

The 1925 Norse-American Centennial: Embracing America, Performing Whiteness

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Abstract

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2025 represents the 200-year commemoration of the first major wave of Norwegian migration to the United States. In 1925, the Norse-American Centennial celebrated Norwegian migration to America, while simultaneously enabling members of the Norwegian American community to perform their identity as white Americans. By analyzing three essays from the Centennial's "Why We Celebrate" essay contest and President Calvin Coolidge's keynote speech, I highlight three themes that most perform this whiteness: 1) the Vikings, Leifr Eiríksson, and the discovery of America; 2) claims of Norwegian American ethnic superiority compared to other white ethnic groups; 3) and the prevalence and celebration of Americanness, or what it means to be an American, within the Norwegian American community.

Preface

In August 2022, I started research on the 1925 Norse-American Centennial as an undergraduate research intern for the Norwegian American Historical Association (NAHA), which was founded shortly after the Centennial. The bulk of the research task was to read through primary materials collected and digitized by NAHA in order to build a website highlighting key events and ideas from 1925. Throughout this month, I and another intern began to work through the thousands of digitized letters, correspondences, records, clippings, posters, and films in NAHA's archive, in addition to reading secondary scholarship focused on the Centennial. This month-long endeavor was a wonderful experience, and both the archival material and secondary scholarship, such as *Ethnicity on Parade* by April Schultz (1994) and the anthology *Nordic Whiteness and Migration to the United States* (2021), raised numerous questions for me about the 1925 Centennial, whiteness, and Norwegian American identity. These two books, in addition to other scholarly works, functioned as a guide to the source materials, and made it easier to understand the claims and actions of the Centennial committee, authors, and attendees. Questions around mythmaking, what constitutes Norwegian American identity, and what was actually being celebrated in 1925 stuck with me, particularly as I am a member of the Norwegian American community, and my family has proudly attended Sons of Norway meetings for years. Two months after my internship at NAHA, these questions re-appeared in another context, as I received the honor of presenting my research to Queen Sonja of Norway.¹ During my three-minute presentation, she asked me about the festivities taking place in 2025: "Hvordan skal vi feire i 2025?" [How will we celebrate in 2025?]. At the time, I did not have a solid response, and this question surrounding 2025

¹ Queen Sonja of Norway was on tour to promote the strong connections between Minnesota and Norway, including visiting St. Olaf College for the opening of their newly renovated archive. See also VanDerVeen, "Queen Sonja of Norway visits campus"

remains an open question throughout this thesis, as do the questions surrounding Norwegian American identity and whiteness.

Ever since my time as a research intern, cultural markers and monuments to the Norwegian American community continue to appear within my daily life. The archival collection at NAHA is important to the formation of Norwegian American identity, as it preserves and continues an ongoing memorialization of historic moments. References to a settler past are scattered everywhere around me, and throughout Seattle. For instance, I am currently enrolled in the Scandinavian Studies department at the University of Washington, Seattle, home to the 1925 Norse-American Centennial of the Pacific Northwest, which took place around three weeks after the initial Centennial celebration at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds. When visiting the National Nordic Museum in Seattle to conduct research for this project, I could not help but take note of The Sloop Tavern across the street, named after the type of ship that crossed the Atlantic in 1825, carrying the first major group of organized Norwegian settlers to the United States. Thirty minutes away by foot from the Nordic Museum stands the Leif Erikson statue in Ballard, continuing to look out over Puget Sound. The inscription at his feet reads, “Son of Iceland, Grandson of Norway, Ancestor of all who emigrated from Nordic lands,” which harkens to the mythologized past of Viking exploration and discovery, and connects these myths with the Norwegian American community. Another example is the Leif Erikson lodge in Ballard, which hosts a local Sons of Norway lodge, or the poster for *Reisen til Amerika* on the wall in my office, an exhibition at the South Street Seaport Museum in New York curated by *Aftenposten* between 1996 and 1997. This poster features four Norwegian immigrants, a mother and father with two children by their side, arriving in New York with suitcases and travel documents in their hands. And in my family’s private belongings, my grandfather cherished a 1925 Centennial medal,

which my father keeps in his collection of important items. My grandfather received this medal for his birthday in the early 2000s from a dear friend, as his friend wanted to share and celebrate my grandfather's Norwegian heritage. Because of their pervasiveness and their perceived innocent expressions of identity, these markers, ironically, help to maintain the obscurity of whiteness and white supremacy surrounding the history and present day of this ethnic group identity.

This project focuses on Norwegian American ethnic identity assimilating into a racialized white American identity. While there may be some resistance in the Norwegian American community to the ideas that these markers, and the ethnic identity that they symbolize, are connected with white supremacy and anything but innocent, various scholars have written on this connection. In *Writing Beyond Race* (2013), for example, bell hooks states:

White supremacist thinking continues to be the invisible and visible glue that keeps white folks connected irrespective of many other differences. Politically, white supremacist thinking was created to serve this purpose ... White folks from all places and classes, speaking all manner of languages, migrated here in the hopes of creating a better, more prosperous, freer life for themselves. They, for the most part, collectively, accepted a national identity based on the fictions of race and racism created by white supremacist thought and action. (3-4)

An ironic obscurity of whiteness is referenced in this quote, as hooks highlights the visible and invisible aspects of white supremacy and the duality of migration to the US. The irony stems from how apparent these ideas and examples are, despite white supremacy attempting to remain undetected. The goal of white supremacy is to maintain the invisible "glue" among the accepted

white community despite the differences among them². This is where my positionality as a member of the Norwegian American community comes into play, as I had never seriously considered how my ethnicity might be implicated in and actively constructed in relation to white supremacy until I spent time in the archive with this celebration. In the archive, the Centennial, and my positionality as a Norwegian American, became more complicated and less innocent. Significantly, hooks notes that different groups, such as Norwegian Americans, did not migrate because of any connection to national identity, but instead because they wanted a better life for themselves and their families, a seemingly innocent narrative. Yet, by proclaiming themselves to be Americans, they obtained access to the realm of national identity and white supremacy. This intersection is featured within the archive, as members attending the Centennial had a unique claim to a certain kind of whiteness that other non-white ethnic groups did not, yet they also had to exert a lot of effort to access this power.

The refusal to acknowledge, or ignorance towards, white supremacy is certainly noticeable within the markers of Norwegian American identity mentioned above. From myths of Viking descendancy and migration to the United States as a neutral, colonizing act, all of these material objects and the stories they inspire can be explained in the light of one important moment: the 1925 Norse-American Centennial. What was this event, why was it so crucial to the Norwegian American community, and what is the history of the group identity that we will be commemorating in 2025? Since my time as an intern at NAHA, one clear trend has emerged when thinking about and discussing the 1925 Centennial: the performance of whiteness.

Whiteness as a performance, that is the active bringing into being a white identity, was central to the Norwegian American community in 1925 in order to gain access to the realm of white

² See also Feagin, *The White Racial Frame*, Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, and Jackson, *Scandinavians in Chicago*.

American privilege. Although explicit references to the word white during the Centennial are scarce, there are implicit and obscured references to whiteness evident throughout the essays, speeches, and installations of the Centennial. Due to this performance of whiteness and obscured acceptance of white supremacy, it is difficult to celebrate Norwegian American identity without tacitly accepting and promoting these ideas.

Introduction

In 1825, Norwegian Quakers, led by Cleng Peerson, sailed from Norway on the *Restauration*, a small sloop, holding 52 passengers, as they crossed the Atlantic. The members of this ship were later called Sloopers, and are now regarded as starting the first major wave of migration from Norway to the United States. 100 years later, in 1925, at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds in the Twin Cities, Norwegian Americans and other festival-goers gathered from June 6th to June 9th to celebrate the 100 year anniversary of the crossing of the *Restauration*.³ This celebration, titled the Norse-American Centennial, was intended to celebrate the Sloopers, Norwegian Americans, and Norwegian American identity. Many different speeches, services, exhibits, and musical performances entertained celebration-goers, both in English and Norwegian. Speeches were given by prominent members of various Norwegian American institutions with various roles, such as scholars Ole Rølvaag, Rasmus B. Anderson, and Olaf Morgan Norlie, religious representatives like Bishop Johan Peter Lunde, and political representatives including Minnesota governor Theodore Christansen, Congressman O.J. Kvale, and Senator Peter Norbeck.⁴ A massive 1500 person pageant was performed, named “Pageant of the Northman,” which sought to retell the history of Norwegian immigration to the Midwest and to reenact the story of Colonel

³ While the largest celebration took place in Minnesota, there were also Centennial celebrations in other major U.S. cities, such as New York and Seattle.

⁴ See also the 1925 Norse-American Centennial Souvenir booklet for a detailed timeline of event speakers.

Hans Heg, a Norwegian American who fought in the Civil War. The keynote speech, and a major point of attraction, was not given by a member of the Norwegian American community, but rather by President Calvin Coolidge. While the Centennial was intended to be a celebration of the Sloopers and Norwegian American identity, the inclusion and prevalence of non-Norwegian American participants and a major focus on becoming Americans by the Norwegian American members meant that the 1925 Centennial also functioned as Norwegian American assimilation into the realm of American whiteness.

In this thesis, I argue that the Norwegian American community and members of the accepted white American community used the 1925 Centennial to welcome and affirm Norwegian American identity as a white identity by building on myths surrounding Norwegian colonization, ethnic superiority, and focusing on and celebrating Americanness. An example of this is present in the very title for the Centennial, where instead of using the term Norwegian, the organizers label the event as Norse-American. The use of Norse invokes a call to the past and the Vikings, in an attempt to appeal to the myth of a historically transcendent, enduring rather than performed, ethnic identity. In tandem, members of the already accepted white American community, represented by President Calvin Coolidge, used these myths to legitimize the Centennial performance, so that the Centennial functioned as a means of performing whiteness. By attending and speaking at the Centennial, President Coolidge and other white Americans legitimized the claim of Norwegian Americans on whiteness, which they believed to be a fundamental aspect of true American identity. Significant aspects of Norwegian American identity—the use of white supremacist language and mythmaking, settler colonialism and the continued legacy of colonization, and perceived superiority due to successful assimilation into a white American identity—rests on this foundation.

