

Norwegian Surnames in America

Surnames During the Immigration Period

From 1825, the year of the first organized Norwegian immigration to the USA on the sloop *Restauration*, until the beginning of the next century, about 900,000 Norwegians immigrated to America. For most of them, the destination was the USA. During the 1800s, most Norwegians did not have a set surname. They had a given name (Anna, Knut), which was their actual name, and a patronymic, which consisted of the father's name and the suffix *son/sen* (English *son*) as in Knut *Andersen* or *dotter/datter* (English daughter) as in Anna *Larsdatter*. This name provided information as to whose daughter or son the person was. If the individual lived on a farm, the name of the farm was added to the two previous names, more like an address than a surname. In an official document the name might look like this: *Anna Larsdatter Helland*, i.e. *Anna* is the daughter of *Lars* and lives on the farm *Helland*.

Among the gentry during the 1800s, it had become customary to have a set surname. Gradually, society was becoming more organized with a growing bureaucracy, which put demands on a more dependable system for identifying its citizens, but it wasn't until 1923 that the Norwegian Parliament, *Stortinget*, passed a law requiring all Norwegians to take a set surname or family name. When emigrants were registered on departure from Norway, and on their entry into America, they needed to have a surname. The choice of name could vary a great deal within a family, and it could also be changed during the first decades in the new country.

Name Choices

In 1850 Tron Jacobsen and his wife Henrikke Henriksdatter and their five children, who lived on a farm named Buringrud, packed up their belongings and immigrated to Iowa. They had been living on Buringrud farm for about seven years. When they settled in America, they took the name *Jacobson* from Tron's patronymic Jacobsen. All of their children used Jacobson as a surname, but one of their grandchildren, Theodore Samuel Buringrud, took back the farm name and passed it on to his children.

In 1861 Marta Osmundsdatter and Hans Jonesen and their five children left the small farm named Kløv at Helland to start a new life in America. They had lived at Kløv for only nine years. When choosing a surname to use in the New Country, they landed on *Helland*, since they this was the area where they had lived, rather than Johnson (from Jonesen), which choice would have given them a very common surname in the USA. But the descendants of Synneva Knutsdatter and Jone Hadlesen, who left the area with their three children the same year, took the patronymic *Johnson* in America, based on the name of their father *Jone*.

In 1862 another family left the small farm Træ (Hellandstrædet) at Helland after having lived there for fifteen years: Siri Oddsdatter and Ola Paulsen with their six children. Ola had come to Helland from the Guggedal farm further up the valley. It is interesting that Ola chose the name *Guggedal* when he settled in America, a name that is almost unpronounceable in English. Guggedal was adapted to Gudgdal, but his sons chose the patronymic Olson/Oleson, based on the name of their father. In this family we thus find people using the farm name and the patronymic in two spelling variations.

During the 1880s the siblings Lena, Nils, and Tormod emigrated from Helland, where they had lived for a few years on the farm where their mother Ambjørg Tormodsatter grew up. Their father, Samson Nilsen, joined them in America in 1898. Samson was born on the Slogvik farm, and

when he emigrated, he was working at the copper mines at Karmøy. All of these family members took the name *Helland*, even though their connection to this farm was rather remote.

Farm Names

These examples illustrate several typical features of Norwegian immigrant names found in the USA. Many immigrants chose as a surname the name of the farm they had left (*Helland*), even though they might not have lived there more than a few years. Thus, they followed the same pattern as most Norwegians back home: the surnames of a little less than 70% of all Norwegians come from a farm name. Other immigrants chose a patronymic based on the name of their father, such as Johnson (from Jon), Nelson (from Nils), Olson (from Ola, Ole, or Olav). An example of how an immigrant might choose a name can be found in a passage from *The Fargo Forum* about Bjug Harstad from Valle in Setesdal:

Harstad walked the 25 miles to enroll. While at Luther College, President Lauritz Larsen asked Harstad his name. "Bjug Aanondson," he replied. "But what farm did you come from in Norway?" queried Larsen. He answered, "Harstad," and from then on his name was Bjug Harstad.

When asked about his name, Bjug gave his first name, which is his "real" name, and the patronymic, which tells the name of his father. He did not have a set surname at this time.

Norwegian farm names used as surnames have a built-in advantage for genealogists, as they contain specific geographical features. As is the case with the name *Helland*, some farm names will be found a good many places in Norway. But in other cases, there is only one place in Norway where you will find certain names. This is the case with *Buringrud*, *Fisketjøn* (*Fisketjon*), *Guggedal* (*Gudgdal*), *Hagland*, *Mundal* (*Mondale*), *Rokne* (*Rockne*), and *Tufteskog*. All of these farm names are in use as American surnames.

