

University of Wisconsin Eau Claire

Struggle and Survival in a Foreign Land:
The Immigrant Experience of Anders Lian

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Abstract

Throughout out the nineteenth century thousands of immigrants arrived in the United States. Many of these immigrants hoped to improve their lives by establishing themselves in America. Anders Lian, a youthful immigrant from Norway, arrived in the United States in early 1890. Anders Lian, like many other immigrants, envisioned America as a land of prosperity and hoped that living in America would also bring him a degree of success. However, as Anders Lian discovered, the United States in the 1890s brought struggle along with success. The letters of Anders Lian, preserved for over a century by his relatives in Norway, present a tale of struggle, survival, and hope for a new life in America. Through his letters a detailed account of life in a Midwestern city in the 1890s emerges, along with an understanding of the United States during the 1890s.

Introduction

“Now to be sure it is more than I can understand. I have been waiting and waiting for a letter, but in vain. I promised that I would write, and that promise I have reasonably tried to keep, but then I hoped that you would also write to me.”¹

Homesickness was just one of the many hardships faced by immigrants arriving in the United States. No immigrant was immune to hardship, yet for over a hundred years tens of thousands of immigrants arrived in the United States. All hoped to improve their lives, and eventually fulfill the “American Dream.” Many immigrants settled in Wisconsin, some settled in cities and others chose to reside in the countryside living agrarian lifestyles. The largest portion of immigrants settling in Wisconsin are of German descent, but there is also a strong Norwegian heritage, especially in Western Wisconsin. Norwegian immigration to Wisconsin began long before the civil war, but intensified during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many settled in rural areas, establishing communities that revolved around agriculture. Many of these immigrants fulfilled their dreams, but historians have largely ignored another group of Norwegian immigrants. Many individual Norwegian immigrants settled in Wisconsin’s cities; their story has rarely been told.

Anders Lian traveled from Norway to the United States in the late nineteenth century. A collection of letters Anders Lian wrote to his family in Norway have been preserved for nearly a century by his relations there. Today these letters can be found in multiple places. They have been digitized and published online, and photocopies of the translated letters are available at the Area Research Center located on the University of

¹ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 20 September 1890. Translated by Genevieve Hagen. Special Collections, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire, Eau Claire.

Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Anders likely left his home in Vaerdalen, Norway (a small town probably north of Trondheim, Norway), as a young man either in his teens or early twenties. Upon his arrival in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, Anders lived for many years with his Aunt and Uncle at 725 Water Street. Anders found employment primarily at sawmills in Eau Claire during the summer months, and at lumber camps during the winter. His letters tell a different tale from the romanticized immigrant histories that are so abundant today. His correspondence reveals a very unique story of struggle and hardship. For many immigrants, like Anders Lian, life in America brought great changes and even greater challenges. For some of these immigrants, their “American Dream” would not be fulfilled.

Over the past century many historians have examined the lives of Norwegian immigrants in the United States. The Norwegian-American Historical Association, founded in 1925, actively promoted the academic study of Norwegian immigrants and their descendents in the United States. Besides regularly publishing an academic journal, the organization also published many of the earliest works on the subject. The most influential of the early scholars supported by the Norwegian-American Historical Association was Theodore Blegen. Like so many scholars after him, Blegen focused on the migration of Norwegians as a group. Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, his works often focused on the earliest Norwegians to establish themselves in the United States, primarily those who emigrated before the Civil War. Blegen centered his research on the reasons why they left Norway, where they settled, and the adjustments they made living in America. However, the greatest bulk of Norwegian immigrants arrived in three distinct waves after the Civil War. Blegen perhaps avoided examining these groups of

immigrants because another scholar at this time, Olaf Morgan Norlie, had only a few years before him written a book that discussed the immigrants arriving after the Civil War.

Like Blegen, Norlie examined Norwegian immigrants in the United States and published many books and articles during the 1920s and 1930s. Norlie published his most influential work, *The History of Norwegian People in America*, in 1925. A large portion of his work focused on the most successful Norwegian immigrants and their accomplishments, but did not analyze average working class families. Books like these did not capture the essence of American life as encountered by immigrants like Anders Lian. After these early works were published there was a nearly fifty-year absence of any major publication on this topic. Not until the 1970s did another major piece of scholarship in this field get published.

During the 1970s and 1980s a great flurry of articles and books were published that examined Norwegian immigration after the Civil War. Unlike the early works of Blegen and Norlie, these publications focused exclusively on the lives of these immigrants, not just the most successful, and how they adopted or adapted to American customs while still maintaining their Norwegian identity. The two most influential scholars in the field at this time were Arlow Andersen and Odd Lovoll. The lives of immigrants like Anders Lian are revealed through the works of Andersen and Lovoll.

Andersen's major work, *The Norwegian-Americans*, appeared in 1975. His book discussed many of the same themes Blegen and Norlie addressed fifty-years earlier. However, Andersen's work focuses more attention and greater detail on the lives of average Norwegian immigrants. Like Norlie's, Andersen's book primarily focused on

the lives of those Norwegians arriving in the country after the Civil War. Since the 1970s historians have focused primarily on these groups of immigrants rather than those arriving before the Civil War.

One of the most recent scholarly publications on the subject appeared in 1984, *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People*, by Odd S. Lovoll. Lovoll is the first to provide an analysis of ordinary Norwegian immigrants that settled in urban rather than rural areas. However, his analysis of Norwegian immigrants settling in urban areas was not exhaustive, ultimately leaving that aspect of immigrant's lives largely overlooked. Few historians have examined the urban lives of Norwegian immigrants. The reasons for this become clear in a passage from another of Lovoll's books, *The Promise Fulfilled: A Portrait of Norwegian-Americans Today*. "The 1900 federal census reveals that 49.8 percent of all Norwegian-born heads of households were engaged in agriculture, as owners or renters of farms, or as agricultural laborers. A major increase in the last-mentioned category placed 63 percent of those with one or both parents Norwegian in agriculture; 54.3 percent of the second generation were in fact farm operators. No other ethnic group even came close to being this rural."² Through this statement it is evident why historians have given a much more detailed focus to rural Norwegian communities.