As the marker of 200 years approaches, questions around Norwegian American identity reemerge. The overarching question that motivates my research is: What strategies does the 1925 Norse-American Centennial essay contest and Coolidge's speech employ to consolidate this settler community as white Americans? To begin answering this question, I will review existing scholarly definitions of Norwegian American ethnic identity and its connection to whiteness. Significantly, many scholars of Norwegian American history and culture don't explicitly foreground the idea of whiteness, yet this idea is often implicit. The decision to explicitly address whiteness, or not, is significant because whiteness is a central factor to understanding current discourse around Norwegian American identity.

Next, I will analyze four essays written by prominent members of the Norwegian American community for the 1925 Centennial's 'Why We Celebrate' essay contest, and President Calvin Coolidge's keynote speech. In three subsections, my analysis will emphasize three key themes: 1) the Vikings, Leifr Eiríksson, and the discovery of America; 2) claims of Norwegian American ethnic superiority compared to other white ethnic groups; 3) and the prevalence and celebration of Americanness, or what it means to be an American, within the Norwegian American community. I argue that these are the most important themes for performing whiteness, as there are clear, repeated examples of them throughout the 1925 Centennial. That is through the active celebration and performance of the festival, the Norwegian American community was able to repeat and legitimize claims that allowed them to become white Americans.

Finally, I will conclude this thesis with a brief analysis of the current, ongoing commemorations of the 2025 Bicentennial, specifically analyzing the introduction page for *Crossings 200* and the affiliated conference *Crossings and Connections: Norwegian Migration to*

North America. I am doing this work to resist the implicitness and invisibility of whiteness that hooks highlights. Moreover, by connecting my historical analysis with the present moment, I critique the commemorative discourse repeating the same pitfalls as the 1925 Centennial, and to observe what themes have disappeared, been replaced, or still exist and implicitly support white supremacy in 2025.

Scholarship on the performance of a white Norwegian American identity

The main focus of my thesis stems from four books: April Schultz's *Ethnicity on Parade* (1994), Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995), Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet's *Destination Culture* (1998), and *Nordic Whiteness* (2021), edited by Jana Sverdljuk, Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, Erika K. Jackson, and Peter Kivisto. Each of these works explores a different idea relevant to my thesis: ethnic identity, the construction of whiteness, and Nordic whiteness and mythmaking, respectively. After I define how I am using my key terms, whiteness and performance, I will expand on why these sources matter for my thesis, how I intend to engage with them, and how my project will differ.

What is whiteness?

Throughout this thesis, I refer to the performance of whiteness during the 1925 Norse-American Centennial. In this section, I will define what I mean when I use these words, and how they affect my understanding of this topic. To start with the definition of whiteness, I will look at how the *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] defines whiteness, followed by a historical example from around the time of the 1925 Centennial in W.E.B. DuBois's *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1920), followed by a contemporary example from Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995), and ending with my own interpretation. The OED defines 'whiteness' as: "Light

skin-colour, esp. in a person of European origin or descent; the state or condition of being white ... conceived in terms of racial or cultural identity.” (Whiteness, def. 2c). While the OED definition does emphasize the existence of whiteness in European ethnic identities, such as Norwegian Americans, this is a very limited definition, leaving out the historical connotations of whiteness, white privilege and white supremacy. As seen in the preface, hooks highlights the maintenance of white supremacy as a key fixture of whiteness and creating a national identity, particularly among immigrant communities such as Norwegian Americans. Power dynamics and becoming white are important aspects of whiteness, including bringing together different nationalities and supporting the invisibility of white supremacy. Rather than focusing on the power of becoming or performing, the OED definition acts as an ahistorical definition that emphasizes phenotype and descent.

In *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* from 1920, W.E.B. DuBois interrogates questions of race, class, and gender in the US during the early twentieth century. In his second chapter, “The Souls of White Folk,” DuBois delves into the idea of whiteness in an attempt to understand it. He explicitly asks the question, ““But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?”” (34). Immediately after, his answer is, “Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!” (34). To DuBois, whiteness is ownership and control over everything, and the idea of control is central. Whiteness expands as far as it is allowed to by those who fall within its definition. In addition to this, DuBois argues that personal whiteness is a modern concept, not something from the ancient world. With the ability to desire whiteness, DuBois implies that an ethnic group can become white and enter into this realm of power, such as when an ethnic community seeks further recognition and support from the already accepted white American

community. This definition also shows that hooks's understanding of whiteness is not a new concept. Instead, the idea that whiteness is rooted in power and control is well-established. As this scholarship from DuBois was published five years before the Centennial, it acts as an account of one idea of whiteness around the same time period, and provides necessary historical context for the Centennial.

In *How the Irish Became White*, from 1995, Noel Ignatiev highlights the creation of a white American ethnic identity, albeit while focusing on another ethnic group, the Irish. In the introduction, Ignatiev asks, "What did it mean to the Irish to become white in America?" (2), to which he responds:

To both [Irish laborers and entrepreneurs] it meant that they were citizens of a democratic republic, with the right to elect and be elected, and to spend, without racially imposed restrictions, whatever money they managed to acquire. In becoming white, the Irish ceased to be green. (2)

According to Ignatiev, functioning as white Americans meant that the Irish were able to participate in an idealized version of freedom for them, where they could vote and be elected, and spend money where they chose to. In other words, as white Americans, they had privileges reserved only for Americans who were considered white. Yet in becoming white, the Irish also had to stop being considered Irish, and instead become Americans. Ignatiev's definition works in congruence with the definitions provided by DuBois and hooks. While DuBois focuses on power relations and control and hooks on the invisibility of white supremacy, Ignatiev includes privilege and loss of ethnic specificity as key aspects of whiteness. While some aspects of ethnic identity may have been preserved, the community could function and was accepted as being white Americans.

These definitions can function as a starting point for discussing whiteness during the 1925 Centennial. Based on my readings of DuBois, Ignatiev, and hooks, whiteness is the method and action, often implicit, of gaining access to white privilege and upholding white supremacy. Whiteness isn't simply something one inherits, rather it must be claimed and created.⁵ This idea of whiteness is seen through the 1925 Centennial, particularly in the celebration as the moment of performing the Norwegian American community as fully white Americans. Significantly, this idea of whiteness, white supremacy, and access to power was common in the early twentieth century. For example, one of the most influential texts around race at the time was Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* from 1916. Grant argues for the superiority of the 'Nordic' race, and the threat of immigration from outside of Northern Europe. His influence on discussions of race and ethnic identity were extremely popular, going so far as to influence public policy, such as the 1924 Immigration Act signed by President Calvin Coolidge.⁶ Reading through the essay contest and Coolidge's speech in particular, this idea of whiteness connected to privilege and supremacy is pertinent, and acts as the method for Norwegian Americans becoming the correct version of red, white, and blue.

What is performance?

Given this definition of whiteness, the construction and process of becoming white is important to discuss, especially because I argue the performance of whiteness was a major purpose and outcome of the Centennial. When I use performance, I mean the words and actions used to construct and proclaim Norwegian American identity as a white American identity throughout the 1925 Centennial. This understanding of performance is connected to J.L. Austin's definition

⁵ See also Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, and Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity."

⁶ See also Andersson and Magelssen, "Performing a Viking History of America," Brøndal, "'The Fairest among the So-Called White Races,'" and Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*.

of performativity: by saying that something is one way or another, it can become so, given the right conditions. In *How to Do Things With Words*, editors Urmson and Sbisà compile various lectures given by Austin, particularly on the subject of performativity. In “Lecture I.” Austin defines what it means to perform, and how one can perform with words:

I propose to call [these sentences or utterances] a performative sentence or a performative utterance, or, for short, ‘a performative.’ The term ‘performative’ will be used in a variety of cognate ways and constructions, much as the term ‘imperative’ is. The name is derived, of course, from ‘perform,’ the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something. (5)

By uttering something, such as statements like ‘I name’ or ‘I bet,’ one does not simply describe, but rather *does*. This kind of speech, or utterance, is seen throughout the Centennial’s essay contest and Coolidge’s speech. By proclaiming that Norwegian Americans are Americans, it is not simply describing the community as Americans, but rather performing the action, making them Americans. Through this performance, they become the “right” kind of Americans: they become white, in the sense defined by DuBois.

Another scholarly work that features an idea of performance, specifically through celebration, is *Destination Culture* (1998) by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. In *Destination Culture*, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explores the idea of performance through the ethnographic lens of ‘the festival’:

The festival, both as it occurs locally and as an anthology of ethnographic displays, can be seen as a form of environmental performance ... Arts festivals are generally less didactic and less textual [than museum exhibitions]. They depend more on performance,

reserving extended textual analysis, to the degree that it is offered, for the program booklet, in this way avoiding the awkwardness of discoursing about living people in their very presence ... Festivals are cultural performances par excellence. Their boundaries discernable in time and space, they are particularly amenable to encapsulation. (59, 61)

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is arguing that festivals are more invested in performance than museum exhibitions, where visitors can experience and interact with a concentrated cultural identity. Objects and exhibits within a museum are often stagnant, leading to a sense of preservation, while celebrating during a festival leads to a sense of activeness, as the culture is alive and able



Fig.1. President Calvin Coolidge speaking at the Centennial. "Norse-American Centennial film."

to be produced in the current moment.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also argues that textual elements are often limited in the performance of the festival, except for supplementary materials such as programs.

An example of the non-textual is Calvin Coolidge performing his speech live during

the Centennial (see fig. 1). While there is a silent

recording of his speech, this is also supplemented by the archived version of his speech, which allows for study after the initial performance. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's definition of the festival as an environmental performance holds true for the 1925 Norse-American Centennial. Norwegian Americans in 1925 were not a stagnant community or an object in a museum, they were an active community, performing the Centennial to celebrate Norwegian migration to the United States and to perform their own whiteness.⁷ The performativity of festivals allows for physical and

⁷ See also Andersson and Magelssen, "Performing a Viking History of America," and Hobsbawn and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

temporal boundaries to become focused, with a heightened emphasis on remembering 1825 and the crossing of the *Restoration*, and performing Norwegian American identity as white in 1925.