Tightly Knit Rural Communities

After Ireland, Norway is the country that sent the largest percentage of its population to America, and Norwegians were the largest group of immigrants that settled as farmers in the New Country. They settled in core agricultural states in the Midwest: North Dakota (30% of the population claim Norwegian roots), Minnesota (17.3%), South Dakota (15.3%), Wisconsin (8.5%), and Iowa (5.5%). More recent immigration accounts for the fact that Montana moved up to fourth place in the 2000 Census, with 10.6% of its citizens claiming Norwegian heritage. In Canada there are also significant Norwegian Canadian populations: Saskatchewan (7.6%), Alberta (4.9%), British Columbia (3.6%), and Manitoba (4.2%). See the map below for numbers of Norwegian Americans living in the various states and provinces.

In these states communities were established that could be termed rural ghettos of Norwegian immigrants. They organized Norwegian Lutheran churches, where services were held in Norwegian and youngsters were instructed in Norwegian in order to prepare them for confirmation. These communities were interconnected through the Norwegian language press, consisting of 280 newspapers and magazines. Reading circles encouraged people to read Norwegian novels in the original, drama groups performed plays in Norwegian, and a good many novels and non-fiction books were published in Norwegian. In many of these micro societies, people from the same valley or rural area in Norway made up the majority of the population, and an "unpronounceable" Norwegian farm name would therefore not present a problem, since people rarely ventured into the English speaking American macro society. This is probably the most important reason that many surnames of this type

have survived in America in their original form, rather than being adapted, changed, or exchanged for an English one.

Special Norwegian Letters

However, three letters did have to be changed because they are not found in the English alphabet. But a name thus adjusted would be recognizable even so.

Æ, æ: *Sæther* was written *Setter* or *Sather*, *Sæbø* became *Sabo(e)* or *Sebby*, *Skjæveland* became *Sheveland*, and *Sævareid* was written *Sevareid*.

Ø, ø: *Fisketjøn* became *Fisketjon*, *Jørstad* became *Jorstad*, *Kjølvik* was written *Colwick*, *Lepsø* became *Lepse*, *Løvoll* became *Lovoll*, *Rølvaag* became *Rolvaag*, *Søndenå* became *Sandeno*, *Ødegaard* became *Odegaard*, *Øfstedal* became *Oefstedal*, and *Østebø* was written *Ostebee*.

Å, å, Aa, aa: Since the letter *å* was not introduced to replace *aa* before 1917, it was rarely found in the spellings of immigrant surnames. Names such as *Bråstein* and *Haukås* were written *Braastein* and *Haukaas*. But names with double a would seem strange in English in any case. Thus, *Bråstein* was changed to *Brosten*, *Bråten* to *Braten*, *Fagerås* to *Fageros*, *Haukås* to *Hougas*, and *Nybråten* to *Nybroten*. Sometimes the double a was preserved: *Rølvaag* became *Rolvaag*, and *Ødegård* could be either *Odegard* or *Odegaard*. Names with the element *Ås* or *Aas* might be written *Oas*, *Aus* or *Awes*, *Åssved* as *Aaosved*, and *Åsheim* as *Oasheim*. This was to avoid unpleasant and comical associations with English “ass”.

Adapting Names for Pronunciation

The spelling of some names has undergone minor changes in order to approximate the Norwegian pronunciation in English. *Seim* was changed to *Sime*, *Eide* to *Eade*, *Li* and *Lie* to *Lee*, *Aas* to *Oas* (*Aus* has also been used), *Haug* and *Haugen* to *Houg*, *Hougen*, *Lunde* to *Lundy*, *Rud* or *Ruud* to *Rood* or *Rude*, *Vetthus* to *Vet(t)rus*, *Fidje* to *Fedde*, *Tjelle* to *Chally*, *Kleiveland* to *Cleveland*, *Hervik* to *Harwick*.

Shortened Names

Another change might be to shorten a name that was found too long: *Roverud* to *Rove*, *Værholm* to *Holm*, *Klevstadberget* to *Berg*, *Liabråten* to *Braten*, *Sigmundstad* to *Sigmond*.

Other Changes

In some cases it is difficult to see the original Norwegian farm name behind the English form of the name; *Chally* from *Tjelle*, *Tottle* from *Tøtland*, *Ostebee* from *Østebø*, *Eddy* from *Eide*, *Brown* from *Braut*, *Figland* from *Fidjeland*, and *Rosdail* from *Rossedal*.

There are also examples of names that have been translated or partly translated: *Østvold* becomes *Eastvold*, *Østerhus* becomes *Easthouse*, *Vetthus* or *Winterhus* becomes *Winterhouse*, *Askeland* becomes *Ashland*, *Haug* becomes *Hill*.