Recently, however, there has been a renewed focus on the urban lives of Norwegian immigrants. In his recent Ph.D. dissertation, John Randolph Jenswold, a University of Connecticut student, took the initiative to study Norwegian immigrants settling in larger cities and towns. Jenswold's work, although the most comprehensive

² Lovoll, Odd S, *The Promise Fulfilled: A Portrait of Norwegian Americans Today* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 14.

study of Norwegian immigrants in the city thus far, remained unfinished. A major work, focusing exclusively on Norwegians in the cities, has yet to surface, leaving this aspect of Norwegian immigrants lives largely unexplored. Jenswold's research directly reflects the lives of Norwegian immigrants settling in urban areas like Anders Lian.

Norwegians in Wisconsin, by Richard Fapso, is the most comprehensive study of Norwegian immigrants in Wisconsin. Fapso's book, although short, covers numerous aspects of their lives in Wisconsin. Like earlier historians of the subject, Fapso devotes a greater amount of time to discuss rural communities. *Norwegians in Wisconsin* provides an excellent introduction to the topic, but the book is not a fully developed work on the topic because of its brevity.

All of these historians, in writing their books, have examined the letters of Norwegian immigrants to the United States. These letters play a crucial role in helping historians understand the challenges that faced Norwegian immigrants settling in the United States. This paper aims to examine the letters of one Norwegian immigrant, Anders Lian, and develop an understanding of his experience. Lian, who first arrived in the United States in 1890, kept regular contact with the family he left behind in Norway. Through his letters not only do his personal hardships become clear, but also a unique understanding of American life in the late nineteenth century.

America Fever

Norwegian immigrants left Norway for many of the same reasons other Europeans emigrated to the United States. Historians agree that Norwegians left Norway in search of better prospects, and land they could own. Perhaps the single greatest factor in encouraging Norwegians to leave Norway was a rising population combined with poor prospects of land ownership. As Richard Fapso wrote, “an increasing population, the lack of available new farm land, and fluctuating grain prices on the world market, brought many *Bonde* (freeholders) to financial ruin.”³ According to Roger Daniels, “in addition to land hunger and population pressures, religious intolerance played a part in the origins of nineteenth-century Norwegian migrations.”⁴ The overwhelming majority of Norwegians were Lutherans, but there were many divisions among them. These divisions later manifested themselves as separate synods in the United States. However, not all historians agree that religious intolerance played a role in encouraging Norwegian emigration to the United States. Richard Fapso contends that Norwegians suffered from very little religious prosecution in Norway. Fapso argues that they emigrated primarily because of adverse conditions of land, climate, and economics.⁵ Regardless of the conflict between the scholarship of Daniels and Fapso, it is clear that land ownership, economics, and religion all played a role in causing Norwegians to leave Norway for the United States.

In addition to leaving because of domestic concerns, many Norwegians became enticed to leave because of letters from friends and relatives living in the United States.

³ Richard J. Fapso *Norwegians in Wisconsin*, 2d ed. (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2001), 6.

⁴ Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, 2d ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 173.

⁵ Fapso, 8.

Lovoll states, “knowledge of America frequently supplied the final incentive to leave.”⁶ The exact reason Anders Lian left Norway is unknown, but most likely a combination of multiple factors. Anders was born and raised in the northern, fjord region of Norway.⁷ It is possible that a lack of arable farm land and poor employment prospects caused him to leave, but there is evidence that letters from family members living in the United States spurred Anders’ interest in America. Anders uncle Elling, who had previously emigrated, lived in Eau Claire, Wisconsin with his wife and two children. Elling would occasionally write home to his brother, Anders’ father. From these letters Anders received a great deal of information about America. Elling spoke frequently of politics, religion and other facets of life in America. Through these letters Anders developed an idea of the United States as a land of great opportunity, a place where he could live comfortably. This idea became reinforced during the first grueling months Anders lived in the United States. The house of his uncle was, “fine and spacious, there is so much luxury and finery.”⁸ Sights like this certainly reinforced Anders belief that he would succeed in the United States.

Late in 1899 Lian wrote to his Uncle Elling requesting information about immigrating to the United States. In February 1890 he received a reply from Elling’s wife, Guruanna. It is obvious that Lian had a great interest in coming to the United States, Guruanna informed Anders about the costs of travel and informed him that he could face hardship in the United States as well. “It can be accompanied with good

⁶ Odd S. Lovoll, *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 13.

⁷ Anders Lian, Liverpool, England, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 22 April 1890. In this letter Lian writes about his trip to Trondheim, Norway, a major city located north of major manufacturing centers and surrounded by fjords. The community Anders grew up in is most likely in the fjord region along the northern coast of Norway where subsistence agriculture, fishing, and hunting were common.

⁸ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 26 May 1890.

fortune and bad fortune, and a person must take it just as it comes, whether it is joy or sorrow or possibly both.”⁹ Whether Anders heeded this advice or not is unclear, but he remained committed in his goal to come to the United States. In a letter only a few weeks later Anders’ aunt Guruanna writes that his ticket has been sent and preparations were being made in anticipation of his arrival.¹⁰ Like many immigrants, relations already living in the United States paid for the tickets for their trans-Atlantic journey. “Estimates are that in the 1880s most of the Scandinavians emigrating to the United States came on prepaid tickets or purchased them with money specifically sent for that purpose.”¹¹ This apparently was the case with Anders Lian.