The 1925 Centennial highlights a moment in time in which festival-goers were able to interact with and visualize Norwegian American identity with non-textual features, such as exhibiting artifacts from the Norwegian American community or listening to speeches by important members, in addition to taking part in the event of the essay contest. By including definitions of performance from Austin and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, I aim to clarify why I approach Coolidge's speech and essays from the contest as textual traces of the performance of whiteness, or as archived materials, through which their contemporary thoughts and ideas about Norwegian Americanness can once again be brought to light.

What is Norwegian American ethnic identity?

Another important idea is the construction of a Norwegian American ethnic identity, as the idea of the Norwegian American community becoming white Americans requires this definition. While there are numerous scholars that have written about building European ethnic identities, Schultz's *Ethnicity on Parade* primarily focuses on the construction of Norwegian American ethnicity and argues that the Centennial provided a stage for debating Norwegian American identity between different factions to construct a unified identity.⁸ An example of this debate included whether to maintain more Norwegianness in their identity, such as primarily using the language in schools and at church, or accommodating the already accepted American community and use English. In her introduction, Schultz writes:

⁸ Some other important works on the construction of European ethnic identities include Bergland and Lahlum, *Norwegian American Women*, Blanck, *The Creation of an Ethnic Identity*, Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, and Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*.

Out of the great tensions, conflicts, and negotiations over what it meant to be a Norwegian American amidst the politics of Americanization and nativism, Centennial organizers and participants arbitrated a complex cultural identity ... From such a vantage point, ethnicity is not inherent but is constructed as a dialogue between immigrants and dominant society. It is not something to be preserved or lost but rather is a process of identification at a particular moment to cope with historical realities. (11-12)

Schultz uses the 1925 Centennial to argue that ethnicity is not innate, nor a fixed marker, but is instead constructed through compromise, identity markers, discussion, and claims. These claims are amply illustrated by the 1925 Centennial, as the organizers had to navigate a post-war America and the political sphere of identity, particularly a push towards Americanization and nativism, or an assimilation of different ethnic Americans into a singular entity of 'American'. During the aftermath of World War I, there was an intense focus throughout the United States placed on different ethnic identity groups to assimilate into this singular American identity.⁹ In response, a delicate balance between becoming Americans and celebrating Norwegian identity took place. Schultz's work argues for the construction and performance of Norwegian American identity, similarly to this thesis, and is a major inspiration, as her arguments center around identity as a process of becoming rather than a stagnant, immovable idea.

This argument is further supported by Odd Lovoll in his 1998 book *The Promise Fulfilled*, where he focuses on Norwegian American ethnic identity and its current state. When referring back to the Centennial and its aftermath, Lovoll states:

For Norwegian Americans, the Viking image and the president's testimonial to the virility and adventurous spirit of an ethnic group with ancient Norse roots, rural values, and good American ideals became significant components of a dynamic process of self-definition.

⁹ See also Chrislock, *Ethnicity Challenged*.

This creative and inventive process of defining the cultural and historical content of their ethnicity became essentially a question of both accommodation and resistance to assimilative forces in the historical context of the 1920s rather than a re-creation of an authentic Norwegian cultural heritage. (70)

Lovoll points to the importance of references to the Vikings and Coolidge's speech during the Centennial as integral parts to the construction of Norwegian American identity. The '... dynamic process of self-definition' refers to the debate about ethnic identity and what was being celebrated in 1925, and how the community sought to be considered true Americans, while simultaneously wanting to maintain their connection to Norway. Creating and inventing a Norwegian American ethnic identity was important to the community as it allowed them to navigate both worlds, acting as both patriotic Americans and maintaining connections to their home country. Yet given the need to occupy a space between "accommodation" and "assimilation," it was an invented idea of identity rather than being fully rooted in historical accuracy.

The debate surrounding, and fluidity of, Norwegian American identity, combined with a focus on the Centennial and the myths used to construct a defined Norwegian American identity, are a prevailing narrative throughout Schulz's and Lovoll's books. The claims Schultz and Lovoll make about myths surrounding the Vikings, discovery, and creation of a Norwegian American ethnic identity are similar to those I highlight in Calvin Coolidge's speech and the Centennial essay contest. *Ethnicity on Parade* and *The Promise Fulfilled* also provide a clear starting point for my analysis. While Schultz and Lovoll do a masterful job at illustrating the connection between the Centennial and building Norwegian American ethnic identity, they rarely make explicit connections between the construction of this identity to the idea of Nordic whiteness and

the ‘becoming’ of Norwegian Americans as white Americans. Despite limited explicit references to whiteness, Schultz’s and Lovoll’s books contain the building blocks for constructing an implicit whiteness, such as mentions of the Vikings and discovery, statements about Norwegian Americans claiming ethnic superiority, and emphases on Americanization and nativism taking root. By using their research as a starting point, I make explicit the connection between the clearly stated ideas of a constructed Norwegian American identity and the performance of whiteness.

One other important note on Norwegian American identity is the terminology used to name and refer to the community, particularly the ‘hyphen’. Terms naming racial and ethnic identity groups, such as Norwegian Americans, sometimes include a hyphen between the two words (e.g., Norwegian-Americans). The hyphen is a complex identity marker with a long history of discussion and debate. For example, before 1925, there was a strong anti-hyphenist and nativist movement in America, fueled largely by responses to World War I and anti-immigration sentiments. In order to prove their loyalty to America, ethnic groups, such as Norwegian Americans, had to assimilate into American culture.¹⁰ Yet the idea of including, or removing, the hyphen is not only situated in the past. In *AfroSwedish Places of Belonging*, for examples, Nana Osei-Kofi addresses the history of the hyphen in racial and ethnic identifiers as a tool to signify otherness, particularly when referring to people of African or Asian descent (14). When discussing her choice to use the term ‘AfroSwedish’ rather than Afro-Swedish, Osei-Kofi writes, “This choice rejects the relational tension and asymmetry of identification with Africanness vis-à-vis Swedishness that the use of the hyphen facilitates when translated as Afro-Swedish” (14). By removing the hyphen, and capitalizing both Afro and Swedish, Osei-Kofi places both

¹⁰ The anti-hyphenism movement during World War I and how this movement applies to the Norwegian American community are illustrated in Chrislock’s *Ethnicity Challenged*.

sides of AfroSwedish identity on equal footing. Inspired by Osei-Kofi's work, and refusing to use the hyphen due to its history of othering, I use the term Norwegian American to refer to this ethnic group throughout my thesis. Importantly, though, the risk of being othered is not the same for everyone, especially today, when no one would question the Americanness and whiteness of Norwegian Americans.

What is Nordic whiteness and mythmaking?

While Schultz and Lovoll cover the construction of a Norwegian American ethnic identity, and Ignatiev covers the idea of the Irish becoming a white ethnic identity, the 2022 anthology *Nordic Whiteness and Migration to the USA* highlights the construction of whiteness across migrants from all the Nordic countries, including Norway. By analyzing various myths surrounding Nordic Whiteness, this anthology interrogates and clarifies the integration and performance of whiteness and how the boundaries of whiteness among migrants from the Nordic countries are not set in stone. The six myths that *Nordic Whiteness* claims contributed to building a white identity concern, first:

the representation of Nordic immigration to the USA as a peaceful process of settlement on 'empty' American lands ... The *second* myth is about Nordic immigrants as a homogeneous group ... The *third* myth deals with the representation of Nordic immigrants as an inherently egalitarian people ... The *fourth* myth has to do with the representations of Nordic immigrants as people living in harmony with other groups ... The *fifth* myth has to do with the belief that Nordic immigrants easily assimilated into white American society ... The *sixth* myth is that there was political and ideological mutual understanding between Nordic and the white Anglo-Saxon elite. (6-10)

The editors and various contributors to this anthology deploy these six myths to understand, question, and explain the complexities and interconnectedness of whiteness to Nordic communities across the United States. These myths, and the debate surrounding them, seamlessly fit into the celebration and events of the 1925 Centennial, and are important steps in performing whiteness. While all six of these myths relate to this thesis, the least important myths are the second and fourth, as the other myths are directly connected to the ideas of the Vikings, Leifr Eiríksson, and discovery, claims of ethnic superiority, and Americanness. By invoking these myths through their rhetoric and actions, members of the Norwegian American community appealed to the accepted white American community to legitimize their claim of Norwegian American identity as a white American identity. In addition, the involvement of members of the white American community, such as President Calvin Coolidge, officiated the acceptance of Norwegian Americans into the official, implicit sphere of accepted white Americans.

By using the myths from *Nordic Whiteness* in congruence with the creation of a Norwegian American identity and the definition of performing whiteness, I argue that they can apply across the board and allow for analysis of important features absent in previously cited scholarship. The myths from *Nordic Whiteness* function as an example of contemporary discussion of Nordic ethnic identities, and a way to read archival material from historical events connected to the construction of Norwegian American identity. By focusing on aspects of these various works, I have reviewed relevant scholarship to connect the ideas of Norwegian American ethnic identity to the performance of whiteness, providing a basis for analyzing the 1925 Centennial.

Analysis: Speeches and Essays from the 1925 Centennial

The ideas of performance, Norwegian American ethnic identity, the construction of a white American ethnic identity, and myths surrounding Nordic whiteness all coalesce within the speeches, events, and celebration of the 1925 Norse-American Centennial. In order to illustrate the intersection between ethnic identity and the performance of whiteness, I will analyze two sets of primary sources from the Centennial: three essays from the 1925 Norse-American Centennial's "Why We Celebrate" essay contest, prominently featured in the Centennial's souvenir booklet, and the archived keynote speech from President Calvin Coolidge. Featuring influential members of the Norwegian American community, the "Why We Celebrate" essay contest acts as an example of the Norwegian American community seeking to gain access to white privilege and be considered white. As a representative of the accepted white American community, President Coolidge functioned as the agent performing and legitimizing Norwegian American entry into this community. In Coolidge's speech and the "Why We Celebrate" essay contest, three themes emerge that emphasize the performance of whiteness: the Vikings, Leifr Eiríksson, and the discovery of America; claims of Norwegian American ethnic superiority compared to other white ethnic groups; and the prevalence and celebration of Americanness within the Norwegian American community.

