



An Immigrant's Anguish:

The Americanization of Johanes Johansen

By Robert F. Zeidel

After nearly twenty years, John Holt poignantly remembered the day in 1869 when his younger self, then known as Johanes Johansen, left his native Norway on a journey that would take him to a new home in the timberlands of west-central Wisconsin. In an 1887 journal entry, but penned to “Dearest Mother,” Holt wrote as an anguished son asking for parental absolution: “Yes, dear Mother, if I could only reach you, I would hug you with tears of regret. You must excuse and forgive your ‘son of pain’ who so proudly left you to such sorrow on my departure.” He had not cried when they parted, but as he had passed through the nearby countryside,





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The dining room at August Mason's lumber camp in Barron County, Wisconsin, ca. 1895, was similar to many of the camps across the pinery, providing food for all the senses: the table settings reflect the food for the tongue, the diverse posters offer food for the eyes, and food for the ears is provided by the music from the loggers' violins. John Holt spent much of his career both cooking for and entertaining the men of Knapp, Stout & Company.



Courtesy of the author

*John J. Holt stands second from right, in a white apron, ca. 1878.
The lumber camp crews spent months together during the winters in the Northwoods.*

tears had streamed from his eyes. As he remembered it, he “nearly regretted having left,” and only the fear of cowardly shame kept him from turning back. The young traveler steadied himself with the thought that he would soon return, never thinking that after his departure, he would never see his family again. Had he known his fate, and that of his family, he “would probably not have left.” As it was, he kept his childhood home, “those happy times with you and father,” in his thoughts, dreams, and prayers.¹

John Holt’s story, specifically his moments of despair, disappointment, and anger, within the context of a generally bountiful and rewarding life, helps to elucidate the difficult, and often painful, side of American immigration. Although he enjoyed considerable economic and personal success, he simultaneously struggled with disconnection from his childhood family and homeland. Consistently—in letters, a diary, and a brief autobiography—he revealed his anguish, emotionally describing how deeply he missed “the blessed time” of his Norwegian youth. Even in his eighty-ninth year, when he could look back on fifty-five years of marriage, hold great-grandchildren in his arms, and contemplate the memories of a productive life, the feelings remained.²

No one individual embodies the “universal immigrant,” and indeed, among the millions of migrants, arriving at different times under varied circum-

stances, there has been a decided lack of commonality. Oscar Handlin, in his seminal book *The Uprooted*, interpreted the immigrant experience as being much like John Holt’s, one of “broken homes, interruptions of a familiar life, separation from known surroundings, the becoming a foreigner and ceasing to belong.” Other studies, especially those which emphasized community migration and an accompanying transplantation of cultures, have demonstrated less traumatic transitions. Both depictions are important in understanding the full spectrum of the American immigrant experience, but Holt’s transformation from Norwegian exile to established American exemplifies the uprooted type, reminding us that immigration is a matter of anxious separation, even as it offers the prospect for a new and better life.³

The writings which Holt used to convey his often painful metamorphosis typify a Norwegian-American tendency to use such prose for self-revelation, as “an element of confession,” thereby providing an intimate portrait of the migration experience. Unfortunately, Holt gives less insight than others into his motivations for recording his thoughts and memories, but similar immigrant authors have indicated almost a compulsion to verbalize their immigration and assimilation stories, to put the details of their lives down on paper so as to share them with others. This act of preservation and dissemination itself became part of the immigrant experience. In Holt’s case, his literary efforts seem to be an exercise in introspection, an

effort to try to understand the meaning of the events in his life, and also to share his story, and whatever lessons it may hold, with others. In one instance, he apologized for saying too much, as he “only intended to give a short biographical sketch of myself,” yet the more detailed account indicates an importance for the author and presumed interest on the part of reader. In some instances, his recollection of factual details seems confused, but not his accompanying emotions. Whether in his first letter home or his last biographical sketch, Holt emphasized his feelings of separation from his Norwegian roots.⁴

On January 2, 1850, John Holt began life as Johannes Johansen, the first of nine children born to Johannes and Sedsil [Olsdatter] Johansen. His birth, on Upper Riset Farm, at Furnes, Hedmark Fylke (county), Norway, coincided with the country’s demographic revolution. Between 1815 and 1865, Norway’s population almost doubled. A rising birthrate and dramatically declining death rate resulted in one of the highest growth rates in Europe. For a country that remained overwhelmingly rural (84 percent) but with only 3 percent of its land tillable, and that lacked significant industrialization, the burgeoning population began to put a strain on resources and economic opportunity. While true mass emigration did not begin until the 1860s, demographic changes did provide a classic push factor for those pondering their future.⁵

The elder Johansen’s frequent moves and identification as a furrier, a pre-industrial artisan, indicates that the family belonged to the growing number of *husmenner*, or cotters, “an intermediate rural class,” of agricultural workers without their own land. Other evidence indicates that the Johansens were tenant farmers, a more independent class that occupied and worked land belonging to others. The 1865 Norwegian Census lists the family as *huusmand med jord*—tenant with land, meaning that the family