⁹ Guruanna Sende, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to Anders Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 12 February 1890. Translated by Genevieve Hagen. Special Collections, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire, Eau Claire.

¹⁰ Guruanna Sende, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to Anders Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 1 March 1890.

¹¹ Leonard Dinnerstein and David M. Reimers, *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration*, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 29.

The Arduous Voyage

By the mid to late nineteenth century immigration had become an important business in the United States. Steamship lines and railroad companies actively campaigned for immigrant service. “The first railroad to seek foreigners aggressively, the Illinois Central, inaugurated its program in 1854. The line sent special agents to the German states and the Scandinavian countries, and these men attended fairs and church services, arranged meetings, advertised in the local press, and promised fabulous inducements to prospective settlers.”¹² Soon other railroad companies followed suit, sending agents to Europe and publishing brochures in multiple languages to attract immigrants. Steamship lines also promoted their own interests. “By 1882, 48 steamship companies traversed the Atlantic. The Red Star, Anchor, Hamburg-American lines, among others, established more than 6,500 agencies in the United States to sell prepaid tickets.”¹³

Of the letters of Anders Lian that survive, a few of them describe his long voyage over the Atlantic and his final arrival in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. These letters provide an intimate glimpse into the conditions and concerns Anders and many other immigrants faced when traveling to the United States. Of these letters there are two of considerable length, one written to his parents while awaiting a trans-Atlantic steamship in Liverpool, England and another written from Eau Claire, Wisconsin after completing the long voyage.

Anders Lian left his home in Vaerdalen, Norway in late April 1890; he traveled south to Trondheim, Norway and there awaited a ship to take him across the channel

¹² Dinnerstein and Reimers, 28.

¹³ Dinnerstein and Reimers, 29.

separating Norway and England. Lian describes how terrible the experience is aboard the ship to England in vivid detail. “Thursday about noon the steamship *Hero* left Trondheim; it is just a little, if I can say ‘cattle boat,’ the provisions on board were terribly poor. The coffee was undrinkable; the treatment was tolerably good, but so cramped for room, between three and four hundred passengers on board.”¹⁴ While steamship companies competed for passenger traffic, “few felt compelled to make the voyage comfortable for steerage passengers.”¹⁵ For Anders this was only the first leg of his journey, and a taste of things to come.

After his arrival in Hull, England, Anders forced his way through a crowd of other immigrants, and was stopped by customs. Anders complained frequently about the many searches his packages had undergone. “The custom official shows up and everyone must open his food box and traveling bags for him. Do you have tobacco? Do you have snus (snorting tobacco)? Do you have cigars?”¹⁶ Naturally the customs official had to restrict certain items from entering the country. But as Lian continues, “A person is allowed to take other things and as much as he wants.”¹⁷ Perhaps the most remarkable thing Anders witnessed was the sheer number of immigrants traveling to America like himself. Lian made multiple references to this in his first letter describing the masses of people of all nationalities crowding onto the ships and trains in England. Between 1891 and 1900 nearly four million people in Europe left their homes for America.¹⁸ England was one of the final resting points before the trans-Atlantic journey. Besides the throngs of people, Lian also saw many other interesting sights in England. “I have not seen one wooden

¹⁴ Anders Lian, Liverpool, England, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 22 April 1890.

¹⁵ Dinnerstein and Reimers, 29.

¹⁶ Anders Lian, Liverpool, England, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 22 April 1890.

¹⁷ Anders Lian, Liverpool, England, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 22 April 1890.

¹⁸ Dinnerstein and Reimers, 19.

house since I set foot in England. Just stone houses, for the most part brick houses.”¹⁹

Lian’s frequent references to the many things he saw during his journey allows us to understand that the environment he entered was unfamiliar to him, and may also be a sign of homesickness.

While in England Anders suffered the first of many setbacks in his journey. In his first letter, dated April 22, 1890, Anders expresses some concern for his upcoming trans-Atlantic journey. Based upon the large number of immigrants Anders encountered, he suggests “it is uncertain if everyone will get to come along over the Atlantic Ocean.”²⁰ Unfortunately for Anders, he would be one of those people that did not make it across the Atlantic when he wanted. In his second letter to his parents from Eau Claire, Wisconsin on May 10, 1890 he explains, “It did not go as I supposed as when we came to Liverpool the day before we were supposed to leave on the Star Line’s ship *Britanica*. No, that was overfilled; about 400 people had waited eight days in Liverpool.”²¹ Anders was very disappointed with this layover; his own words suggest a hint of anger. “Eight days in this unattractive city. Yes, what could we do? Liverpool is an exceedingly dark town with huge factories all over.”²² Later, Anders went into further detail, describing the terrible scenes he witnessed in Liverpool in detail, “it is a horrid life in the dark narrow streets, the worst is to see all the ragged, half-naked children who roam around in the streets and steal tobacco. They want to have tobacco, you understand.”²³ This dark, gloomy description of Liverpool provides a first hand account of the polluted atmosphere of industrialized England in the late nineteenth century.

¹⁹ Anders Lian, Liverpool, England, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 22 April 1890.

²⁰ Anders Lian, Liverpool, England, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 22 April 1890.

²¹ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 10 May 1890.

²² Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 10 May 1890.

²³ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 10 May 1890.