Vikings, Leifr Eiríksson, and the discovery of America

Myths surrounding Nordic whiteness and the Vikings were heavily present throughout the Centennial, and were featured in speeches from the Norwegian American community and President Calvin Coolidge. Both of these events, the essay contest and Coolidge's speech, work as a discussion and discourse, as the Norwegian American community used the Centennial to

appeal to the broader white American community, presenting these myths, and claiming themselves as white, while members of the accepted white American community, speaking from a position of privilege, legitimized these claims. The 1925 Centennial was advertised as a celebration of the Norwegian American community and 100 years of migration, and much of the promotional material for the event prominently featured the inclusion of President Coolidge as the keynote speaker. Including Coolidge as a speaker broadened the appeal of the event and helped to attract more people within and outside of the Norwegian American community to the event.

The claims of discovery and references to the Vikings during the Centennial first appear in the foreword by Gisle Bothne, the Centennial President. In his opening remarks, he proclaims that, “The ‘Sloopers’ are by no means, however, the first Norwegians that are recorded in American history. Pre-Columbian history carries records of their voyages of discovery and colonization ... All of this is embraced in the Norse chapter of American history, which will be passed in review at the Centennial celebration” (3). Bothne is setting up the connection between the Norwegian Americans at the 1925 Centennial celebration and the colonial history written in the Icelandic sagas, particularly *Grænlandiga Saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*. He is setting up the myths about Leifr Eiríksson and Vínland as fact rather than fiction, which he and other speakers during the Centennial can later refer back to when discussing 1825 and the first Norwegian colonists to arrive in the Americas. He writes as though Eiríksson’s expedition was established fact in 1925, although it would be decades until the settlement L’anse aux Meadows would be the only historically confirmed Viking settlement in the Americas. On this point, in *In Search of First Contact*, Annette Kolodny does not link this settlement with those in the Vínland sagas;

rather she approaches both through the lens of nineteenth century European ethnic imagining, such as featured in the essays by Anderson, Norlie, and Ager. Kolodny states:

Clearly, L'Anse aux Meadows was a landing site and a place for repairing ships, but it was not the Vinland where grapes grew wild. Perhaps it is best, therefore, to think of Vinland as what it became for Euro-Americans in the nineteenth century, that is, as a geographical site that was transfigured into an imagined landscape for the projection of dreams. (18)

Understanding the idea of Vínland as a myth built on historical texts is key to Kolodny's argument. The writers of the essay contest, and members of the Centennial as a whole (see fig. 2), used Vínland primarily to pursue their own dreams of becoming white Americans, and as a



Fig.2. Leif Erikson and the Restauration crossing the Atlantic. "Norse-American Centennial film."

text they can appropriate for their own mythmaking.

By connecting the settlers of 1000 with the colonizers of 1825 (see fig. 2), the idea of Norwegian American identity as a white identity rooted in colonialism has the basis to become "fact" because it implies rightful inhabitation based on the notion of ancient

occupation, similar to Dubois's definition of whiteness

as "forever and ever" ownership of the earth.

One of the most prominent members of Norwegian American academia and building the Leifr Eiríksson myth was Rasmus B. Anderson. According to the laudatory biography that precedes his Centennial essay, Anderson started his professional career at Albion Academy in Wisconsin, and served as the head of the University of Wisconsin- Madison's Scandinavian

studies department (47).¹¹ Anderson's most significant contribution to the creation of Norwegian American identity were his publications. His biography claims that he was the first Norwegian to publish a book in English in America, titled *America Not Discovered by Columbus* (1874) (47). In this work, Anderson proudly claims that Leifr Eiríksson, not Christopher Columbus, discovered America, and that the Vikings should be proclaimed as the true discoverers of America. In *Vikings across the Atlantic* (2013), Daron Olson explores myths about the Vikings and Norwegian identity, both in Norway and in America. He begins with Rudolf Keyser and P.A. Munch, two early Norwegian history professors based in Norway, before discussing Anderson's contribution:

As professor at the University of Wisconsin, Anderson was familiar with the Norwegian school and adopted the glorification of the Viking age to serve as the cornerstone of his synthetic ideology. To the ideas of Keyser and Munch, he added an American component to the story by promoting Leif Erikson as both a Norwegian and an American hero. His most inventive concept was the idea that American values owed their origins to the activities of the Norwegians. For the Norwegian historians, the American connection was virtually nonexistent. (Olson 44)

Anderson undertook the task of connecting the myth of Leifr Eiríksson to both Norwegian and American identities, to the Norwegian American community, and claimed this connection as the cornerstone of American democracy and freedom. Based upon these foundational texts and his position as a major influencer within the Norwegian American community, Anderson's contribution and inclusion to the Centennial's essay collection makes sense. Because of his writings and due to his position at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Anderson's myth about

¹¹ In the essay contest, Anderson is the only author to be introduced and celebrated with his biographical information.

Vikings and the discovery of America entered public consciousness and helped to legitimize Norwegian American identity as a white, American, historically transcendent immigrant identity. In building up this mythos, Anderson helped lay the foundation for Norwegian Americans to be recognized as officially and equally white Americans, an identity which came to the forefront during the Centennial.

In my introduction, I mentioned that there were few uses of the term white during the Centennial, yet Anderson's essay is one exception to this general trend of whiteness as race remaining implicit. While Anderson's essay is not long, only about half a page, it is filled with historical myths and identity-building narratives, similarly to his previous works. He starts his essay by highlighting the intertwinedness of the *Restoration* and America, specifically mentioning the importance of the day the ship departed Norway: July 4th, 1852. He follows this appeal with high praise for the Vikings and colonization:

The civilized history of America begins with the Norsemen. They were the first to venture out of sight of land in ships. They were the discoverers of pelagic navigation. The first white man to plant his feet on the American continent was Leif Erikson in the year 1000. The first white man who founded a settlement in America was Thorfin Karlsefne in the year 1007. The first white woman who came to this country was Thorfin's talented and enterprising wife, Gudrid. In the year 1008 she gave birth to a son in Vinland. The boy was called Snorre and he was the first person of European descent to first see the light of day in the New World. (47)

Acknowledgement and praise of Viking colonization is central to Anderson's Centennial essay. He re-introduces myth-making ideas from his previous writings that function to legitimize the idea of Norwegian American identity as a white colonial identity. Starting with the phrase, "the

civilized history of America,” Anderson sets up the importance of both the Centennial and of Norwegian Americans in America, as a people who manage to matter for close to 1,000 years of history, despite having arrived in the US only 100 years prior to this celebration. This line has dual purpose, for both explicitly arguing that the Vikings were the first to colonize the Americas and for giving Norwegian Americans a mythos to claim their own identity as justified colonists, or being the “first” to discover and settle the land. It also refuses to acknowledge or legitimize Indigenous sovereignty or existence in the Americas prior to colonization. This concept is clearly illustrated in Christopher Crocker’s article “What We Talk about When We Talk about Vinland,” where he dissects the claims of firstness and discovery in congruence with Indigenous erasure. In his article, Crocker states that:

... the supposed early Norse presence in what became America was primarily interpreted by American historians during this time in the context of and in order to uphold established discovery myths. By positioning the early Norse settlers as white ancestors of present-day Anglo-Americans, their brief occupation was seen as a precursor to the eventual so-called Manifest Destiny of European colonial expansion. (99)

Through the claims of discovery, historians such as Anderson could limit and erase contact with the Indigenous population while simultaneously connecting northern European migrants like Norwegian Americans with the history of America. In order to claim a historicity between the Vikings and Norwegian Americans, Anderson must establish a link between the myths of discovery and firstness.

To Anderson, the Vikings were the first worthy ethnic group in America, and he uses vivid language to prop up these myths. He follows up the first line by referring to the Vikings as, “... the first to venture out of sight of land...,” and “... the discoverers of pelagic navigation.”

These references to firstness and discovery are used to mythologize the Vikings and enhance Anderson's claim on a white identity marker. By claiming these titles, Anderson is proclaiming the Vikings, and thus Norwegian Americans, as early proponents of colonization. In the last segment of Anderson's quote, he ties the idea of the Vikings and colonization with whiteness, as he claims Leifr Eiríksson and Gudríð were the first white man and woman to step foot in America.¹² This is one of very few instances throughout the essay contest where the term white is explicitly stated. The direct reference to whiteness is important, as it helps Anderson to build his historical argument. By adding the word 'white' in front of Leifr Eiríksson and Gudríð, Anderson ahistoricizes the historical roots to allow legitimacy for the claim of Norwegian Americans as white Americans. Because of Anderson's perceived connection of Norwegian Americans to the myths of firstness and discovery of the Vikings, they are, to Anderson, legitimate white Americans.

In addition to this explicit mention of whiteness, Anderson also argues that without the early work of discovery, settlement, and conquest by the Vikings, the future nations of Europe would not have been able to become colonizing entities in 'the New World.' This phrase, which refers to the continent currently known as North America, refers back to the ideas of firstness and discovery, either by the Vikings or Columbus, and it simultaneously invokes a history of colonization and Indigenous erasure.¹³ Although these ideas were popular in 1925, and are still used outside of academic contexts, when reading the *Vínland sagas*, both the idea of discovery and colonization fall apart. In "A Global Race in the European Imaginary" (2018), Geraldine Heng writes about first contact and colonization in the *Vínland sagas*. She argues that there was

¹² See also Crocker, "The First White Mother."