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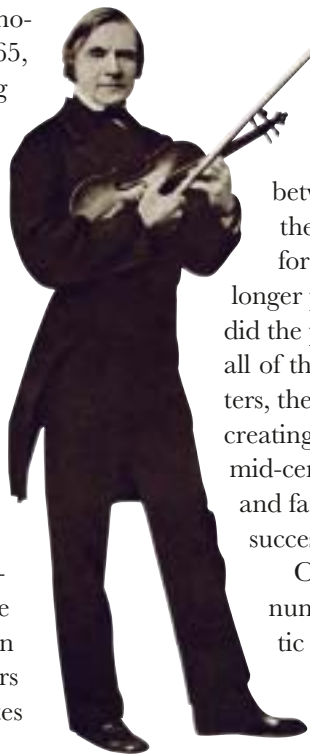
The railroad brought European immigrants to the Midwest, and it brought many Norwegians to the Northwoods of Wisconsin, including Johannes Johansen, the future John Holt. This locomotive is from the first train into Eau Claire, although the photo itself was taken several years later.

members were tenants to whom the owner granted a small allotment which they worked for their own profit. In any case, it is doubtful that the family owned its longtime home, later described by Holt as a small farm in Hedmark County, a largely forested area of east-central Norway. Since it was the child’s third home in his first two years, it is unlikely that the Johansens were *bonder*, or small landholders. There is no indication that the younger Johannes expected to inherit

family land, through the practice of *aett*, or lineal descent to the oldest son. Instead, following his confirmation at about age fifteen, Johannes briefly practiced his father’s profession, before the elder sent him to Vang, so that he could learn the more profitable trade of tanning.⁶ Uncertainty characterized the life of the Johansens and other mid-nineteenth century Norwegian cotters. Despite the country’s population growth and land use limitations, it still could provide all of its inhabitants with some manner of economic opportunity, although more people did strain the social and cultural fabric. Division increased between the elite landed *bonder* and landless cotters. In the early nineteenth century, ample work opportunities for the cotters resulted in earlier marriage, and with longer periods of marital fertility, family size also rose. So too did the practice of “night courting,” or premarital sex, but not all of those which resulted in conception led to nuptials. Cotters, then, had more children, both legitimate and illegitimate, creating complications concerning their economic future. By mid-century, prudence suggested that they put off marriage and family until they had achieved some degree of economic success, but what if that day never came?

Other forces also shook the coter world. The growing numbers of those born out of wedlock produced a pietistic backlash, in the form of moral condemnation, which pressured young men and women to follow socially acceptable behavior.⁷ Young Johannes, for

example, saw “the importance which a good and well-run society had on our lives,” and though he made this observation in comparison to the “coarse, raw” life of an American lumber camp, he elsewhere emphasized the impor-



WHS Name File

Ole Bull, world-famous violinist and Norwegian-American icon, was connected to Wisconsin’s lumber industry by marriage. He married the daughter of one-time state senator Joseph G. Thorp who was also president of the Eau Claire Lumber Company.

Logging Scene by Carl Anderson. A former logger, Anderson painted this folk art rendition of work in Wisconsin's Northwoods long after he retired, sometime after 1957. Anderson chose to share his memories visually rather than with words, like Holt.



WHi Image ID 2775

A Knapp, Stout & Co. crew, ca. 1895, stops work for a chilly moment to pose for the photographer.



WHi Image ID 8653



tance of Christian teachings during his Norwegian youth. He stopped short of condemning those who engaged in unruly behavior, but clearly their lifestyle would have had no appeal to young Johanes. If his own prospects for traditional marriage and family seemed questionable, this may have influenced his decision to emigrate. Additionally, he and his family adhered to the teaching of Hans Nielsen Hauge, who emphasized the role of lay leadership within the official Norwegian Lutheran Church. This break from theological orthodoxy created men and women more willing and better able to contemplate such a radical choice as immigration. Johanes, for instance, apparently did not seek permission from the official Lutheran church to emigrate, as did some of his traveling companions.⁸

When coupled with the fact that few of the landless could ever hope to own land, these social developments created a climate ripe for making such a fateful determination. Surviving accounts do not provide a thorough explanation of why young Johanes chose to emigrate, but given the implied connection to “his future” career opportunities, Norway’s socio-economic tensions almost certainly contributed to his emotionally arduous decision to leave for America. Also, in a first letter home, he notes that “I don’t think that I will like it here in America, but the money is good.” His intentions to return relatively soon, perhaps “in a couple of years,” suggest that he hoped his American sojourn would provide a type of quick economic gain not readily available in his homeland. At this still early phase in Norwegian-American immigration, this was a common practice. An off-hand comment about his sister Oline not knowing that he was leaving suggests that it was an impulsive decision; when presented with an opportunity to go to America and see what it had to offer, he took it.⁹

Johansen’s journey followed a typical immigrant path. He left Christiania (now Oslo) on September 14, 1869, in the company of a friend, Ole Guldbransen, and his family from Vang, and after a brief stop in Kristiansand, sailed to Scotland. After traversing that country by train, he boarded the Anchor Line’s *Iowa*, one of the largest immigrant steamers, for the trip to the United States. An interesting hybrid, which in itself gives a sense of the changing times, the ship had both coal-fired engines and four masts. The Atlantic crossing took nineteen storm-filled days, the most that it had ever taken the *Iowa*, and a relieved lot of seasick passengers disembarked at New York City. Johanes’s traveling party stayed at Castle Garden Immigration Station for one night and then boarded a train for Chicago. There, they waited three days for their luggage, during which time Johanes unsuccessfully looked for work at a tanning factory. Finding none, he continued his journey via train and then river boat, eventually arriving at Eau Claire, Wisconsin.¹⁰