As disappointed as Anders may have been with his Liverpool layover, what happened next disappointed him even more. Lian, along with a group of other Norwegians, had tickets and planned on taking a Star Line ship across the Atlantic Ocean. He and other passengers were dismayed when on April 24th they learned they would instead be boarding the Guion Line's ship *Arizona*. "Now you can believe there was commotion and noise. Many were so angry that they could have torn the agents to pieces; a group of Swedes protested against going on the *Arizona* and remained."²⁴ A problem like this was a common immigrant experience. As Robert Nesbit explains, "Immigration to the United States was large, if very disorganized, business activity."²⁵ Reluctantly Anders, along with a handful of other Norwegians, boarded the *Arizona* and departed for the United States on April 25, 1890.

Conditions aboard the *Arizona* were very similar to those experienced by Anders aboard the *Hero*. "The Star Line people were shoved down into a dark room in the foredeck next to Irish, Germans, Polish, Russians, Finns, Jews and yet others, lice crawled back and forth on them. It was fortunate there were twenty Norwegians together in the same section."²⁶ This was not uncommon; nearly every steamship crossing the Atlantic Ocean was crowded. Although steamships certainly improved conditions and reduced the time spent at sea, "overcrowding and foul odors still existed, and the turbulence of the North Atlantic still forced many passengers to their knees to pray for divine assistance."²⁷ Just like aboard the *Hero*, the food and water aboard the *Arizona* was terrible. "For breakfast was bread and coffee, for dinner rotten meat. For my part I

²⁴ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 10 May 1890.

²⁵ Nesbit, 165.

²⁶ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 10 May 1890.

²⁷ Dinnerstein and Reimers, 30.

would have starved to death if I had not had food with me from home.”²⁸ Although the ordeal of crossing the Atlantic was difficult for Anders, it clearly did not shake his spirit as his letter of May 10th clearly indicates, “I am now standing on America’s freeborn earth!”²⁹

Anders finally arrived in the United States on May 6, 1890. From there he proceeded to acquire railroad tickets and traveled by train across the country until arriving in Eau Claire. “Now I come to the station ‘Eau Claire,’ but I stand here and don’t know where I shall go. Nobody had expected me now when I came on the Guion Line.”³⁰ Eventually Anders met someone he knew, and arrived at his Uncle Elling’s home at 725 Water Street. Anders quickly settled in at his new home, as a boarder in his uncle’s house. From here forward Anders flung himself into American life, searching for jobs and struggling to make ends meet.

²⁸ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 10 May 1890.

²⁹ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 10 May 1890.

³⁰ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 10 May 1890.

All in a Day's Work

Finding jobs, clothing, and feeding himself were the hardest transitions Anders had to make in the United States. Upon arriving in Eau Claire, Anders' uncle Elling had a tremendous influence on him, helping him find a job at a local sawmill. When Anders arrived in 1890, finding work in Eau Claire was not difficult. Fortunately labor was in high demand that year. "There is such a demand for working people now that it had been a long time no doubt since there were so few looking for work. A stranger barely comes near the mill before the boss is after him and asks if he wants to work."³¹ Times would not always be so easy for Anders. In just a few years he would struggle to find employment.

During the summer months it became very common for Anders to work at sawmills. Based upon where he lived in Eau Claire, it is likely that Anders found employment at the Empire Lumber Company's mill in Eau Claire. It was in close proximity



This photograph of Anders Lian (c. 1890s) was sent home to his family. It depicts a prosperous young man void of any of the struggles facing immigrants. Photographs like this reinforced views of immigrant success in the United States. Courtesy of the Chippewa Valley Museum. Used with permission.

to where he was boarding, however Lian never makes it clear exactly which mill in Eau

³¹ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 20 September 1890.

Claire employed him.³² At this time there were many sawmills in operation, and many of the newest immigrants of Scandinavian stock, like Anders, quickly found themselves working at the mills. In his second letter to his parents since arriving in Eau Claire, Anders described his employment and the conditions he endured at the mills.

I have now toiled for ten days in a sawmill in this city; it was rather heavy and slow-going work to begin with. Now it goes well, it consists in sorting and removing slabs of ends and board edges from the circle-saws. There are four mills in this neighborhood, twenty in and around the city. Each mill employs hundreds of workers. I have thirty-six dollars a month, without paying for board and room.³³

From his letter it becomes clear why Eau Claire was popularly known as “Sawdust City.” In 1881 over two hundred million feet of lumber was sawn in Eau Claire mills. This made Eau Claire second only to Minneapolis in the Great Lakes region.³⁴ When Anders arrived in 1890 the mills were even more productive with over eight hundred million feet of lumber being sawn.³⁵ In his letter of May 26, 1890 Anders seemed satisfied with his wages in town, but in a letter from only a year later he clearly expresses dissatisfaction over how little money he earns. “Here in town the times are quite bad. \$36.00 a month is usual hire for common work, and I will say that either I am going back to Norway soon, or find myself a better place than Eau Claire.”³⁶ Anders’ dissatisfaction derives from the

³² “Bird’s Eye View of Eau Claire, Wisconsin,” 1890. Special Collections, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire, Eau Claire.

³³ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 26 May 1890.

³⁴ Malcolm Rosholt, *Lumberman on the Chippewa* (Rosholt, Wis.: Rosholt House Press, 1982), 96.

³⁵ Tim Pfaff, *Settlement and Survival: Building Towns in the Chippewa Valley, 1850-1925* (Eau Claire, Wis.: Chippewa Valley Museum Press, 1994), 72.

³⁶ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to Jacob Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 26 July 1891.

low wages he earned, and the fact that a high portion of his wage was spent paying for his room and board in Eau Claire.

