–1855* (Northfield: NAHA, 1955), 121–22, 130; Johan C. K. Preus and Diderikke M. Preus, eds., *Linka's Diary, On Land and Sea, 1845–1864* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1952), 192–94.
9. *Holden Through One Hundred Years*, 14–15; "Anonymous Sketch," 9, NAHA; Minnesota, manuscript census, 1875, Goodhue County, Wanamingo Township, p. 11; Mrs. R. O. Brandt, "Social Aspects of Prairie Pioneering: The Reminiscences of a Pioneer Pastor's Wife," and B. H. Narveson, "The Norwegian Lutheran Academies," both in *Norwegian-American Studies and Records* (Northfield: NAHA, 1933, 1944), 7:18 and 14:194–95.
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12. Here and below, see *Budstikken*, Mar. 23, 1880.
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27. *Argus*, Mar. 18, 1880; *Goodhue County (Red Wing) Republican*, June 3, 1880; *Budstikken*, Mar. 23, 1880.
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31. *Argus*, June 24, July 15, 1880.
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37. *Republican*, Feb. 5, 1880; *Advance*, Mar. 3, 1880.
38. *Advance*, Mar. 3, 1880.
39. Oline Muus to *Amerika*, Muus Papers, SOCA.
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