The trip included a bizarre example of the hardships of immigrant travel. Although everyone survived the mid-

Atlantic storms, Ole Guldbransen’s “old mother Tsuit-Stokket” died on route from New York to Chicago. The elderly matriarch got off of the train at a station and sat down between cars on an adjoining track. Since that train had no engine, no one worried about her safety, but when one did attach unexpectedly, it moved the cars and crushed her. Johanes appreciated the journey’s dangers, writing to his family, “I think that you will thank God, along with me, who has protected me from all danger and spared my life during such a long and dangerous trip.”¹¹

If that journey had taken Johanes from a land of uncertainty, he entered one of optimism and opportunity. Wisconsin had been a state for only twenty-one years, since 1848, but at the time of his arrival, it was on the verge of an industrial and agricultural boom. Natural resources, especially timber, abounded. Key to unlocking the state’s economic potential was improvement of transportation, especially the construction of railroads. Both the cutting of trees and the laying of track, along with the ubiquitous growth of farming, would require labor, such as that offered by newly arrived immigrants.¹²

Johanes was one of many who chose Wisconsin as a destination. According to the 1870 federal census, Wisconsin had 364,499 foreign-born residents (35 percent of the total population), including 40,046 Norwegians, the largest number for any state. The earliest groups of Norwegians in the United States had settled in upstate New York and northeastern Illinois’ Fox River Valley, but by the 1850s, Wisconsin had become their most popular destination. One early sojourner called it “the best and most healthful place for the Norwegians.”¹³ Here, in this potential land of plenty, Johanes would make his new home.

When Johanes noted that the money “was good” in the United States, he may have been a little optimistic. He had not been able to find a work as a tanner in Chicago in 1869, and he did not find steady employment in Wisconsin until the spring of 1870, when he found a job as a brick layer. Whatever his remuneration, it was not “wages,” and he soon took a job with Chapman, Thorp & Company, which owned farms and a sawmill near Eau Claire. Johanes worked five weeks on a farm and then through the summer at the mill. Employment for Chapman, Thorp had an unexpected benefit. Thorp was the father-in-law of Ole Bull, a well-known Norwegian-American violinist, and in the fall of 1870, Johanes got tickets to hear him play.

Arrival of Eau Claire’s first railroad, the Omaha Rail in 1870, provided Johanes’s next employment. That fall and winter, he worked on a construction crew which was cutting right-of-way through the Knapp Hills, located about thirty-five miles west of Eau Claire. At the vanguard of settlement, in the midst of what was then still wilderness, Johanes and the



other laborers, an ethnically diverse crew, lived rough and tumble lives. An oak log shanty, chinked with clay, provided shelter from the Wisconsin winter. “Evenings,” he remembered, “were spent playing cards, making music, sometimes dancing, and other wild goings on.” Such frivolity troubled the young Norwegian immigrant, giving him pause to think about the more orderly world of his departed homeland. After working on the railroad for about a year, Johanes and three other immigrants from Norway’s Guldbrandsdalen region set out for the farming community of Erin Prairie, a predominantly Irish-American community in St. Croix County, where completely different concerns would cut short Johanes’s stay.

In August 1871 he found work with farmer William Hennesy, which brought with it two significant opportunities: education and potential marriage. While Johanes had learned some English, Hennesy encouraged him to pursue more instruction, so that he could increase his chances of succeeding in business. Hennesy also had two teenage daughters, and Johanes reminded himself of the tale of a similarly situated immigrant who had been tricked into matrimony, by a farm lass who exploited his limited use of English. In that tale, the man only knew how to say “yes, yes,” which he unsuspectingly replied to a magistrate’s conjoining questions. Johanes promised himself that he would not be so tricked, but also told himself that he must be careful, for once a woman got “a slight hold,” it would not be “easy to tear oneself away.” He left Hennesy’s employment, returned to Eau Claire, and then made his way west to the nearby small town of Cedar Falls, near Menomonie, Wisconsin. The reasons for Johanes’s relocation suggests a negative attitude towards women, but more likely he did not want to make any commitment that might encumber his anticipated return to Norway. Or, given his eventual choice of bride, he may have wanted to save himself for a woman of Norwegian descent.

