

# For Children of Norway, a Rift With the Mother Country

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MINNEAPOLIS — Around a table at Ingebretsen's, an 86-year-old market stocked with Norwegian staples like lutefisk, meatballs and fruit soup, the women of the Monday knitting club were upset.

"This is a bit of a slap in the face," Janet Rog, 74, said of Norway's recent announcement that it would shut its career consulate here next year and send the diplomats home.

The consulate, opened in 1906 and upgraded in 1946 to its current status as consulate general, is a point of pride for the Upper Midwest, which is home to more Norwegian-Americans than any other region of the country.

It is hardly a question of their needing a nearby office to get passport updates or the like. The families of most, after all, have lived in America for generations, and many confess that they have never actually set foot inside the consulate. Rather, this is a matter of respect, of recognition.

"We're very proud of our roots, and we've tried really hard to preserve them," said Shirley Hansen, another knitter at a table bursting with the bright geometric patterns Norway is known for. "Norway is near and dear to us, but now we feel like maybe they haven't considered us quite so important."

Reminders of their roots are all around, especially in Minnesota, which claims 850,000 people of Norwegian descent, far more than any other state. Residents fly Norwegian flags. They worship in Lutheran congregations like the one at Mindekirken here, the old stone church where 100 people gather for the Sunday sermon in Norwegian. They hold parades and street fairs each May 17, or Syttende Mai, to honor Norway's constitution day.

"We treasure the heritage more here than they do in Norway itself," said Audrey Amundson of Starbuck, Minn., which sealed its place in history in 1983 by cooking what residents insist was the world's biggest lefse, a Norwegian flatbread made of potatoes, cream and flour. (The pancake, 9 feet 8 inches in diameter, secured Starbuck's spot in the Schibsted Norwegian Book of Records.)

The flood of immigrants from Norway began in the middle 1800s. At first, there were Quakers who arrived as religious refugees. But more came for economic reasons: A population explosion had hit Norway, followed by food shortages. The cold, wide-open,

rolling land of the Midwest seemed not so different from some of the land these farmers had worked back home.

Perhaps, some here fear, it has simply been too long. Maybe Norway sees the Midwest no longer as a current diplomatic interest but rather as some cultural collection place for the past, with its treasured rosemaling art exhibits, its “Norwegian bachelor farmers” of Garrison Keillor’s radio program, its museum in Decorah, Iowa, that is devoted to Norwegian-Americans.

“In part, this is an image problem about how Norway views us,” said Jeff Mueller, president of the Norwegian-American Chamber of Commerce for the Upper Midwest. “Norway looks at us as ‘that’s where our ancestors went.’ ”

For now, five people, including two career diplomats from Norway, continue to work in the consulate, on the 27th floor of the AT&T Tower in downtown Minneapolis. They hand out relatively few visas and such, but focus on promoting tourism, business between Norway and the United States, and cooperation between schools and colleges, said Rolf W. Hansen, the consul general.

Norwegian officials say their decision to close the consulate, which handles a nine-state region, is simply a matter of money. Jannicke Jaeger, an official at the Norwegian Embassy in Washington, said it cost about \$2 million a year to operate the consulate. While it will be closing in 2008, new ones will be opening in China, where the economy is booming, and in Spain, where many Norwegians retire.

Wegger Christian Strommen, the recently appointed Norwegian ambassador, said no one was abandoning the Midwest.

“We’re not going to leave,” Mr. Strommen said in a telephone interview from his Washington office. “We are going to take all these things forward, in a slightly different way.”

An honorary consul (usually a local resident with strong ties to the home country who is not paid for the part-time service) will be appointed for Minneapolis, the ambassador said. He said that Norway would pay for at least one staff member at the honorary consulate and that he intended to spend more time in the Midwest himself.

“The Midwest is not less important to us,” said Mr. Strommen, who heard from worried Minnesotans, including Gov. Tim Pawlenty, during meetings here in recent days. “These are my people,” he said, adding that even he had extended family throughout this nation’s middle.

Still, some Norwegian-Americans in Minneapolis, where the Norwegian Consulate is the only remaining career consulate aside from those of Canada and Mexico, are grumpy. Quietly, stoically grumpy — that is their understated Norwegian way, they say — but grumpy nonetheless.

“This hurts our feelings a little bit,” said Margaret Hayford O’Leary, chairwoman of the Norwegian department at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn. Will the Midwest soon become “flyover land,” Professor O’Leary wondered, even for Norwegians?

Residents have sent letters to members of Norway’s Parliament. They have sought help from Norwegian-American leaders like former Vice President Walter F. Mondale and Roger Moe, a former Minnesota state legislator. A delegation arranged a trip to Norway to complain.

Some question claims that the issue is one of financial shortfalls. What, they ask, about the government pension fund of more than \$300 billion that Norway has amassed in recent years from its oil exports?

“It’s silly to think that this place is somehow going to break the budget for Norway,” said Anne Kanten, a resident of Milan, Minn., which calls itself Norwegian Capital U.S.A. “What’s more Norwegian than Minnesota, anyway?”

Three other Norwegian career consulates in the United States will remain open, in New York, San Francisco and Houston. Embassy officials defend those choices as strategic; Houston, for instance, has significance for Norway’s oil interests.

For Minnesotans, that is one more rub.

“Houston?” asked the 80-year-old Mrs. Amundson, laughing faintly. “Houston, Texas?”