

The Milwaukee Norwegians

Early history in Wisconsin

By 1840 there were already two major Norwegian communities settled in Wisconsin—at Rock Prairie and Jefferson Prairie, in Rock County. Norwegian immigrants to rural areas followed a distinct settlement pattern. One family would purchase land and develop a farm in an unsettled area. When members of that family began to make a profit off the land, they would purchase contiguous lands and invite other family members or past neighbors in Norway to join them. The pattern would continue with the new immigrants. This would guarantee that the Norwegians settling in rural areas were surrounded by people who spoke the same language, shared similar values, and maintained Norwegian traditions.

While most early Norwegian immigrants were farmers, others brought additional skills with them. In the United States, many worked in ship building, the fishing industry, glass blowing, carpentry, and in quarries as stone cutters.

Norwegians in Milwaukee

The settlement pattern discussed above was not possible in urban areas such as Milwaukee. To maintain their culture there, Norwegians would settle in the same or nearby neighborhoods and establish their own church (almost always Lutheran) where Norwegian was spoken. In Milwaukee, one large settlement built up around Our Savior's Lutheran Church, founded in 1858, at South Ninth and Scott streets on Milwaukee's Near South Side (today the church is located at 3022 West Wisconsin Avenue). Many residents of this neighborhood went on to become major leaders in the Norwegian ethnic community.

A distinct marker of the Nordic presence in Milwaukee is the bronze sculpture of Leif Erikson created by American sculptor Anne Whitney in 1887. It is located at the northern end of Juneau Park. On the sandstone base, the inscription reads, "Leif, the discoverer/son of Erik/who sailed from Iceland/and landed on this continent/A.D. 1000." In runic letters, it also reads, "Leif, son of Erik the Red."

sculpture of Leif Erikson



"Most Norwegians are very connected with their homeland still. So, in other words, their old culture values still are staying with them, whoever they are. I know many Norwegians who have lived there many years. When they retire here and they can see how well Norway has developed, and then they retire by going back home. They retire to Norway."

"My immigrant ancestors? You know Norwegians are well known for cutting stone. And, also, they were very good at climbing. They were the ones, when there were building tall buildings, they used to climb up there and stuff like that. That goes way back."

"I think that there were people that when they came over here, they learned to work in the factories and whatever skills because most of them that came over here came from rural communities and so their skill was farming and keeping the land, but they learned. . . When my spouse's mother came, she worked as a domestic. But I think there were many people, particularly women, who worked as domestics."

Quotes of Norwegian informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Cultural preservation

In both rural and urban areas, Wisconsin Norwegians founded organizations to ensure cultural preservation. The largest of these is the Sons of Norway, with a mission “to promote, preserve, and cherish a lasting appreciation of the heritage and culture of Norway and other Nordic countries while growing soundly as a fraternal benefit society and offering maximum benefits to its members.”

In Milwaukee, activities of the Sons of Norway, Fosselyngen Lodge #82, include *Syttende Mai* (Norwegian Independence Day) events, a Scandinavian Festival, Heritage Camp for youth, the *Lykkeringen* folk dancing group, public torsk and meatball suppers, family picnics, scholarships to families and members, a Christmas party, exhibits at the Holiday Folk Fair, a monthly member magazine, and newsletters.

Many of these had been held at the Norway House on West Oklahoma Avenue. However, the 8,100 square foot building was sold in 2018, and many of the activities are today held at diverse locations including Mount Hope Lutheran Church on Becher Street in West Allis.

“Well mine [leisure time activity] would be rosemaling. . . It's been thirty-six years. And that is my greatest pastime. . . In Norway there are different types of rosemaling according to the different districts in Norway. So, there's many different styles, but I would say five popular ones.”

“I guess the most important [ethnic practice] is the passing on of some of the special things and I guess what I brought from my own parents or the foods and the making of the foods. . . And I would think the passing on of the recipes of the foods.”

Quotes of Norwegian informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.



Norwegians in Milwaukee still enjoy traditional foods such as *lefse*, *lutefisk*, and *rommegrot*. Many also engage in art forms such as rosemaling and hardanger. Rosemaling is a style of painting on wood that uses geometric patterns, stylized flower ornamentation,

and scrollwork, often in flowing patterns. Hardanger is a form of embroidery often used on national costumes that is traditionally worked with white thread on white cloth, using counted thread and drawn thread work techniques.