Johanes’s financial situation quickly improved. Railroad work had allowed him to pay all his debts and, in typical immigrant fashion, even send a little money back to his Norwegian family. Now, he was about to embark upon his principal occupation. Johanes intended to work a mill in Cedar Falls owned by Jewett and Company, but after a week, the foreman offered him a position helping the cook at the company boarding house. He remembered that the offer was for “a quick, smart, young man.” Johanes took the job, and thereby learned the cooking trade which he would ply for the next twenty-five years. By the summer of 1873 he had worked his way up to head cook, providing meals for up to 150 men. Given that the lumberjacks were not above “running out” cooks whose fare did not meet their gastronomic standards, Johanes’s long tenure attests to his culinary success.¹⁴

The young immigrant may have left the job at Erin Prairie for fear of marital entrapment, but by 1873, he had developed

a serious romantic interest in Norwegian immigrant Martine Hansen. Born in 1850 on the Barstad farm, Sokndalen, in what is now Rogaland Fylke, she had come to the United States at the age of seven. In an appropriate admixture of cultures, Johanes and Martine married in 1873, in a traditional Norwegian Lutheran church, the First Lutheran Church of Eau Claire, at a ceremony officiated by Pastor Amund Johnsen, on the quintessential American holiday, the Fourth of July. Records do not indicate those in attendance, but Johanes no doubt dwelt on the obvious omissions, his Norwegian friends and family. Unfortunately, there are no known sources that give Martine historical voice, which would be insightful given the developments that she and Johanes soon would confront.¹⁵

Shortly after his joyous nuptials, it became apparent that marriage and economic success had effectively changed his plans to return to Norway in five years’ time from his departure. Although he now contemplated a visit to Norway, he increasingly entertained thoughts of “how wonderful it would be if he could get his parents and siblings to come to America.” Immigrants frequently engaged in this type of “chain migration,” whereby an initial immigrant or group paved the way for family or villagers to join them. Nothing seemed to pre-



Courtesy of Herman Stalson

John Holt finally returned to Norway in 1914, hoping to recapture some part of his idealized past. This studio shot, taken in Norway, is a study in dignity and regret.

clude this happening with the Johansens, particularly in light of their son’s success, but then, “as lightening from a clear sky,” came unexpected news; the entire family was moving to New Zealand!¹⁶

Johanes’s oldest sister, Oline, had married clergyman Edward Neilsen, who, while performing a funeral, “had been called by the spirit to emigrate” and be “a servant of the Lord in the Methodist faith,” in New Zealand. Neilsen’s conviction affected not only him and his wife, but also the rest of the Johansens. Johanes’s two younger sisters (other sources say only one at that time) would accompany the couple, and his parents and other siblings would come later.

The connection with Methodism was in itself unusual. There were only about three thousand such adherents amongst an overwhelmingly and officially Lutheran population of 1.8

million Norwegians. One source, however, did identify Neilsen as some sort of hybrid “Methodist Lutheran,” but the exact nature of his faith, both before and after the defining spiritual call, remains unclear. Johanes’ writings indicate his family’s connection to Hauge’s teaching, dissenting from the official Lutheran creed, but they also make several references to his attending American Lutheran churches, although this simply may have been because Johanes could not find what he called “haugianer” congregations. Unfortunately, there is almost no

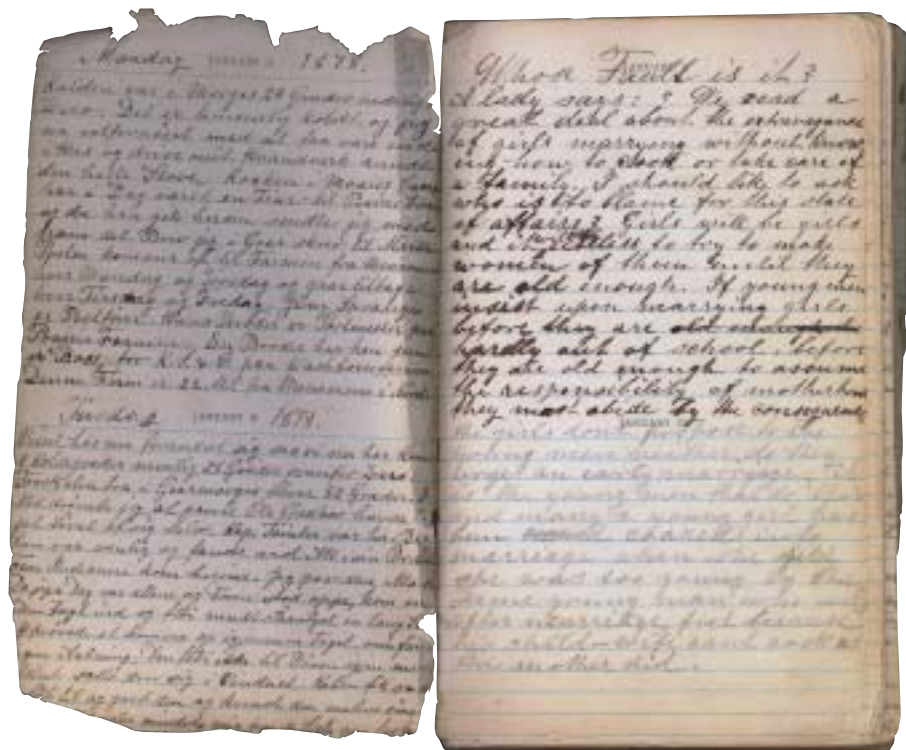
other immigrant letters, but not this time. “The Spirit” had moved Neilsen to leave for New Zealand, and nothing could change his mind.