¹³ Critiques of concepts like "The New World" and *terra nullis* as contributing to Indigenous erasure are frequent and well-established; see, for example, Deloria's, *Playing Indian*, Finbog's, "The Story of Terra Nullis," and Veracini's, "Settler Colonialism."

contact between the Viking settlers and the Indigenous populations, and that the Viking settlers chose to leave Vinland after failing in their attempt to become colonists. Heng writes, “Both the Vinland sagas and the historical record suggest in their own ways that the Native North Americans of the continent were more than a match for the northern European would-be colonists of Vinland” (277). According to Heng’s analysis of the Vinland sagas, there are both numerous instances of first contact, and it is clear that the Vikings wanted to colonize the New World, yet were not able to because of the strength of the Indigenous population. This interpretation refutes important aspects of the myths surrounding the Vikings that Anderson proposes, as he does not reference first contact with the Indigenous populations, instead using the terms discovery and the ‘New World.’ In addition, the Vikings and Leifr Eiríksson are referred to as colonizers, or that they have colonized the land. According to Heng, and as evidenced by the lack of permanent settlements after the Icelandic sagas, the Vikings are not colonists, but rather ‘would-be colonists’, who choose to abandon Vinland and return to Europe rather than elicit further conflict. Both of these points work to dispel the myth of the Vikings and discovery as perpetuated by Anderson and other members of the 1925 Centennial.

Anderson was an important figurehead in the Norwegian American academic community, and while he founded the myths of the Vikings and discovery, his essay is not alone in portraying these myths. Professor Olaf Morgan Norlie of Luther College submitted the essay ‘Why We Celebrate’ to the contest, receiving second place. Norlie sought to directly answer the question posed by the Centennial committee. While there is no grand biographical introduction like there is for Anderson’s essay, Norlie includes similar themes, bolstering the accolades of the Norwegian American community through invoking various myths of Nordic whiteness. Much of

Norlie's myth-building invokes the history of the Vikings and their supposed colonization, as he proudly proclaims:

The history of the Norwegians begins with the Viking Age, and during the Viking Age, which lasted 300 years, from 800 to 1100 A. D., the Norwegians were the most important and influential people in Europe. They established colonies to the east, the south and the west ... Norway did not keep these far-flung colonies as a colonial empire, but gave them to the nations of Europe; and wherever Norwegian colonists have gotten a footing, there they have practised what they learned of old Mother Norway ... 'The breath of life which the Vikings infused into history lives today in Norway, England and in America.' (Norlie 52)

Norlie proclaims the influences of the Vikings on the future, how their history of discovery and conquest led to the future expansion of European colonialism. This appeal to a mythic past seeks to establish a connection between the Norwegian American community in 1925 and the Vikings in the early 11th century by means of the Norse history of discovery and exploration. By starting with the phrase, "The history of the Norwegians begins with the Viking Age ...," Norlie is proclaiming that contemporary Norwegians in 1925, and by extension Norwegian Americans, are the immediate descendants of the Vikings and their claims of discovery. Yet Norlie also adds a layer of deniability to this colonialism, adding that while the Vikings were the most influential discoverers, they did not hold onto their colonial conquests and allowed the other European nations to stake a claim in colonization. By connecting Norwegian American identity to that of Viking history, Norlie uses the contemporary that the Vikings were white to further the idea of Norwegian Americans as white Americans while simultaneously distancing Norwegian Americans from the forced displacement of colonization after Columbus.¹⁴ He ends this section

¹⁴ See Deloria, *Playing Indian*.

by calling back to this idea, stating that the energy of the Vikings is embedded into the ideas and history of Norway, England, and America. The ending line summarizes the entire argument surrounding the Vikings, that according to Norlie, the people of Norway, England, and America are inextricably linked together and function as being practically the same in terms of status, thereby cementing the claim of Norwegian Americans on whiteness.

Myths surrounding the Vikings, Leifr Eiríksson, and discovery were important to the Norwegian American presenters at the Centennial, and these claims are also prevalent in President Calvin Coolidge's speech. By including similar myths to those featured throughout the essay contest, Coolidge confirms and legitimizes the other men's claims on the accepted white American community. In his speech, Coolidge proclaims, "These Norsemen whose beginnings in the United States we here celebrate have exercised a great influence upon our modern history and western civilization ... Lief the son of Erik, near 500 years before Columbus appears to have found the New World" (3). Coolidge plays on similar myths to those within the Norwegian community, specifically referring to Norwegian Americans as Norsemen and repeating the myth of Leifr Eiríksson discovering America. Coolidge provides support to the claims of Norwegian Americans as Americans, and he invokes the same myths as Anderson and Norlie in order to affirm their connection to the Vikings, firstness, and discovery. Coolidge follows up this first reference to Leifr Eiríksson, Columbus, and 'the New World' by stating:

These sons of Thor and Odin and the great free North shape themselves in the mind's eye as very princes of high and hardy adventures. From Norway to Iceland, from Iceland to Greenland, from Greenland to the mainland, step by step they worked their way across the north Atlantic ... One wonders whither these Northmen would turn for adventure if

the earth should ever be so completely charted that exploration offered no more challenges. (4)

In this quote, Coolidge continues the claims on discovery and the Vikings, even going so far as to label the Norwegian American community as descending from the Norse gods. He lays out the path from Norway to Iceland and Greenland, yet does not use the term American, instead using “the mainland” and “the north Atlantic.” These specific word choices are important, as they emphasize the importance of crossing and discovery in order to build a connection to America during 1925. Importantly, as I have already stated, there was no definitive archaeological evidence for the Vikings in America at the time of the Centennial. Through these praises and by invoking the same language as the essay contest authors, Coolidge affirms them as “truths” also held by the accepted white American community, thereby providing a legitimate claim that Norwegian Americans, through their Viking ancestors, discovered America. The myths of Leifr Eiriksson, the settlement of Vínland, and the discovery of America were a constant mythologizing force throughout the Centennial to proclaim Norwegian Americans as having a legitimate claim to becoming true Americans.

Ethnic Superiority

The second theme in my analysis of the Centennial performance of whiteness is claims on Norwegian American ethnic superiority. By proclaiming the Vikings and Leifr Eiriksson as the main proponents of discovery, Coolidge and the Centennial essay contest authors laid the groundwork for additional myths concerning other areas of life where Norwegian Americans were supposedly better than other ethnic identities, sometimes including even accepted white Americans. Additionally, the three essay contest authors used their academic authority to proclaim the greatness of Norwegians and Norwegian Americans, building upon myths and

half-truths. Using grandiose language, they often used the accepted white American community to compare and bolster their claims. Even Coolidge includes some claims connected to Norwegians being ethnically superior to other white Americans, although to a lesser extent, as his speech primarily focuses on supporting America as a whole. Both Coolidge and the essay authors often invoke highly racialized and white supremacist language, including the labels Norse, Anglo-Saxon, and Teutons, tapping into similar race sciences as featured in Madison Grant's book *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916).¹⁵ By invoking these claims of ethnic superiority, the essay writers and Coolidge sought to distinguish Norwegian Americans from other ethnic identity groups and claim superiority over immigrants not from northern Europe, Germany, or England.

Starting with Norlie, his essay is a clear example of attempting to access the sphere of



Fig. 3. Five hundred children dressed in the colors of the 'Norse' flag. "Norse-American Centennial film."

whiteness to gain white privilege, and playing on myths of white supremacy to do so.

According to his essay contest submission,

Norlie wrote the book *History of the*

Norwegian People in America (1925), in which

he documented the supposed history of

Norwegians, why they were superior to other

ethnic groups, and how they helped make America

great. Featured in his essay is a half page on why Norwegians are the most superior immigrants, even in some cases better than the accepted white American community. He includes paragraph after paragraph on why Norwegians are ethnographically, physically, intellectually, morally,

¹⁵ See also Brøndal, "'The Fairest among the So-Called White Races,'" Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, and Jackson, *Scandinavians in Chicago*.

religiously, socially, industrially, politically, linguistically, and culturally better (52). With all of these characteristics Norlie invokes half-truths, myths, and pseudoscience to falsely prove Norwegian American superiority. One example is his idea about why Norwegians are physically superior: “Physically, they are a hardy, vigorous and handsome race, with the bluest eyes and the lightest complexion of any people on earth, with the possible exception of the Swedes” (52). Norlie is claiming that Norwegians are physically the best because they are resilient and beautiful, with the evidence supporting this being that some Norwegians have blue eyes and very light skin color. Another example is his idea about why Norwegians are culturally superior, “Culturally, they have from the dawn of their history been far advanced in civilization, and have contributed lavishly to art, science and literature, affecting the spiritual uplift and the material progress of the world” (52). Similarly to his references to the Vikings, he attempts to connect Norwegians with history, particularly to claim them as always being the best. He does not provide substantial, tangible claims, rather relying on biased and racialized evidence. These ideas of racial and ethnic superiority are constant throughout Norlie’s list of characteristics; it is used to frame Norwegian identity as the pinnacle of human existence. His arguments are reminiscent of Madison Grant’s work, rooted in eugenics and white supremacist rhetoric in order to claim Nordic superiority.

This idea of Norwegian American identity as a white identity is further clarified later in Norlie’s essay, when he brings up a new argument linking the Anglo-Saxon elite to the Norwegian American community. In addition to his paragraphs dedicated to characteristics, Norlie explicitly states what he believes the Centennial should do for Norwegians and why they are better than other ethnic groups:

The fact is, that, in the past, and even at the present time, many of the so-called Americans, especially those of British ancestry, do not seem to know, or want to know, that Norwegians are of their race, or that they have as good a right to be called Americans as anybody else, or that they are entitled to the same opportunities as their Anglo-Saxon brothers. The Centennial ought to secure from these good neighbors a more just recognition of what a Norwegian really is. (54-55)

This is the true root of Norlie's argument and why he is writing for the essay contest. When one thinks of Norwegian American identity, Norlie wants everyone to think of them as just as good, if not superior, white Americans, instead of Norwegian Americans. This quote harkens back to Ignatiev's definition of whiteness because Norlie proclaims that Norwegian Americans should have the same opportunities and acknowledgement as other white Americans. Because of the long list of positive ethnic characteristics, and the alleged superiority of the Norwegian American community, Norlie is attempting to persuade the accepted white American community of their importance and why they should be considered legitimately white Americans. He plays on white supremacist and eugenicist rhetoric prevalent during the time, such as the works by Madison Grant, in order to argue for this ethnic superiority, even explicitly mentioning the word race. To Norlie, Norwegian Americans are on equal footing with Americans from England and should receive the same opportunities, or privileges, as them.