It is, however, a myth that many Norwegian immigrants were forced to Americanize their names by officials at Ellis Island in New York. This immigrant inspection station was not opened until 1892, after immigration from Norway had reached its peak in the 1880s, and many Norwegians disembarked in other ports, such as Boston and the Canadian cities St. John and Quebec.

The use of Norwegian farm names as surnames was so prevalent in the Norwegian American community that we even find examples of “homemade names” that look authentic, e.g. *Bortnem* instead of *Bjergene*.

Names Peculiar to Norway

Since very many Norwegian immigrants settled in rural communities together with friends and neighbors from back home, they could use a surname in a Norwegian form: *Buringrud, Elvrum, Ildjarnstad, Kaupang, Liabratén, Musgjerd*. All of these are in use as surnames in the USA. After 1900 Norwegian immigrants would be more inclined to keep such a surname in its original form, and only the special Norwegian letters æ, ø, and å would be changed. Bureaucracy is such in our day that a person's identity must be as unique and stable as possible, and these qualities will be necessary to get a passport and other I.D. cards. Generally speaking, the more recently an immigrant has come to America, the more likely it is that the surname has been kept as close to the original form as possible. In our day, detailed research will be necessary in order to determine whether a particular surname was imported to a dominantly Norwegian American rural community in the nineteenth century, or whether it dates from recent immigration.

Patronymic or Father's Name

Norwegian farm names will almost always point to a Norwegian background, but it is more difficult to determine the nationality of a patronymic. Many of the most frequent American patronymics are also common in the Norwegian American community, e.g. *Anderson* (from *Andersen* and other forms), *Johnson* (from *Johnsen* and other forms), *Thompson* (from *Torbjørnsen, Tormodsen*, and other forms).

The surnames *Lar(s)son, Nelson*, and *Ol(s)son* are the most common among Scandinavian Americans, but it is difficult to determine whether the bearer is of Norwegian, Danish, or Swedish descent. *Ol(s)son* may come from Swedish *Olsson* or an Americanized form of Norwegian or Danish *Olsen*. Names ending in *sson* will normally be originally Swedish, and names with the suffix *sen* (*Larsen, Nielsen, Nilsen, Olsen*) will point to a Norwegian or Danish background.

Behind common American patronymics may be the name of a Norwegian father. *Johnson* may come from *Jonsen, Johnsen, Jonesen, Johansen, or Johannesen*. *Thompson* may come from *Torsen, Torbjørnsen, or Torgersen*. Determining the nationality of a patronymic will generally give more uncertain results than in the case of a farm name. On the other hand, many of them point to a Scandinavian background.

Examples of Norwegian Immigrant Surnames in America

Agre: Peter, born 1949, recipient of Nobel Prize in chemistry in 2003. From the farm name Åkre in Rendalen in Hedmark.

Amble: Michele, born 1956, married name Bachmann. From a farm name in Kaupanger in Sogn.

Aus: Gunvald 1851-1950, engineer, founded the Gunvald Aus Company in New York City. From a farm name Ås many places.

Engen: Corey (Kåre) 1916-2006, cross country skier in Colorado. From a farm name Engen many places.

Evenstad: Linda, born 1942, known as Linda Evans, actress from Connecticut. From the farm name in Nes in Ringsaker in Hedmark.

Fisketjøn: Gary, born 1954, critic and publisher. From the farm name Fisketjørn in Suldal in Rogaland.

Harstad: Bjug 1848-1933, minister and educator, founded Pacific Lutheran University in 1890. From a farm name in Valle in Aust-Agder.

Haugen: Mary Margaret, state senator in Washington State. From a farm name Haugen many places.

Hemstad: Richard 1933-2005, politician in Washington State. From a farm name Hemstad in Stange in Hedmark.

Herseth: Stephanie, born 1970, politician from South Dakota. From a farm name Herset several places in Norway.

Hilton: Paris, born 1981, heiress, model, and socialite from New York City. From a farm name Hilton in Ullensaker in Akershus.

Hovde: Elizabeth, newspaper commentator in Oregon. From a farm name Hovde several places.

Hustvedt: Siri, born 1955, novelist from Minnesota. From a farm name Hustveit several places.

Klemesrud: Judy Lee 1939-85, journalist from Iowa. From a farm name Klemetsrud in Eastern Norway (Austlandet).

Loken: Kristanna, born 1979, actress from New York State. From a farm name Løken ca. 40 places.

Mondale: Walter, born 1928, politician from Minnesota, Vice-President of the USA 1977-81. From the farm name Mundal in Fjærland in Sogn.