Johanes’s response, although recorded some years later, reveals both his profound disappointment and the extent of his new immigrant identity. He had been “led astray,” he reasoned, in going to a new land with the false trust that he soon would be reunited with family. Now, “the cold and cruel whip of fate,” had “turn[ed] away its mighty hand,” and what he had envisioned as a temporary separation would be permanent. He could see his “dearly beloved mother,” feel the “burn” of her tears, but what, he asked rhetorically, revealing the sense of betrayal which had remained throughout the years, could he have done? He could not have gone to New Zealand, nor had it been the plan at the time of his departure. “We will be spread in all directions and made strangers in this world,” he angrily proclaimed, “and therefore my name shall no longer be Johanes Johnson, but John J. Holt—because I have been lost and will not be found again.”¹⁸

The choice of names is interesting. His *Autobiography* indicates that his childhood home was located on Holsveen, or “Holt’s Road,” but in Norwegian, one of the meanings of *holdt* is “to endure or last.” Descendants attribute Johanes’s new name to the Norwegian location, but his use of “because” in the sentence explaining the name change suggests a

causal effect. Perhaps, his new name was meant to convey both the end of his old-world identity, and the affirmation of the emergence of a new, yet connected one in the United States. Despite a sense of the forlorn, the essence of the child Johanes, in metamorphic form, would survive, as the American John Holt. The sources do not provide a definitive answer, but Holt suggests this notion of preservation, writing and referring to himself in the third person, immediately after announcing the name change, “Thus Johanes wept in his heart, while the small home that he had left, with all of its dear memories, became alive in his mind.” The Norwegian immigrant had become the American John Holt, but a part of Johanes, son of Johanes and Sedsil Johansen, and of Norway, would endure.¹⁹

Separation would continue to trouble the man now known as John Holt. In 1878, five years after his marriage and news



UWStout MSS 33

Holt's handwritten diary with a page in Norwegian on the left and one in English on the right, reflects the combination of cultures most immigrants encounter on a daily basis.

other information about the Johansen family’s religious beliefs. Therefore, one can only speculate as to whether the entire family had embraced Methodism, and whether broader religious matters, as well as the family’s specific plans to leave for New Zealand, also troubled Johanes.¹⁷

There was no such uncertainty as to how he felt about the emigration decision itself. “To go back to Norway would be easy enough,” he mused, at least to see his kinfolk, “but to join them in New Zealand. (Ufdal!)” They never would be joining him in America, nor would he be able to reunite with them in Norway. He had gone far enough, and was not going to go any further. Unstated, but obvious, he truly had become an American, a Norwegian-American, but still an American. His work and his marriage attested to his success. A return letter, which explained all of this to Neilsen, implored him to instead come to America. Such epistles worked in the case of myriad

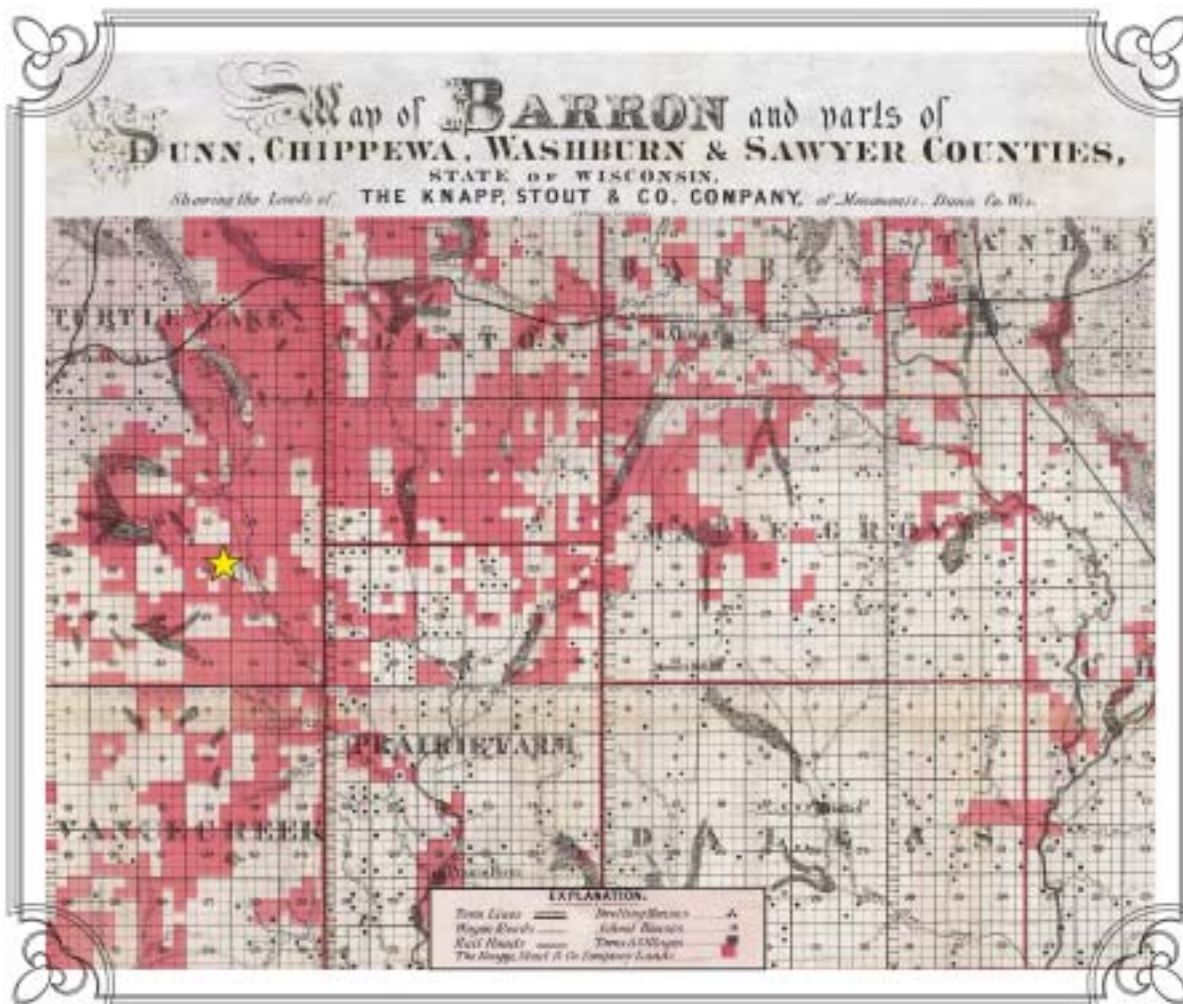
of his family's emigration decisions, he began a short-lived, intermittent diary, including summaries of letters to friends and family members, with numerous entries revealing his continued inner turmoil. He was "well and in good shape," but nonetheless troubled. In addition to references of twenty below zero temperatures and the isolation of the lumber camps, one of the first entries described the fate of a little bird who had sought shelter from the cold in Johannes's cook shack. It flew in through the open door and eventually settled on a window sill, where the resident cat discovered and killed it. It reminded Johannes "of all the souls that are lost." Perhaps, despite a good job and growing family, including daughter Junietta (later called Nettie, one of his five children) who had started to say "dada," he considered himself one of the unfortunates.²⁰