In many of the letters Anders wrote he often complained about how mundane millwork was, and how terribly lonely he was in Eau Claire. “It is as usual with me, drudgery from morning to night, sweating and lonesomeness. This is something you can take into consideration when you consider coming to America.”³⁷ Loneliness was common among Norwegian immigrants, especially those, like Anders, who came over as individuals. While many of the first Norwegian immigrants arrived as family groups, beginning around the 1870s there were more individual departures.³⁸ Many of these individuals probably left, like Anders, because they would be joining others already living in the United States. Most of these immigrants left Norway because of adverse economic conditions that left many young Norwegians unable to obtain a profitable job. Norway’s population grew faster than its economy could handle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Lovoll, most of these individuals “were ordinary workers and had only their labor to offer.”³⁹ Because many of these immigrants were unskilled, and could only offer their services as laborers, many Norwegian immigrants sought employment in mills during the summer months and at lumber camps during the winter. Anders found the winters months much more agreeable. He was able to escape the boredom of the sawmills during the summer months.

At first Anders sounded skeptical about working in the woods. Before departing for the woods in November 1890, Anders wrote to his brother and confessed that he did not think life in the woods would be much better than millwork, but he remained eager

³⁷ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to Jacob Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 26 July 1891.

³⁸ Lovoll, Odd S., *The Promise of America*, 27.

³⁹ Lovoll, Odd S., *The Promise of America*, 27.

for a change from the life of the mills.⁴⁰ After arriving in the woods, Anders remained disillusioned about lumbering, stating he “certainly will not be praising the state of affairs and life up here in the woods,” in a letter to his parents from January 1891. Anders continued by describing his lodging arrangements, “70-80 men of all nationalities are together in one place so that not all comfort conveniences are carefully observed.”⁴¹ In his next letter Anders continues his description of what he quickly referred to as “the camp.” “There is first a rather large long building with bunks to lie in on two levels on both sides and in between a large stove in the middle.”⁴² Anders description is certainly agreeable with other historical accounts of lumber camps. In the late nineteenth century most lumber camps had a wooden shanty for the men to sleep in, and the stove provided the only warmth on cold nights. The sleeping bunks were made of boards covered with hemlock boughs or straw.⁴³

The lumber camps also provided Anders with a diet much different than the food he had grown accustomed to in Norway. “By the 1880s, the food in camp had improved in variety and taste, and by the 1890s, camp food was the envy of passing jewelry salesman. The woods boss found that good food increased production, cut illness, and improved morale.”⁴⁴ For Anders the change in eating patterns between the United States and Norway was something he observed very quickly. As he described in a letter from November 1890, “A man avoids being troubled too much with graut (cream porridge), sild (herring), suppe (soup), and such. Meat is used for every meal.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to Jacob Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 9 November 1890.

⁴¹ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 2 January 1891.

⁴² Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to Jacob Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 9 November 1890.

⁴³ Rosholt, 9.

⁴⁴ Rosholt, 11.

⁴⁵ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 3 November 1890.

Throughout the 1890s Anders generally worked in the sawmills during the summer months and in the woods during the winter. However, he worked briefly on a railroad in Montana and as a farm laborer in Grafton, North Dakota. Anders took those jobs in order to avoid working in the sawmills, but ultimately he returned to the mills in Eau Claire. It remains unclear why Anders took these jobs, but perhaps the sawmills and lumber camps remained largely unsatisfying jobs for him. Anders consoled himself only in the fact that when conditions were right a fair amount of money could be made in this line of work. This would not be the case forever though, the Panic of 1893 would begin a depression that would last over five years, and would find Anders struggling at times just to feed himself.

Hard Times All Around

For much of the mid-1890s the United States suffered from an economic depression. Many factors, notably agrarian problems and market fluctuations, initiated this depression. During this period unemployment remained high, and many businesses across the country could not survive and were forced to close. The depression hurt the nation's agricultural sector very hard, but ordinary workingmen like Anders Lian were not immune to the economic crisis. During this period Lian frequently wrote to his family members in Norway describing the dire economic conditions in the country, and the impact the depression had on his own life.

Ominous signs began to appear first in the late 1880s, but there were numerous events that caused the depression of the nineties. In the late 1880s two regions, the South and Great Plains, experienced growing agrarian problems. For the South, many of these problems stemmed from an erratic commodities market that still had not stabilized itself since the end of the Civil War. "Although production of cotton, the region's leading cash crop, more than doubled between 1870 and 1890, weak and occasionally plummeting commodity prices crippled most producers."⁴⁶ Farmers in the Great Plains also suffered from unstable market prices, and were burdened even further by accelerating deflation and three consecutive years of dry summers and severe winters.⁴⁷ Soon the United States' businesses would suffer the same burdens as farmers.

The depression, although affecting businesses last, was inevitable. Agrarian problems at home coupled with a depression gripping much of Europe were enough to begin slowing the American economy starting in 1890. With European nations calling in

⁴⁶ H. Roger Grant, *Self-Help in the 1890s Depression* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1983), 3.

⁴⁷ Grant, 4.

foreign loans, gold drained quickly from American reserves. All of this eventually led to the Panic of 1893, beginning in May when the National Cordage Company entered receivership. By the end of 1893 nearly 500 banks and 15,000 other businesses failed, and “by mid-1894 the unemployment rate had risen to more than fifteen percent.”⁴⁸ For the next five years industry and commerce remained sluggish in the United States, and not until 1897 did full-scale recovery begin. However, through most of the late 1890s the economy operated at five to ten percent below capacity, and not until after 1900 would the economy completely rebound.⁴⁹

In his letters written to family members in Norway, Anders frequently described the troublesome times in his letters. These letters also described the difficulty he faced during this period. While Anders found work during this period, although with some difficulty, he could not help but notice the effects of the depression. While temporarily employed on a farm in North Dakota Anders witnessed the effects of the depression first hand. After completing his job as a farm laborer Anders wrote his brother. “Now I have nothing and will go back to Wisconsin. We are experiencing extremely bad times here in America this year. 1000 working people are unemployed and there is nothing to work at or live for.”⁵⁰ Anders’ reference to 1000 working people is most likely an estimation of the people he witnessed first hand, or possible a mistranslation meant to read thousands of working people. Regardless, Anders’ comment points out the difficulty many, including himself, had at finding work. This would not be the last time Anders struggled to find work during the depression.

