

Norwegians and Swedes in the United States: Friends and Neighbors is a collection of seventeen essays stemming from the 2007 Swenson Center conference of the same name.

The collection is divided into four distinct sections—Context, Culture, Conflict and Community—each undertaking a thorough examination of the relationships and interactions between the largest immigration populations from Scandinavian to the United States. As the subheadings suggest, a comprehensive study of the relationship between Norwegians and Swedes in the United States cannot be sustained on comparison alone. Indeed, as Donna R. Gabaccia outlines in the very useful foreword to the book, the narrative of this relationship continues to develop new strains due in part to increasing attention to “inter-ethnic perspectives” concerning American immigration history in general and Scandinavian interactions in particular. It is the developing story of Scandinavian “inter-ethnic perspectives” that the collection aims to uncover and narrate and as a whole this aim is successful. As Gabaccia rightly points out, however, the collection downplays the “importance of contention” between the two groups, by choosing to highlight “the Americanization that brought both groups of immigrants closer to each other.”

The first section on context contains two substantial introductory chapters: “Friends and Neighbors? Patterns of Norwegian-Swedish Interaction in the United States” by co-editor Dag Blanck and “Norwegians and Swedes in America: Some Comparisons” by H. Arnold Barton. The opening chapters strive to broadly describe the identities of each group and the patterns of interactions between them. Blanck develops a useful chronology for grappling with the complex issue, dividing recognizable patterns of interaction into three periods. Blanck emphasizes that although there has yet to be a systematic and comprehensive study of the history of the Scandinavians in the United States, certain patterns emerge from the studies that do exist. When division did occur between Norwegian and Swedish immigrants it was along religious lines, more so than national ones. In matters of the heart, however, Norwegians and Swedes found each other the most desirable and within the political sphere they were each others’ closest allies. Barton’s comparative study of the two groups is admittedly more speculative in nature, but no less productive in results by focusing on the differences between the groups. Some of Barton’s findings are less surprising than others. That the Norwegians were the more nationalist of the two immigrant groups makes sense in term of Norway’s political development over the nineteenth century ending with its independence in 1905. That Norwegian Americans wrote more novels than Swedes was unexpected. As was the conclusion that Swedish Americans generally outpaced their Scandinavian neighbors in the sciences and technology, the visual arts and business. As Barton states, differences such as those I have pointed out are compelling and open new lines of investigation for further research. How to assess why these differences occurred, however, is not as easy or apparent.

The second section examines the central position that diverse aspects of culture held in the Norwegian and Swedish immigrant experience. The following three chapters stood out: Odd S. Lovoll's opening chapter, "Preserving a Cultural Heritage Across Boundaries: A Comparative Perspective on Riksföreningen Sverigekontakt and the Nordmanns-Forbundet" skillfully depicts how even as societies were started in both Norway and Sweden to promote home colonization, the two societies mentioned in the title were founded to cope with expanding populations outside the nation state. Lovoll's explanation of how each society aimed to create a notion of worldwide nationality founded on the promotion of cultural retention within emigrant populations is thought provoking, particularly regarding the underlying conservative politics at its core, a point I would have liked to see more thoroughly developed. In "Freedom, Identity, and Double Perspectives: Representations of the Migrant Experience in the Novels of Vilhelm Moberg and O.E. Rølvaag," Ingeborg Kongslien illustrates that although each author penned works of historical fiction and not historical accounts per se, due to the authors' personal experiences the novels nevertheless provide ample and reliable insights into Scandinavian emigration, including those historical, psychological, sociological and existential. James P. Leary's "Är Du Svenske?"--"Norsk! Norsk!": Folk Humor and Cultural Difference in Scandinavian America" is the highlight of the section as it is rich with familiar jokes that become compelling examples of the development of cultural difference between Norwegian and Swedish Americans. Leary convincingly maps how "Scandihoovian" humor is more about negotiating relationships between Norwegians and Swedes in the United States than about any actual reference to the homeland. Indeed, he illustrates that what often appears as insider teasing is in reality a way to communicate cultural difference to the wider, and often undiscerning, American public.