America had been good to Holt, but all of his successes and accomplishments were not enough to alleviate the pain that he felt from being away from his birth fam-

ily and the friends of his youth. The diary indicates that Holt's parents had not left for New Zealand until 1877, and news of a shipwreck led him to worry that it had been their vessel. Finally, he received a letter which, to his relief, let him know that the family had arrived safely. Still, even this happy news could do only so much to assuage an obviously aching heart. When he tried to convey thanks to his brother-in-law Edward Nielsen for all that he had done for his parents, it brought tears to his eyes. Later, he described the contents of a letter to cousin Gunor Haave, who still lived in Norway, in similarly melancholy terms: "Looked back to childhood where we often played together. How uncertain one's life is and how full of changes, dear memories, and deep losses."²¹

Holt allowed himself to think about following his family to New Zealand, but he realized that it would never happen. "It would be my greatest happiness in life," he wrote his cousin Gunor, "if I could see my dear and precious parents and siblings here in the land of the living on earth. I love them all dear and think

about them often." He similarly wrote to his sister, lamenting the fact that they had not written since her departure for New Zealand and expressing his love for her. He also conveyed both his continued sense of loss and thoughts of joining her and the other family members. Yet, the very things which had made his life in America successful prevented him from fulfilling this wish. He had put down roots in his new country, established a career, built a home, and started a family. These, he acknowledged in a subsequent letter to his sister, effectively prevented him from leaving. All that he could



Graphic by Joel Heiman

Knapp, Stout & Co. mapped large areas of northern Wisconsin, and this detail of Barron, and parts of Dunn, Chippewa, Washburn, and Sawyer Counties indicates the swath the company cut through the state. One of the camps where John Holt cooked, near Prairie Farm, is starred.



Courtesy of Herman Stalson

Four generations: Holt's grandson, John Bartelson, holds his own young son, while Holt's daughter, Jenettie Stalson, stands next to her father.



Courtesy of Herman Stalson

John J. Holt at right, holds his namesake and great-grandson while his grandson, Edgar Holt, looks into the camera.



Courtesy of the author

Herman Stalson, grandson of John J. Holt, and editor of Holt's diary and autobiography, at his grandparents' graves near Wheeler.



Courtesy of Herman Stalson

Johanes Jobansen became John Holt when his family moved from Norway to New Zealand. The New Zealand branch of the family, from left, standing: Alice, Evelyn, and Mavis Jobansen. Sitting from left: Edwin, Annie (Olesen), and Ole Johansen



do was regret the tears that he had caused his faraway family and friends and ask God to bless them.²²

The now permanently American Holt balanced overall success with occasional strife. During the years after his marriage and awareness of his parents' emigration plans, a chain of events took him to his long-time home of Menomonie, Wisconsin. He quit Jewett and Company, after working three years without a break, and in 1875 went into a short-lived partnership with John C. Storm running the Central House hotel and saloon at Baldwin, in west-central Wisconsin. Holt ran the hotel and Storm the saloon. Unfortunately, Storm imbibed too much of his own product, and when Holt realized that this was ruining the business, running up several hundred dollars in virtually uncollectible debt, he determined either to sell his share or buy out his too-often inebriated partner. Storm bought his partner's share, with the payment including a lot in Menomonie. Holt thereafter started building a home on his recently acquired property, and went to work cooking for Knapp, Stout & Company in 1875.