Like Norlie, Anderson includes references to ethnic superiority, albeit not to the same extent. While he does not have as long a list of why Norwegians are superior to everyone else, he does provide specific examples reminiscent of Norlie's many claims. Before his section on the Vikings, he states:

... it will appear that the Norwegian-Americans are distinguished for the earnestness of their religious worship, for their ardent advocacy of civil and religious liberty, and for their industry and enterprise. We find them associated with the most loyal and law abiding citizens, giving their best energy to culture, law, and order. These are traits that the Norwegians have inherited from their remote ancestors, and in connection with this centennial celebration we may take occasion to emphasize some of the services rendered by Norway to the world, and particularly to this country. (47)

Anderson states that Norwegian American's religiosity, their involvement and support of political endeavors, their industrial expertise, their morality, and their culture, are 'distinguished,' or better than other ethnic groups. These claims follow a similar path of provoking ethnic superiority as Norlie's listing of paragraphs, as both Anderson and Norlie are claiming that Norwegian Americans are better Christians than the average American, more supportive of the foundational belief in civil liberties, and that they work harder than anyone else in America. All of these half-truths and opinions build upon each other to present Norwegian Americans as the best versions of themselves, specifically appealing themselves and the Norwegian American community to the accepted white American community. They are appealing to accepted white Americans, like Calvin Coolidge, to legitimize their claims on whiteness and their desires that the Norwegian American community be deemed officially white because of their alleged superiority, doing so in English rather than Norwegian.¹⁶

Unlike the authors in the essay contest, Coolidge does not explicitly include claims of Norwegian superiority, instead invoking claims of American superiority and the importance of the Norwegian American community to the country's foundation. Despite this distinction,

¹⁶ On the importance of the loss of Norwegian language in America, see Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, and Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade*.

Coolidge still showers the Norwegian American community with praise and attributes to them many positive characteristics. Near the end of his speech, Coolidge states that:

These Northmen, one of whose anniversaries we are celebrating today, have from their first appearance on the margin of history been the children of freedom. Native to a rigorous climate and a none too productive soil, they have learned the necessity for hard work and careful management ... They have been rapidly amalgamated into the body of citizenship, contributing to it many of its best and most characteristic elements. (8)

Coolidge affirms and restates many of the half-truths introduced and celebrated by members of the Norwegian American community, including Anderson and Norlie. By prescribing democracy and productive labor as innate attributes of Norwegian Americans, Coolidge lends credibility to their claims on ethnic superiority, while simultaneously attaching this superiority to American identity. Norwegian Americans have been able to flourish because of America, and America has been able to flourish because of the superior Norwegian Americans. These half-truths assert themselves and persist throughout the essay contest and Coolidge's speech as a means to provide reasoning and support for the accepted white American community to include Norwegian Americans in their ranks. This is not the only instance of dual Norwegian and American superiority, as Coolidge ends his speech by proclaiming:

Our America with all that it represents of hope in the world is now and will be what you make it. Its institutions of religious liberty, of educational and economic opportunity, of constitutional rights, of the integrity of the law, are the most precious possessions of the human race... When I look upon you and realize what you are and what you have done, I know that in your hands our country is secure. You have laid up your treasure in what America represents, and there will your heart be also. You have given your pledge to

the Land of the Free. The pledge of the Norwegian people has never yet gone unredeemed. (9)

Coolidge directly defines what he considers to be the fundamental aspects of America, including God, democratic principles, morality, and justice, and ties them to the Norwegian American community and how they represent these ideals. They have answered America's call to freedom and helped bolster the country, at least in Coolidge's mind. Norwegian Americans represent the idealized version of Americans, as they are Christian, hard-working, believe in democracy, and hold the same, or similar enough, moral values to Coolidge and other white Americans. To this extent, Coolidge invokes claims of Norwegian American ethnic superiority similar to those of Anderson and Norlie.

Americanness

The third major example of performing Norwegian American identity as a white American identity is the constant references to America and Americanness, some examples of which we have already seen above. Throughout the souvenir booklet and the festival, appeals toward the confirmed American community never ceased, such as celebratory photos of President Coolidge or church services in both English and Norwegian. A major example of this idea is featured in the introductory welcome pages to the souvenir booklet, which begins with an image of a sloop crossing the water and a foreword from the Centennial President Professor Gisle Bothne. The page between this sloop and Bothne's foreword is a large photo of Abraham Lincoln, accompanied with the title 'The Typical American' (3). Initially, this image might appear out of place for the Norse-American Centennial booklet, a humorous edition, as there is no explicit reference to the photo, either as a footnote or in Bothne's foreword. In a closer reading, however, there is an appeal to the celebration of being recognized as American. Bothne states, "The

mother country sends to the celebration illustrious men and women to represent the government and their national institutions and organizations, in a spirit of goodwill and in true understanding of the part immigrants from Norway and their descendants have played in helping to build the American nation” (3). To Bothne, Norwegian Americans have played a fundamental role in the construction of America and should be treated as such. In order to illustrate this point, Bothne points to the representatives from Norway who came to celebrate the Norwegian Americans and their impact on America. In Bothne’s forward, the essay contest, and Coolidge’s speech, there is

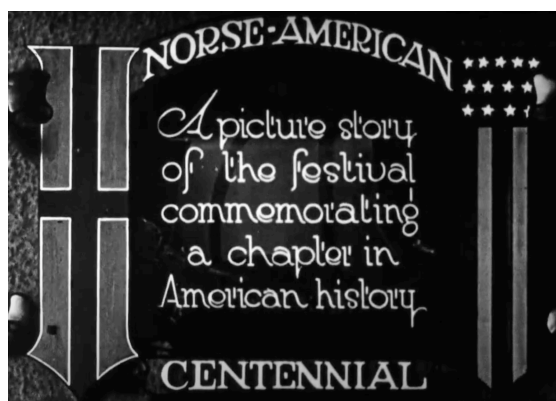


Fig. 4. Intro to the Centennial film reel.
"Norse-American Centennial film."

a prominent and celebratory Americanness, of becoming accepted Americans and being considered a part of the nation.¹⁷ By beginning the souvenir booklet with a large photo of Abraham Lincoln, the Centennial committee hopes to invoke a similar American pride when thinking about Norwegian Americans. The importance of making

America, and Norwegian Americans being an active part in this creation, is also a recurring theme in the appeal to Americanness.

This Americanness is seen throughout Norlie’s essay because during his four and a half pages he covers a broad range of topics connected to Norwegian American identity, often intrinsically connected with Nordic whiteness, depicting Norwegian Americans as pioneers responsible for the construction and settling of the land. By naming his essay after the contest, featuring a re-telling of the story of Norwegian migration, and describing a long list of

¹⁷ For further discussion on Americanness, see Lovoll, *The Promise of America* and *The Promise Fulfilled*, Øverland, *Immigrant Minds*, *American Identities*, and Thaler, *Norwegian Minds-American Dreams*.

praise-worthy traits of Norwegian Americans as discussed previously, Norlie is celebrating the American connection of Norwegian Americans. At the beginning of his essay, Norlie states:

In 1925 there will be held a Norwegian-American Centennial. No doubt the Norwegians of America will have commemorative celebrations here and there throughout the length and breadth of the United States and Canada ... The purpose of the Centennial is, in the first place, to commemorate the coming of the sloop "Restaurationen" ... The purpose of the Centennial is, in the second place, to pay fitting tribute to the Norwegian pioneers in America, the 750,000 who came across from Norway, besides their children born here, who have for a whole century toiled faithfully and done their share in the making of America. (51)

With this first claim, Norlie is re-stating a basic premise, that the Centennial is commemorating the *Restauration* and the first major wave of Norwegian migration to North America. The act of commemorating invokes the idea of remembering and celebrating the past. Norlie's second claim is far more impactful in celebrating Norwegian American identity, as he sends high praise to all the Norwegian pioneers in America, claiming that they have helped make America what it is. By using the label "... Norwegian pioneers in America..." in addition to the claim that Norwegian Americans have, "... toiled faithfully and done their share ...," Norlie attempts to connect the idea of ethnic identity with positive characteristics. He is planting the seeds of myth-making that will come to fruition later in his essay, and by starting with these high praises, he is appealing to the idea of whiteness. He is attempting to instill American pioneering, or rather a more positive version of colonization, as the roots of Norwegian American ethnic identity, and will show this later on with numerous examples of how Norwegian Americans are a part of making what exists, not only taking part in.

After these introductory claims, Norlie continues to make claims on a positive ethnic identity, claiming that many Norwegian Americans speak English, fear God, have settled the ‘wilderness,’ and are completely modest (51). He also proclaims that George Washington “... was proud of his Northern ancestry” (51). These claims are often illogical, and funny at times, but by uttering them, Norlie is attempting to give credibility to the idea that Norwegian Americans attending the Centennial are, and always have been, made of the right material to become white Americans. They speak the dominant language, have the correct religious beliefs, have taken part in the creation of the “New World,” and have been doing so since the Viking Age, as demonstrated previously.

This connection to pioneering and acting as correct Americans comes to fruition later in Norlie’s essay as he connects American support for immigration with immigrants’ support for America. In addition, he continues his praise for America and connects the best of the country with the Norwegian American community’s support. In the middle of his essay, he writes:

In times past much has been said of what America has done for the immigrant. America has done much for the immigrant. But there is also another side to this question. The immigrant has also done much for America. All the countries of the world have, for example, contributed to the citizenship of America ... For a century the Norwegians have been coming to America to make their home, and no people in the world in their former home have been so well prepared for American citizenship as have the Norwegians.