The third section of the collection identifies areas where conflict arose between the Scandinavian immigrant groups. The first two chapters examine how Norwegian independence affected relationships between Norwegian and Swedish Americans, while the second two chapters scrutinize the complex divides, factions and mergers within the varying denominations of the Lutheran Church in the United States. Jørn Brøndal's "We are Norwegians and Swedes Now, Not Scandinavians": The Impact of Norwegian Independence on Scandinavian American Politics in the Midwest" and Ulf Jonas Björk's "An End to Brotherhood?" Swedes and Norwegians in America Discuss the 1905 Union Dissolution" are complimentary chapters that detail the ramifications of Norway's independence on political and social alignments between Norwegian and Swedish Americans. The conclusions of both chapters reflect back to my earlier statement concerning the collection overall: conflicts were limited and those that arose were short-lived. As each chapter suggests, pan-Scandinavianism seems to have post-dated any animosity, albeit at varying levels across time and place. Kurt W. Peterson's "A Question of Conscious: Minnesota's Norwegian American Lutherans and the Teaching of Evolution" is the stand out piece of the collection. Peterson targets the imperative position that Norwegian American Lutherans held in early twentieth century debates concerning the status of evolution in public schools and by doing so, places current discourse on the subject into a new, and

nuanced historical context. The chapter is filled with—what was for me at least—compelling insight into how Lutheran history supported the separation of church and state, thus ultimately rendering null the scheme to legislate the exclusion of evolution in Minnesota’s public schools and universities. Peterson asserts that, “many Lutherans wanted nothing to do with [legislation] because they wanted nothing to do with the Reformed tradition. Their fight was not simply over the teaching of evolution; for them, the heart of their Lutheran theological heritage was at stake.” Equally compelling is the way in which Peterson details the close ideological ties between Norwegian American Lutheranism and the broader Evangelical movement.

The closing section of the collection is a fitting bookend to a study that casts a wide net as it examines both distinct features and broad trends within the Norwegian and Swedish American community. That this section is the largest reinforces the collection’s unifying intentions. Each chapter features a case study of a specific cluster of Norwegian and Swedish immigrants within the United States. The section is rich with description and details, demographics and specifics, whether investigating the nontraditional immigrant position held by many Norwegian and Swedish engineers and architects, as in Per-Olof Grönberg’s contribution, or chronicling the narrative of an insulated Scandinavian enclave on the shores of Lake Superior, as in Philip J. Anderson’s piece. All but one chapter, however, focuses on Scandinavian communities in the Midwest. The exception being Jennifer Eastman Atterbery’s “Scandinavian’s in the Rocky Mountain West: Pragmatic and Programmatic.” Atterbery’s very interesting examination of Scandinavian settlements in Montana and LDS Utah (touching only briefly on California) broadens the scope of what is an otherwise very regional-specific section. In fact, the exclusion of the West is one of the shortcomings of the collection as a whole and I would have liked the same rigorous scholarship that pervades the collection applied to Norwegian and Swedish communities in California, Oregon and Washington, or for that matter, to those in New York and the East. One of the most outstanding features in this section is the way in which personal narrative and family history interjects into large-scale and oftentimes characterless demographic statistics. In more than one instance, particularly in Byron J. Nordstrom’s “Norwegians and Swedes in Willmar, Minnesota, in the Early Twentieth Century,” general and sweeping statistical information is transformed from the tedious to the compelling by granting the dates, numbers, and anonymous names on the page, a narrative. By fleshing out both the communities under study and particular individuals within those communities, the closing section is a fitting end to what is a comprehensive, informative and insightful study of Norwegians and Swedes in the United States. The information presented in this study will most certainly fuel and encourage subsequent research and publication in the field.