For the next fourteen years, Holt labored at Knapp, Stout and lived in Menomonie. He and his wife Martine soon moved into their new home, where most of their children would be born. Work for Knapp, Stout followed a seasonal round. Holt cooked for the men at the sawmill during the summer, and then in fall went into the woods for several months to cook at one of the camps. In the years when he took part in the spring "drive," floating the logs down river to a mill, he did not return home until June. It was hard work, but Holt prided himself on having developed a good reputation as both a cook and a colleague, and also as a musician. His musical prowess included the ability to play several instruments and to compose popular songs.

Ditties about camp life particularly appealed to Holt's co-workers, but so too did a popular waltz that Holt named *Seterwaltz*, a tale of the Norwegian summer farm. Touching on familiar themes of detachment and remembrance, it described how milkmaids took cattle to graze at higher elevations during the summer months. The maids lived in small cabins, called *seter*, and spent their days watching the herds and making butter and other dairy products. Young men would visit the young ladies on Saturday nights. In his *Autobiography*, Holt described his waltz as having "a deep and sorrowful melody that the old Norwegians in the camp, who had left the 'old country' and now remembered, could not hear enough." They often requested it before they went to bed, "because then they would sleep so well afterwards." Like similar ballads, it was not anti-emigration, but a sentimental statement of loss due to migration.²³

Realities of being away at camp re-emphasized family separation in July 1880. Holt was cooking for a summer haying crew when he received word that his daughter Tomasine was gravely ill. She had been a sickly child, unable to walk or stand at fifteen months, but the family hoped that she would

improve. Upon hearing that her condition had worsened precipitously, Holt raced home to the ailing child. Arriving too late, he "did not get to see my little one again"; nor had he been at home when she was born. Descriptions of her funeral, found in Holt's last diary entry, nonetheless speak of his faith in an ultimate, spiritual reunion, "up there where we never will be parted. Give us this O God in Jesus name." His convictions come across clearly, but his life story suggests that the "we" may have meant more than his present nuclear family mourning the death of a child.²⁴

In 1889 the Holts moved to an eighty-acre farm near Colfax, about twenty-five miles north of Menomonie. John had little experience with farming, and wanting to minimize economic risk, he continued to spend winters cooking at logging camps. After two years, he sold the Menomonie house, which allowed him to buy a team of horses, a wagon, and other farm implements. Only fifteen acres had originally been tilled, but now he could expand the operation. He also bought more land, bringing his total holdings to about 200 acres, some of which supported a dairy herd. In 1891 he quit cooking and devoted his full attention to agriculture.

The move to Colfax also allowed Holt to live in an area "where the majority of people are Norwegian." Until this time, he had felt a sense of isolation, living as part of an ethnically mixed work force—which Holt once describe as "a very tough crew" consisting of "Norwegians, Swedes, Germans, Irishmen and a Frenchman!"—in a Yankee-dominated world. He had traveled to America with the Norwegian Guldbransen family, but they soon had left the Eau Claire area. He did marry a fellow Norwegian immigrant, but almost immediately after beginning married life, learned that he would never again see his own family. In Colfax his situation began to resemble a more typical immigrant experience, in that he was living in an ethnic enclave or community. Holt, however, also stressed his Americanization, noting that he had twice been elected "to the English school board in the area, and has twice been both treasurer and secretary of same." Johannes Johansen Gallos (following Norwegian custom the final name referred to the farm in Norway where he had last worked) had filed the initial petition for naturalization in 1873, but it was John Holt who became a naturalized citizen in 1906.²⁵

In 1914, on the cusp of the Great War, sixty-four year-old Holt finally made his long awaited trip to Norway, but it was more of a visit than a return. His 1903 *Autobiography* conveyed his wish to see his childhood home, to look upon the fir trees that he climbed as a youth, and that in his mind "seem to still sway, and to wait for him yet." He also feared that he never again would actually see them. Other than a brief mention, nothing survives to convey Holt's feelings when he actually got to Norway, but they must have been bittersweet. His father, and perhaps also his mother, had died

in faraway New Zealand, where the rest of the family now lived. His youngest brother, Ludvig, who took over their father's New Zealand farm, was twenty years younger, meaning that the two had never laid eyes on each other. So, while the great fir trees may have swayed still, the voices of the Johansen family were nothing more than fading echoes in the Norwegian mist.²⁶

Other than this emotionally charged trip to Norway, Holt's later years attest to his American success. He and his wife Martine lived happily on their Colfax farm until she died in 1928, after a short illness. Speaking of her death, and providing one of the few insights into her personality and character, in his diary Holt described Martine as having lived the life of a quiet homemaker, who faced death "happily in the faith of her Savior." He thereafter left the farm and went to live with his oldest daughter, widow Nettie Stalson, and her children. Surviving family photographs from his final years show him holding some of his many grand- and great-grandchildren. Holt lived to the age of ninety-four. He died in 1944 and was buried in the Norton Lutheran Church cemetery near his rural Colfax farm.²⁷