⁴⁸ John M. Murrin et al., eds., *Liberty Equality Power: A History of the American People*, 2d ed. (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 648.

⁴⁹ Charles Hoffman, “The Depression of the Nineties,” *Journal of Economic History* 16 No. 2 (June 1956): 139.

⁵⁰ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, to Jacob Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 17 September 1893.

By the summer of 1894 the country continued its downward spiral as the depression raged on. While writing to his parents Anders Lian offers another stark description of the difficulty many were having in America. “Overall times are very bad here. Thousands and thousands of workers are unemployed in the country. People say, and that with correctness I suppose, that no one can remember such times and conditions.”⁵¹ It is easy to understand why so many could not remember times being so bad, because as H. Roger Grant states, “Unemployment figures on a per capita basis during the winter of 1893-1894 were likely the greatest in the nation’s history.”⁵²

For many people, the depression of the 1890s became difficult on many levels. While many people were able to find jobs, they found their wages cut more and more as the depression continued. By 1896 Anders’ frustration with the depression, and his job, came through clearly when he wrote to his brother. “I am working at the mill now again, but am so terribly tired of the whole place. We will soon be getting nothing for it either, as the day wages have been reduced three years in a row.”⁵³ During the winter months, when Anders worked in logging camps, conditions were not much better. When he first arrived in the United States, Anders sent word to his brother that wintertime wages reached anywhere from twenty-six to thirty-two dollars a month plus room and board.⁵⁴ Five years later wages were not nearly as good. In a letter to a family member, Anders wrote that lumberjacks were paid between twenty and twenty-six dollars per month during the winter of 1896-1897.⁵⁵ In a letter to his parents in December 1896, Lian commented both on the poor wages in the woods, and how bad conditions remained.

⁵¹ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 1 July 1894.

⁵² Grant, 8.

⁵³ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, to Jacob Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 25 May 1896.

⁵⁴ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, to Jacob Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 5 March 1896.

⁵⁵ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, to an unidentified relative, Norway, late 1896.

“The wages in the woods are not much more than half of what they were before. Here in America it will soon not be possible to live any longer. In every little town are here are hundreds of men who cannot find work.”⁵⁶

Throughout the country conditions were very similar to what Anders Lian encountered in Wisconsin. In order to press the government to help the unemployed, Ohio reformer Jacob Coxey organized a “living petition” of unemployed workers to travel to Washington, D.C. Coxey was met with armed resistance and arrested for trespassing along with several other members of his protest.⁵⁷ Coxey’s army dramatized the unemployment issue in the United States, but an even more significant event in the 1890s brought much greater focus to the crisis of the times. “There are strikes and conditions here which cost the country millions of dollars. Last week a railroad strike broke out and hundreds of the railroad trains are also standing still.”⁵⁸ The railroad strike Anders referred to is the Pullman Strike of 1894. The Pullman strike is without doubt one of the most important events of the 1890s. George Pullman, founder of the Pullman Company, built the town of Pullman just south of Chicago. The town’s plan kept workers out of Chicago’s urban atmosphere and provided a clean, regulated environment to promote moral, productive behavior amongst the workers. With the onset of the depression of the 1890s, Pullman cut wages, laid off employees and forced the remainder to continue paying the same rent for company homes.⁵⁹ The ensuing strike brought many railroads across the United States to a halt, as almost no Pullman cars operated across the country. Thousands of state militia soldiers were called up and finally put an end to the

⁵⁶ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 12 December 1894.

⁵⁷ Murrin et al., 648.

⁵⁸ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 1 July 1894.

⁵⁹ Richard Schneirov, Shelton Stromquist, and Nick Salvatore, eds., *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s: Essays on Labor and Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 8.

strike in July 1894.⁶⁰ The combination of a sluggish economy and labor unrest in the 1890s would contribute to the rise of Progressivism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

By the middle of 1895 the American economy seemed to be turning around, and coming out of the depression. Unfortunately political events in December 1895 sent stocks plummeting again. “The widespread fear of war with Great Britain, prompted largely by President Cleveland’s belligerent message to Congress on December 17, 1895, that blasted British policy in the Venezuelan boundary dispute, sent stock prices tumbling.”⁶¹ This destroyed the hopes of many Americans. Believing the depression ended and good fortunes laid on the horizons. Anders Lian certainly conveyed this mood when writing to his parents in the summer of 1895. “Times are gradually becoming a little better now. Over the whole country the year’s forecast appears to be promising.”⁶² How wrong they were. Between 1896 and 1897 Anders continually struggled to find work. Corresponding with his family in early 1896, Anders discussed the trouble he had finding work during the winter months. Had he not, in his own words, he “probably would have been loafing around town.”⁶³ In addition to having trouble finding employment during the winter months, Anders often found himself unemployed for weeks because the mill season ended unusually early during these years. Logging camps were also starting late and shutting down early between 1895 and 1897. “It is now a long time since I stopped working, and now it definitely looks as if there shall not be anything more to do either. The mills and factories are closing and people are becoming

⁶⁰ Murrin et al., 649.

⁶¹ Grant, 7.

⁶² Anders Lian, Eau Claire, to Jacob Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 19 July 1895.