(Norlie 53, 55)

Norlie comments on the duality of America’s support for Norwegian Americans and vice versa, while reinforcing, similarly to his introductory remarks, the pioneering ability of Norwegian Americans and their connection: “...coming to America to make their home... .” He also makes a

direct appeal based on this creation as to why Norwegian Americans deserve their recognition as Americans, going so far as to label Norwegians as having the greatest claim of all ethnic identities to this label. To Norlie, Norwegians are “well prepared” to become Americans, and have access to the power and privilege of being considered such, or, in other terms, have access to the privileges of whiteness and maintenance of white supremacy. In his appeal to Americanness, he even includes a section of the song “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” stating before sharing the lyrics that, “The Pilgrim Fathers themselves were mainly of Norwegian descent, and the Norwegian-Americans have full right to sing” (Norlie 55). Proclaiming the Pilgrims and Norwegian Americans as being historically related and declaring Norwegian American’s right to sing a famous traditional American song speaks to the breadth and prominence of Norlie’s appeal to Americanness.

Norlie’s connection to Americanness primarily focuses on the pioneer, the making of the land, and readiness for citizenship, although these are not his only appeals. Although most of his essay focuses on myths surrounding the Vikings and the discovery of America, Anderson also celebrates the making of America by the Norwegian American community, similarly to Norlie. In relation to Norwegian American support to America, Anderson states that:

While celebrating this interesting and important event in our Norwegian-American history it is proper to review the many blessings of which the Norwegian immigrants have been the recipients in this land of liberty and opportunity on the one hand, and on the other, the services which this group of our population have rendered their adopted country. (47)

Anderson starts by highlighting the support shown by America to the Norwegian migrants and why they should be thankful for America. He follows this up with why America should be

thankful for Norwegian Americans and the services rendered by them, specifically the making of America, such as settling and farming the land, although this definition of making remains vague, and does not mention the forced removal of Indigenous groups from the land.¹⁸ This duality of America supporting Norwegian Americans and Norwegian Americans supporting America is the basis for an American identity that incorporates Norwegian Americans within itself. Norwegian Americans are true Americans because they have partaken in the past and present construction of America.

In addition to this construction, settling, and contribution to America, Anderson includes references to significant American documents and how they are relevant in celebrating Norwegian American identity. These references are used to reinforce the idea that freedom and democracy come from Viking culture, and by extension, from Norwegian American culture.

Near the end of his short essay, Anderson states:

Here the tree [of liberty] flourished and budded in the Magna Charta [sic] and in the Bill of Rights. The Puritans took with them scions of this tree of liberty in the Mayflower to Leif Erikson's former Vinland. Here is the best of soil and in the most favorable environment this old Norwegian tree of liberty developed the most beautiful full-blown flower in the Declaration of Independence and produced the ripest and sweetest fruit in our Constitution. (47)

In this quote, Anderson is attempting to connect the Pilgrims to the Vikings by playing up the historical roots of discovery for the already confirmed white Americans. Anderson also attests that Norwegian Americans are true Americans as through the Norwegian tree of liberty—referring to Vinland, the firstness of the Vikings, and the Viking culture of independence—

¹⁸ See *Nordic Whiteness and Migration to the USA* for further discussion of Indigenous erasure and “The Empty Land Myth.”

freedom and democracy were able to excel in America. He references the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution as fundamentally allowing the Norwegian tree of liberty to grow. Without the Vikings, and thus Norwegian Americans, the bastion of freedom and democracy would not have been able to flourish to the same degree. Anderson uses these grand gestures and metaphors to celebrate the achievements of America and to ensure that Norwegian Americans are included within the category of American, ending his essay with the line, “Surely, every descendant of the grand old Vikings has reason to be proud of the services rendered by them to the world and particularly to America” (47). Instead of using the term Norwegian American, he refers to the community as the “descendants of the grand old Vikings,” and follows this by stating that they should be celebrated due to the “services rendered” by them, referring back to the tree of liberty, the spreading of freedom and democracy, and the making of America. By intentionally including references to fundamental aspects of American history and ensuring that Norwegian Americans are a stated part of that history, Anderson is seeking to include and affirm the community as a part of the accepted white American community. Despite arriving at different points in time, Anderson connects the Vikings and Norwegians through historical bonds, and proclaiming that they share a connected common history, whether spiritually or politically.

The founding and creation of America is a central claim of the 1925 Centennial, and this claim is also featured in President Coolidge’s speech. As the duly elected president, Coolidge speaks as the representative for America. He holds the special ability to affirm the claims made throughout the Centennial that Norwegian Americans are, in fact, Americans. Throughout his speech, he constantly builds on this idea of America, also when mentioning his reasoning for attending:

One reason that moved me to accept the cordial invitations to come here to-day was the hope of directing some measure of national attention to the absorbingly interesting subject of the social backgrounds of our country ... Their lives [The unsung millions of plain people] have been replete with quiet, unpretentious, modest but none the less heroic virtues. From these has been composed the sum of that magnificent and wondrous adventure, the making of our own America. (Coolidge 2).

Coolidge explicitly states his reasoning for attending in that he wants to increase awareness of those who have built America. While not claiming that Norwegian Americans alone made America, Coolidge is proclaiming that they are a part of the creation. Through his attendance and speech, Coolidge fulfills his role of authenticator and legitimizer: Norwegian Americans, through their pioneering (or colonizing), labor, and continued support, are indeed true Americans.

With this recognition, Norwegian Americans can be considered legitimate white Americans and gain access to white privilege reserved for true white Americans. These claims are referenced again later in Coolidge's speech, as in a moment of proclamation, he re-affirms the Americanness of Norwegian Americans:

Although this movement of people originated in Norway, in its essence and its meaning it is peculiarly American. It has nothing about it of class or caste. It has no tinge of aristocracy. It was not produced through the leadership of some great figure. It is represented almost entirely by that stalwart strain who make the final decisions in this world, which we designate the common people. (8)

From Coolidge's perspective, the migration of Norwegian Americans represents what America is, and can become, due to the hard work of the community and their non-hierarchical

positioning. By including the label of ‘... the common people,’ Coolidge applies an egalitarian narrative, or an idea of American citizenship that not only includes Norwegian Americans, but fully embraces them. To be celebrated and affirmed as Americans by Coolidge is to have the doors opened to their claims on white Americanness and accessing the privileges therein. As Norwegian Americans embrace their role as members of the accepted white community, they can be considered ‘... peculiarly American,’ or in other words, legitimate.

Waldemar Ager’s “Omkring Hundreaarsfesten”

Waldemar Ager’s “Omkring Hundreaarsfesten” [Concerning the Centenary Celebration] is unique amongst the essays from the contest, as it was both the first-place recipient and the only essay to be written entirely in Norwegian. I have chosen to separate this essay from the rest of the essay contest and Coolidge’s speech because it functions differently than the rest and raises interesting counterclaims against the other works from the Centennial.¹⁹ The use of Norwegian rather than English is important not only due to its debated status in the Norwegian American community, but also to signify a difference in audience. While the essays in English were written for both a Norwegian American readership and the general public, Ager’s essay is for members of the Norwegian American community. The three claims for performing whiteness during the Centennial; the Vikings and discovery, ethnic superiority, and Americanness; are still sometimes present in Ager’s work. Unlike his essay contest counterparts, though, Ager is arguing not only in favor of Norwegian Americans becoming white Americans and assimilating, but also for the preservation of aspects of Norwegian identity. Ager’s essay starts with this paragraph:

¹⁹ In *Norwegian Minds-American Dreams*, Thaler dedicates a chapter to Ager and his activism within the Norwegian American community, and in *Ethnicity Challenged*, Chrislock discusses Ager’s stance during World War I and on hyphenism. Ager and Rasmus B. Anderson often debated one another in Norwegian American newspapers, as Ager was pro-German and pro-hyphen, while Anderson was pro-Allies and anti-hyphen. (31, 41-43).

Det væsentligste resultat av en stor og heldig festligholdelse for den norske indvandring vil naturlig bli det, at amerikanere av norsk avstamning vil føle sig mere hjemme, mere hjemstavsberettiget og mere paa like fot med efterkommerne av de angelsaksiske indvandrere, som i almindelighet og i en forskjellig grad fra andre ansees som amerikanere av et egte slag. (12)

[The most important result of a large and grand festival for the Norwegian immigrant will naturally be that Americans of Norwegian descent will feel more at home, more certain of their belonging, and more on equal footing with the Anglo-Saxon immigrants, who are generally and to a different degree from others regarded as true Americans.] (My translation, 12)

This introductory paragraph emphasizes the important aspect of the Centennial, that “...norske indvandring ...,” which he also labels as “... amerikanere av norsk avstaming...,” want reassurance of their place within America, and to be included as Americans, not solely as Norwegians. Ager specifically uses the word “hjemstavsberettiget,” a compound word including the place where one is born and raised (*hjemstavn*) and entitled to (*berettiget*). Ager’s essay is a direct appeal to this community to consider their position within America. He assures them that they deserve the same respect as the Anglo-Saxon community or other accepted white Americans. Ager’s focus is on the Norwegian American community as to why it is important for them to be considered true white Americans, or rather why they should want to be considered true Americans. Meanwhile, other authors during the Centennial, like Anderson and Norlie, engage primarily in mythmaking and appeal to the accepted white American community as to why Norwegian Americans are in fact true, white Americans.

In his appeal, Ager does not provide constant examples of Americanness within the

community, connecting the historical roots of America to Norwegian Americans, rather the opposite. Ager insists upon a distinction between American and Norwegian American history, going so far as to state:

Naar vore barn læser om kolonistenes kampe og frihetskriegen osv., saa vet de, eller burde vite, at deres forfædre ingen del hadde i de store forspil som gik forut for dannelsen av den amerikanske republik. Det er og blir for dem et fremmed folks historie, den de ikke kan tilegne sig som sin egen. (12)

[When our children read about the colonist's struggle and the war for freedom etc., then they know, or should know, that their forefathers had no part in the great prelude to the formation of the American republic. It is and remains for them a foreign people's history, one that they cannot claim as their own.] (My translation, 12)

Ager refers to the colonial period and the fight for freedom not to claim these struggles for the Norwegian American community. His argument is that Norwegian Americans had nothing to do with early colonization in the American republic and that the histories of Norwegian Americans and other European immigrants are distinct. Although he is referring to a later history, this contradicts claims on the Vikings and the discovery of America, as the main crux of mentioning Leifr Eiríksson and the Vikings was to obtain for Norwegian American the status of rightful 'discoverers' of America and thereby status as true Americans. Ager still concurs with Anderson, Norlie, and the other authors on the importance of being considered true Americans, but he invokes different myths regarding discovery and the right to the land.