Rockne: Knute 1888-1931, Norwegian American football player from Chicago. From the farm name Rokne at Voss in Hordaland.

Rove: Karl, born 1951, political advisor from Colorado. From the farm name Roverud near Halden in Østfold.

Sabo: Martin Olav, born 1938, politician from Minnesota. From a farm name Sæbø several places.

Sevareid: Eric 1912-92, television newsman from North Dakota. From the farm name Sævareid in Etne in Hordaland.

Sunde: Sarah Cameron, theatrical director in New York City. From a farm name Sunde ca. 25 places.

Tveit: Aaron, born 1984, actor from New York State. From a farm name Tveit several places.

Vangsnæs: Kirsten, born 1972, actress from California. From a farm name Vangsnæs in Vik in Sogn.

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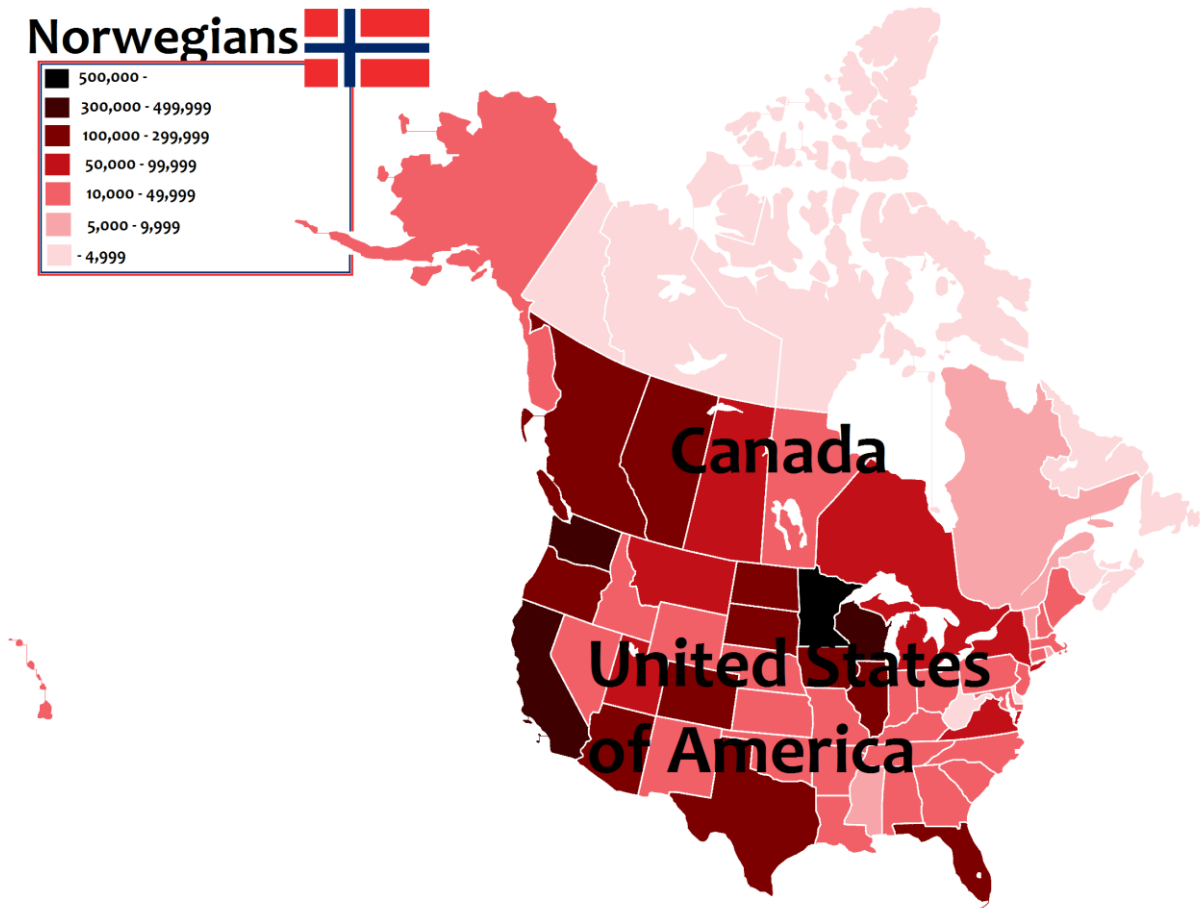
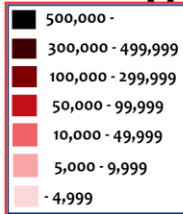
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Norwegians



Map from article "Norwegian Canadian" at Wikipedia:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norwegian_Canadian

Accessed 24.9.2011.