⁶³ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, to his parents and brother, Norway, 26 January 1896.

unemployed every day.”⁶⁴ Eau Claire in the mid-1890s was a much different place than it had been a decade earlier. In the late 1890s the once booming lumber industry along the Chippewa River slowed down significantly. Mercantile and Manufacturing industries were replacing the rapidly closing mills.⁶⁵ Everyone knew this was bound to happen though. Robert Nesbit explains this decline through his examination of a Chippewa Valley lumber company. “The Daniel Shaw Lumber Company contracted only for white pine in the 1860s, a minimum of eighteen inches in diameter. By the 1870s, this had shrunk to twelve inches, by the eighties there could be no more than five logs to furnish 1,000 board feet, by the nineties eight logs, and only a small percentage were white pine.”⁶⁶ The combination of a sluggish economy and the rapidly vanishing pine forests in Northern Wisconsin forced many Eau Claire mills to close during this period.

For Anders Lian the depression of the 1890s marked the low point of his, and certainly many immigrants’ lives in America. “There are masses of people who are going back to the old country, and not just Norwegians and Scandinavians, but from all over Europe. I saw in a newspaper lately that from New York alone, 70,000 had returned.”⁶⁷ According to John Randolph Jenswold, citing Norwegian government records, “one-quarter of all those who emigrated to America between 1881 and 1920 returned home between 1891 and 1940.”⁶⁸ Jenswold’s research in the late twentieth century focused on the urban lives of Norwegian immigrants, something that was not examined by any prior historian. Many of these immigrants who returned home during

⁶⁴ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 21 August 1896.

⁶⁵ Lois Barland, *Sawdust City: A History of Eau Claire, Wisconsin from earliest times to 1910* (Stevens Point, Wis.: Worzalla Publishing Company, 1960), 112.

⁶⁶ Robert C. Nesbit, *Wisconsin: A History*, 2nd ed. (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 309-310.

⁶⁷ Anders Lian, Eau Claire, to Jacob Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 22 October 1893.

⁶⁸ John Randolph Jenswold, “‘The Hidden Settlement’: Norwegian Americans Encounter the City, 1880-1930” (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 1990), 61.

this period, left in order to escape the troubled times that gripped the United States. However some, including Anders Lian, chose to stay in the United States and struggle through the depression. Without a doubt the depression of the 1890s was one of the most difficult periods in American history. Labor, politics, and economics were all in an upheaval that left the United States a much different country than it was before.

The Spanish-American War and its Impact

On April 19, 1898 the United States Congress approved a war resolution that sent the United States to war with Spain, over Cuba. The two greatest causes of U.S. entry into the war were the destruction of the USS *Maine* along with growing public opinion against Spain. Thousands of men volunteered to join the army, including Anders Lian, although many, like Lian, would never see combat duty during the war.

The conflict began in 1895 when Cuban rebels staged a revolt against their Spanish rulers. The fighting between the Cuban rebels and the Spanish Army was brutal. Many Cubans were forced into concentration camps where they were, “denied adequate food, shelter and sanitation, an estimated 200,000 Cubans, one-eighth of the island’s population, died of starvation and disease.”⁶⁹ These atrocities did not go unnoticed in the United States. Accounts in the *New York Times* and *New York World* kept Americans well informed of all the vivid details of the rebellion.⁷⁰ Public opinion in the United States swayed heavily against the Spanish, despite exaggerated reports of Spanish brutality in the *America Press*.⁷¹ Americans viewed the Spanish as an oppressive colonial force and favored the rebel cause.

While public opinion favored war, it was not enough to cause the United States to enter the war. In early 1898 the battleship *Maine* was sent to Havana, Cuba to protect United States citizens there, and on February 16, 1898 the battleship mysteriously exploded. The American Press immediately accused the Spanish of causing the explosion, putting America on a direct course to war. Hundreds of naval officers and enlisted men died as a result of the explosion. “An investigation by American naval

⁶⁹ Murrin et al., 737.

⁷⁰ Murrin et al., 738.

⁷¹ Blum et al., 542.

officers reported that the *Maine's* bottom plates had been thrust inward, indicating an external explosion, but the cause of the tragedy was never discovered.”⁷² President William McKinley immediately responded by demanding the Spanish meet a number of conditions in order to avoid war, including compensation for the loss of the *Maine*. The Spanish agreed to some of these conditions, but refused to agree on all of the terms. After exhausting diplomatic options the United States entered into war with Spain.

On the eve of war, the United States was ill prepared for an engagement against the Spanish army in Cuba. This caused Congress to increase the size of the regular United States army, and to ask for volunteers. “The response to this call was astounding, but outfitting, training, and transporting the new recruits overwhelmed the Army’s capabilities.”⁷³ Among those volunteering for the army was Anders Lian.

Although Anders never saw combat duty during the course of the Spanish-American war, he did spend nearly a year serving with Company A of the Minneapolis 15th Regiment. The exact reason Anders joined the army is unclear from his letters. Anders first mentions the war in a letter to his brother from June 1898. In the letter he explains that the war makes very little impact on life in the northern states, with the only real concern being the escalating prices of tobacco and alcohol.⁷⁴ At this point Anders had not mentioned volunteering for the army, yet less than a month later he enlisted with a unit based in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

On July 1, 1898, nearly two months into the war with Spain, Anders quit his logging job and volunteered for the army.⁷⁵ The reasons Anders joined the army are

⁷² Blum et al., 542.

⁷³ Murrin et al., 739.

⁷⁴ Anders Lian, Drummond, Wisconsin, to Jacob Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 5 June 1898.