At the end of his 1903 *Autobiography*, Holt provides a fitting assessment of his life and immigrant experience. In so doing, he delineates a familiar theme; considerable personal achievement against a backdrop of underlying sadness. His words convey pride in his family and in his professional success, "What can be said of Johannes, is that he always has been a dependable and sober man and a true and hardworking employee." He avoided disagreements, had never been in a fight, nor had he contracted a serious illness, remarkable feats for one "traveling so far in a world where the adjectives 'mean' and 'dangerous' are common." Although his part had been relatively small, he had contributed to a great American epic, the harvesting of the midwestern pinery. Yet, he coupled this positive self-assessment with the memories of his long-lost Norwegian home and family. When their "memories returned," anguish and disappointment moderated his pride in his successful immigrant odyssey.²⁸ ❧

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Notes

¹Herman Stalson, ed., and Dale Tyndall, trans., *Journey to America: The Diary of John Holt* (Colfax, Wisconsin, Privately Published, 1990), [hereafter cited as *Journey*], 49, 53-4. As Stalson notes, Holt added the letter to his mother six and a half years after his last diary entry, and there is no way of knowing if the letter was sent or merely used as a means of reminiscing. *Journey* is a compilation of letters, diary entries, and notes.

²*Autobiography of John Holt*, ca. 1903, Holt Papers, University of Wisconsin-Stout Area Research Center, Menomonie, Wisconsin, translated by Dale Tyndall [hereafter cited as *Autobiography*]; Letter from John J. Holt to Veunen (*The Friend*), July 13, 1938, in *Journey*, 57-8.

³Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 4 and; Jon Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway, to the Upper Middle West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

About the Author

Robert F. Zeidel's Wisconsin roots go back to his own Lithuanian and Swedish immigrant ancestors, who settled in Superior during the late 1800s. He graduated from Carroll College, and then attended Marquette University, where he earned both master's and doctorate degrees in history. He currently teaches U.S. History and Historical Methods at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. He would like to thank Dee Grimsrud of the Wisconsin Historical Society's Library-Archives Division, and John Holt's grandson Herman Stalson for their considerable help in locating pertinent source materials.



⁴Oyvind T. Gulliksen, "You Can't Go Home Again': Norwegian-American Travel Accounts," *The Promise of America*, <http://www.nb.no/emigrasjon/emigration/index.html> (accessed August 2003) [hereafter cited as *Promise*]; John R. Jenswold, "I Live Well, But . . .': Letters from Norwegians in Industrial America" *Promise*; *Journey*, 57-8.

⁵*Autobiography*, 1; Michael Drake, *Population and Society in Norway 1735-1865* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 9, 24, 41-2, 79-80. As something of a precursor to American immigration, many southern Norwegians migrated to that country's northern counties during the 1830s and 1840s; *ibid.*, p. 86-7.

⁶*Autobiography*, 1; Carlton C. Qualey and Jon Gjerde, "The Norwegians," in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 220-21; Gjerde, *Peasants*, 46-7, 131, and 274n60.

⁷Ingrid Semmingsen, *Norway to America, A History of the Migration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 34-6; Gjerde, *Peasants*, 62-115.

⁸*Autobiography*, 1.

⁹*Autobiography*, 1; *Journey*, 13-8; Interviews with Herman Stalson, summer 2001; Odd S. Lovoll, *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 1 16-29.

¹⁰*Autobiography*, 1.

¹¹*Autobiography*, 1.

¹²Richard N. Current, *The History of Wisconsin*, Volume 2, *The Civil War Era, 1848-1873* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976), 1-41.

¹³U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Compendium of the Ninth Census* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1872), 376; Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America, 1825-1860* (Northfield, Minnesota: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1931), 106-7.

¹⁴*Autobiography*, 1-3; Agnes M. Larson, *History of the White Pine Industry in Minnesota* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1949; New York: Arno Press, 1972), 26-7, 135, 141, 197-8; Ralph W. Hidy, Frank E. Hill, and Allan Nevins, *Timber and Men: The Weyerhaeuser Story* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1963), 48, 55.

¹⁵*Autobiography*, 3.

¹⁶Different documents provide two slightly conflicting chronologies of Johannes's marriage and the arrival of the fateful letter. The *Autobiography*, written first in 1903, reports arrival of the news from Norway came "later that Fall," after the marriage, but "When Memories Return," in *Journey*, written thirty-five years later in 1938, indicates that he got the news and then decided to stay in the U.S. and get married. Given the documents' composition dates, the earlier-written *Autobiography* likely provides the more accurate chronology; see *Autobiography*, 3 and *Journey*, 57.

¹⁷*Autobiography*, 3-4; *Journey*, 63; Blegen, *Norwegian*, 17.

¹⁸*Autobiography*, 3-4; the translator used "cruel whip of faith," but Johannes almost certainly meant *fate*.

¹⁹*Autobiography*, 1.

²⁰*Journey*, 21-2.

²¹*Journey*, 22-9.

²²*Journey*, 28-30.

²³*Autobiography*, 4-8; Rochelle Wright, "My Native Land I Bid Farewell': Attitudes Toward Emigration in Scandinavian Street Ballads," in John R. Christianson, ed., *Scandinavians in America: Literary Life* (Decorah, Iowa: Symra Literary Society, 1985), 114-6.

²⁴*Journey*, 48-9.

²⁵*Autobiography*, 8-10.

²⁶*Autobiography*, 8-9; *Journey*, 57-8.

²⁷*Autobiography*, 8-9.

²⁸*Autobiography*, 9-10.