Notable locals

A notable Norwegian intellectual with Milwaukee ties was Thorstein Veblen. Thorstein Veblen was a nationally renowned early sociologist and economist. Born the son of Norwegian parents who immigrated to Milwaukee in 1847, Veblen developed theories of business and the leisure class. His family's experience getting to America was traumatic. Parents Thomas Anderson and Kari Veblen endured a four and one-half month trip on the Atlantic, where the couple and their children protracted a disease. All the children died aboard the ship and Thorstein was born later in 1857 in Cato, Wisconsin. He became a leader of the institutional economics movement and is credited for the main technical principle used by institutional economists, known as the Veblenian dichotomy. It is a distinction between what Veblen called "institutions" and "technology."



Another notable was John Norquistⁱ. Born in New Jersey in 1949 of Norwegian and Swedish parents, Norquist and his family moved to Milwaukee where he became the city's 37th mayor between 1988 and 2003. He was mostly responsible for bringing design principles of the New Urbanism to Milwaukee that led to breakthrough developments downtown, in the Third Ward, and along

the banks of the Milwaukee River. Norquist's father, Reverend Ernest O. Norquist, was a founding member of the local Nordic Council that worked to consolidate the interests and activities of all Nordic countries.

Where to observe Norwegian culture

One of the best places to meet local Norwegians is at the Holiday Folk Fair International at the Expo Center at the Wisconsin State Fair Park in late November. Fosselyngen Lodge #82 sponsors a booth on Norwegian cultural practices. The *Lykkeringen* folk dancing group also performs.

Another place to observe Norwegians practicing their culture is on Leif Erikson Day, an annual observance on October 9th. In Milwaukee, Norwegians gather at the statue of Erikson in Juneau Park to commemorate the life of the Nordic explorer. The actual time of the commemoration often takes place on a weekend closest to the October 9th date. Check for exact dates at:

<http://www.sonsofnorway5.com/lodges/details/50-Fosselyngen-82>.

"I think the Hispanics in Milwaukee with all their festivals and parades—they're pretty much similar to Norwegians—you know, with the flag flying. And they got their day, Cinco de Mayo [as Norwegians have May 17, *Syttende Mai*]."

"We renovated the Leif Erikson statue in Solomon Juneau Park on the lake-front . . . it was so close to the cliff that they were afraid it was going to fall down. And every day on Leif Erickson Day, Norwegians think—they feel—that he discovered America. So that's why we go down there and we place a wreath on there."

Quotes of Norwegian informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Leif Erikson Day



Meet one of your current Norwegian neighbors


Marilee Gloe Runge

Like most Americans, Marilee Gloe Runge has a mixed ethnic background. She is approximately half Norwegian and half Czech. But unlike most Americans, Marilee takes pride in practicing both of her ethnic backgrounds. It starts with honoring her ancestors. "In my immediate family, I carry on the food, home and table traditions of my elders. This begins with the time-honored holiday traditions of setting our dining table with the best linens, china, crystal and holiday centerpieces. Each generation of women and children in my family participated; it taught each of us the meaning contained within the china design or woven linen patterns; it taught us where to place the silverware, which told our guests what to expect; and each holiday had its associated colors which carried their own meaning. All this conveyed to our guests how much we valued their presence at our table." Her family customs also include the kinds of food served and seasonal variations. "A Norwegian tradition we always follow is on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. We eat several pieces of herring on crackers for good luck in the year to come."



To say that Marilee Gloe Runge understands the value of ethnic traditions is a cosmic understatement. A professor of cultural anthropology at Milwaukee Lutheran College with a MA in Cultural Sustainability, she teaches courses in culture, anthropology, and food. And she lives what she teaches: "I make slow food; I passed along the family recipes to my children; I support organic farmers because my elders were farmers who practiced that tradition of raising healthy food." She's also worked beyond American soil by developing sustainability projects in Grenada. One example was an aquaponics training program.

In addition to her academic work, Marilee has a second career in the building/design field. She sees interior design as another component of culture: "Housing and how people live is a matter encompassing customs, climate, environmental materials, and culture." She has used her design skills in diverse contexts. "I was very blessed in my design work to have professionally developed community living spaces," she states. These have included a corporate museum, organic grocery, and designing and renovating churches.



Marilee's hobbies include avid reading, decorative painting, travel, and writing. She is married to a career Marine Corp veteran, who upon retirement became a special ed instructor. On evenings or weekends, hubby Chuck lives out his 20+ year passion as a baseball umpire and football ref. Marilee and Chuck have adult children living in four states and on one tropical island and seven grandchildren. "I feel my gift in life has been becoming a mother," she states, and then adds: "While getting those children out into the world as beautiful individuals that make a parent proud, I always found time to delve into volunteering along the way. Volunteering brings diversity, insight, friendships and humility to a person's soul. Being a member of a church community has graced my life."

ⁱ Photo attribution: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6d/John_Norquist_2008.jpg