⁷⁵ Anders Lian, Camp Ramsey, Minnesota, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 12 July 1898.

unclear, as he does not outline any of them in his letters. The impact of the depression in the 1890s may have left Anders with an uncertainty about summer employment at the mills in Eau Claire. In this sense, joining the army may have brought stability to his life, something that seemed to elude him while he stayed in Eau Claire. He may also have sought adventure, being still single, or the money from being in the army. However, it is also possible that Anders felt a sense of duty to his adopted country. Regardless, joining the army certainly changed Anders life, taking him to places he had never been before.

In a letter to his parents from July 12, 1898, Anders briefly detailed the conditions he encountered in the Army. He explains that he trained daily for about five hours and sleeps in a tent with four other men. While Anders maintained that the rations were not terrible, he does mention that there is a lot of sickness. “There is a great deal of sickness amongst the soldiers here which is not to be wondered at when nearly 1,400 men are packed together in a small place.”⁷⁶ Throughout the course of his enlistment Anders always maintained that he remained in good health. The conditions Anders faced were much better than anything he would have encountered had he seen combat duty. Besides combat, American soldiers in Cuba also had to face a much more grueling battle against malaria and other tropical diseases. It becomes clear through his letters that his future in the army remained questionable while he was enlisted. “Whether we will get to see any of the war is quite uncertain as Spain is soon defeated already.”⁷⁷ This uncertainty is elaborated further in a letter only a few weeks later. “Here there are many who maintain that the war is soon over and then we will soon be discharged.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Anders Lian, Camp Ramsey, Minnesota, to Jacob Lian, Vaerdalen, Norway, 12 August 1898.

⁷⁷ Anders Lian, Camp Ramsey, Minnesota, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 12 July 1898.

⁷⁸ Anders Lian, Hamline, Minnesota, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 29 July 1898.

While many of the volunteers were let go after the Spanish-American war concluded in August 1898, Anders remained in service through the rest of the year. Around November 1898, Anders' regiment moved to a camp near Augusta, Georgia to continue drilling.⁷⁹ Moving from Norway to Wisconsin, Anders remained familiar with the climate and Scandinavian culture, but Georgia was a completely different experience for Anders.

We have an unusual climate down here. No snow yet (moreover, it rarely snows down here) and at the same time as the weather in Minnesota and Wisconsin is snow and biting cold at this season. Down here we have almost not seen frost or ice, and we run around in short-sleeve shirts during the day just as if it were midsummer.⁸⁰

Training in Georgia familiarized his regiment to a winter without snow. During this period the regiment also received new guns and ammunition while stationed in Georgia. "We have now acquired new Krag-Jorgensen rifles of the newest model directly from the factory in Springfield and about 50,000 sharp cartridges, so we are getting a little improvement in marksmanship."⁸¹ The Krag-Jorgensen rifle is of Norwegian design, and most likely fit well with the Minneapolis 15th Regiment, a unit that likely had a high percentage of soldiers reporting Scandinavian descent. Minneapolis, like Eau Claire, had a high portion of its population with Scandinavian backgrounds.

It is unclear when Anders Lian was discharged from the army, but by the end of 1899 he had returned to the north woods of Wisconsin. In a letter to his parents from December 13, 1899 Lian mentions his discharge, but does not elaborate on it because he had apparently written a letter earlier that discussed it. It is difficult to interpret Anders

⁷⁹ Anders Lian, Minneapolis, Minnesota, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 20 October 1898.

⁸⁰ Anders Lian, Augusta, Georgia, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 18 January 1899.

⁸¹ Anders Lian, Camp MacKenzie, Georgia, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 2 December 1898.

experience in the army without the other letter. In the December letter it seems as though his military career is over and he does not feel the need to speak of it. “In my letter to Jacob I told about my letters from you and of my discharge from the army, so I need not write more about that.”⁸² Regardless, Anders experience in the United States Army remains an important part of his life in the United States.

⁸² Anders Lian, Phillips, Wisconsin, to his parents, Vaerdalen, Norway, 13 December 1899.

Conclusion

For nearly one hundred years beginning in 1820, well over a half-million Norwegians left for the United States.⁸³ They left Norway due to a variety of reasons such as land and population pressures. Anders likely left due to Norway's constantly rising population coupled with a stagnant economy. While living in Norway the letters from his Uncle Elling certainly intrigued Anders. These letters play an important role in explaining why he chose to leave Norway and settle in the United States. Letters, like those received by Lian, have played an important role in enticing potential immigrants to leave their homes for the United States.

Although Anders had no trouble finding employment upon arrival, his fortunes would not always be so great. Through the course of the 1890s depression Anders struggled to remain employed year round, and contended with wages being reduced almost every year. Through his letters it becomes clear that life in America did not promise everything that he dreamt and aspired it would. What surfaces is that like Anders, not all immigrants achieved the measures of success they foresaw in America. However, Anders letters abruptly end in 1899, for reasons not entirely clear, and it is unknown what degree of success or failure Anders encountered after 1899.⁸⁴

Ultimately many Norwegians would return to Norway, for many of the same reasons they left in the first place. Often return migration was a direct result of business cycles in the United States. Anders pointed this out during the depression of the 1890s when he spoke of the thousands returning to Europe. "Official Norwegian statistics indicate that between 1891 and 1940 as many as a quarter of all emigrants to America

⁸³ Daniels, 165.

⁸⁴ No record of Anders appears in Wisconsin's vital statistics after 1899. Death, Marriage and Naturalization records leave no clue as to what happened to him after his final letter.

after 1881 resettled in Norway.”⁸⁵ Anders’ fate is not known. His letters stop abruptly in 1899, while he is again working in a lumber camp. Anders frequently commented on being dissatisfied with wages and labor conditions in the United States. Like many other immigrants during this period it is possible that Anders became so dissatisfied with life in America that he returned to Norway.

⁸⁵ Lovoll, 29.

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