Ager argues from a related yet distinct perspective from the other authors of the essay contest. His appeal to the community, why they should desire to become Americans, and how

they are different from other members of the accepted white American community on historical terms is clear. The struggles of Norwegian Americans at the time, both with migration in 1825 and the Centennial in 1925, were distinct from those of other ethnic identities, yet also maintained a historical connection to Norway, and other migrants. Despite these differences, Ager still makes claims on Americanness within his essay. He proclaims that:

Pilgrimsfædrenes og de første kolonisters historie avviker ikke meget fra deres, der kom hundrede eller to hundrede aar senere. Havet var like stort for hundred som for to eller tre hundrede aar siden, skibene ikke større, besværlighetene og farene ikke mindre ... Der utkrævedes omtrent nøiagtig de samme egenskaper for at rydde et hjem i Wisconsin for hundrede aar siden som i Massachusetts for to hundre aar siden. (12)

[The pilgrim fathers' and the first colonists' story does not differ greatly from the one belonging to those who came one hundred or two hundred years later. The ocean was just as big one hundred as it was two or three hundred years ago, the ships not bigger, the difficulties and the dangers not less ... Roughly the same characteristics are required to clear a homestead in Wisconsin a hundred years ago as in Massachusetts two hundred years ago.] (12, my translation)

Ager connects the two migration stories, the Pilgrims on the *Mayflower* and the Sloopers on the *Restauration*. All those who crossed the perilous oceans and built homes in America, whether that be in Wisconsin and Massachusetts, are Americans in Ager's eyes. By claiming that their migration stories are in many ways the same, the only difference being the timing, Ager is appealing to an idea of a "true" white American identity that includes Norwegian Americans within the definition. In addition to his references to the Pilgrims, Ager continues his appeal to the Norwegian American community. In his second to last paragraph, Ager refers back to the

community and to the certainty that they have mattered for the making of America. He states:

Den bedste betryggelse for vort land og alle land er agtelsen for fædrene enten det gaar hundred eller to hundred aar tilbage i tiden. Deri ligger ogsaa de bedste garantier for vor forfatning og vore institutioner. De som har lært at agte og hædre sine fædre vil ikke være med og rive ned, hvad fædrene med blod, sved og hjerne har bygget. Fædrenes flag blir deres flag og fædrenes tro deres. (13)

[The best safety for our country and all countries is the esteem for the forefathers whether it goes hundred or two hundred years back in time. Therein lies the greatest guarantees for our foundation and our institutions. Those that have learned to respect and honor their fathers shall not take part in tearing down what the fathers have built with blood, sweat, and brains. Their fathers' flag shall remain their flag and their father's faith theirs.] (13, my translation)

Ager is arguing for a continued support of Norwegian American identity, in the history of the migrants that crossed, and the institutions they have built, and to specifically respect and honor this legacy. He ends by stating that the flag of the Norwegian American community shall remain in their hearts, and that in assimilating into the accepted idea of a white American identity, they must also maintain their connection to Norway. In this quote, and throughout his entire essay, Ager is balancing the idea of Norwegian-ness and American-ness, supporting the idea of assimilation and joining the accepted American community while also fighting to preserve Norwegian heritage in terms of both language and memory.

Conclusion: The 2025 Bicentennial and *Crossings*

In 2025, there are plans for marking the 200-year anniversary of Norwegian migration to North America, specifically to commemorate the crossing in 1825 and to commemorate Norwegian

American identity in the United States. Throughout this thesis, I have focused on events in the past, looking back to the 1925 Centennial and placing the essay contest and Coolidge's speech in order to analyze them in the context of celebrating Norwegian American identity. From Calvin Coolidge's speech and the authors of the Centennial's "Why We Celebrate" essay contest, each recontextualizes, defines, and affirms Norwegian American identity as a white American identity. According to the essay contest performed as part of the 1925 Centennial to celebrate Norwegian American identity is to celebrate becoming white Americans. In order to become American, the Norwegian American community had to put on the performance of the 1925 Centennial and perform their whiteness through repetition of myths of the Vikings, claims of ethnic superiority, and praise for America, also by means of a contest of words.

2025 represents a major intersection of the past and the present. This year marks 200 years since the first major wave of Norwegian migration to North America, with events already underway. To name just a few, a recreation of the *Restauration* is planned, from Norway to New York in October 2025; Norwegian American institutions such as the Daughters of Norway and various *bygdelags* have festivities planned²⁰; and St. Olaf College, the Norwegian American Historical Association in the United States and in Norway, the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Washington D.C, the Sons of Norway, and many others have come together to form a website and plan a conference: *Crossings* and *Crossings and Connections*, respectively. On their website, *Crossings* offers a way to organize and advertise events connected with the Bicentennial. While there are not yet many performances to analyze in this thesis about the 2025 Bicentennial, as many activities have not happened yet, the welcome page for *Crossings* provides a look into how

²⁰ A *bygdelag* is a organization centered around a specific region of Norway. Various *bygdelags* formed across the United States, particularly after the Centennial, in order to connect Norwegian Americans from different areas of Norway with each other.

the current organizers view Norwegian American identity and what will be commemorated this year. The welcome page for *Crossings* invites the reader in with this introduction:

On July 4, 1825, a group of 52 Norwegians set sail on the ship *Restauration* to make the first organized migration from Norway to North America. Since that first voyage, about 900,000 people have followed, leaving their homes in search of opportunities and a better life. While many returned to Norway, most stayed and built a new home in the New World. Today nearly five million people in North America claim Norwegian ancestry.

Crossings commemorates 200 years of organized Norwegian migration to North America. It's a year to celebrate the strong ties between Norway, the United States, and Canada. It's an opportunity to remember what it means to take great risks and trade one home for another. And it's a chance to better understand the movement of peoples that continues worldwide today.

Whether or not you have Norwegian roots, we invite you to learn more and join us.

("Velkommen-Welcome")

This welcome paragraph on the *Crossings* website is used as an introduction to what this organization is, what it intends to celebrate and commemorate, and why this commemoration is important.²¹ It is structured into three sections: a short history about the Bicentennial, what *Crossings* is attempting to do, and an invitation.

Starting with the first section, the welcome immediately places the focus on 1825 and the crossing of the *Restauration*. While brief, this introduction to the ship places the focus on

²¹ One major event advertised by *Crossings* is the aforementioned conference, *Crossings and Connections*, hosted at St. Olaf College from June 18 through June 22, 2025.

crossing the Atlantic and migration from Norway to North America. Also included in the first paragraph is a highlighting of the importance and relevance of the event after 1825 and still today, which includes the 900,000 people who followed their lead and the five million people in North America who claim Norwegian ancestry. *Crossings* does not use the term Norwegian American for their ethnic group distinction, but rather “Norwegian ancestry,” a stark contrast from the 1925 Centennial. There is no particular mention of the Vikings, claims of ethnic superiority, or celebrating Americanness in the *Crossings* welcome, such as one finds throughout the 1925 Centennial. Rather, there is a focus on celebrating the connections between the United States, Canada, and Norway, in addition to the opportunity to better understand contemporary migration; that is, modern-day immigration both to Norway and to the United States. The idea of understanding and celebrating contemporary migration is quite distinct from the goals of the celebration in 1925. It distinguishes the current moment from the past, in part by focusing on commemoration over celebration.

In the first paragraph, the organizers refer to America as, “The New World.” This reference to the ‘New World’ is problematic in that it invokes the same history of Indigenous erasure as the 1925 Centennial, and its use calls back to myths of discovery and empty land used to justify settler colonialism. Because the word settler is not used, readers can focus on the more neutral and comfortable concept of immigration. Looking forward to the Bicentennial commemoration this year, it is imperative that we, or those presenting and adding to the commemoration during the 2025 Bicentennial, do not fall into repeating similar implicit ideas around Norwegian American identity and whiteness as were performed and supported during the 1925 Centennial, such as invoking the term “The New World.”

Crossings attempts to make explicitly clear that the goal of the Bicentennial is to commemorate the migration and Norwegian ancestry in North America, not to celebrate Norwegian American identity as white, or as representations as the “perfect” American. However, despite the attempts of the organizers to distance themselves from 1925 and the celebration of Norwegian American identity and whiteness, the performance of whiteness and Norwegian American identity linger, as seen by the reference to “The New World.” The establishment of a Norwegian American identity in the decades after the 1925 Centennial, by means of the keynote speech by Calvin Coolidge and the works by Rasmus B. Anderson, Waldemar Ager, and Olaf Morgan Norlie, still impacts the current understanding of Norwegian American identity and the commemoration of 200 years. For example, a week after presenting my research to Queen Sonja, I attended the NAHA board meeting with my poster, where various members could ask questions about my research. One of the members got upset, as the poster mentioned whiteness, and he would not condone Norwegian American identity having any connection with whiteness. Additionally, when I presented this thesis project at a gathering of the Daughters of Norway in Tacoma, one of the audience members became visibly upset, and commented that this was not whiteness, but rather heritage. These examples highlight the positive attachment people can have to what it means to be Norwegian American, and intrinsically connecting these ideas to identity. While there are many Norwegian Americans who don’t want to think about the connection between Norwegian descent and whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy, pointing it out and discussing what it means to be a member of this identity is important, and an absolute necessity for commemorating the 2025 Bicentennial. For example, by using the Vikings as a descriptor for Norwegian American characteristics, they

are repeating an idea brought into being in the 1920s rather than a longterm, continuous ethnic association.

Acknowledging current migration and using the term commemoration over celebration is a start towards reckoning with this contentious past in the present moment, but this alone doesn't go far enough to overcome the imbrication of whiteness and Norwegian American culture. In order to overcome and push back against the myths of the 1925 Centennial and ignorance concerning the performance of whiteness, we, the presenters, attendees, and Norwegian American community members, must actively discuss, engage, and fight against the often obscured and implicit nature of white supremacy and white privilege that has become entangled with Norwegian American identity and the 2025 Bicentennial commemoration.

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