Beyond the Ethnic Colony: Syttende Mai in Whitewater, Wisconsin, 1880-1940

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Abstract
This essay examines the celebration of Norway's Constitution Day in Whitewater, Wisconsin, between 1880 and 1940. While much of the existing research on Norway's Constitution Day in America has focused on communities with significant Norwegian-American populations, this study analyzes how these celebrations transpired in a community with a relatively small Norwegian-American presence. The analysis reveals both similarities and differences when comparing the Whitewater celebrations to those in communities with larger Norwegian-American populations. This way, it demonstrates how local conditions shaped cultural practices in immigrant communities, including those tied to ethnic celebration. By comparing celebratory practices across different types of communities, the essay emphasizes the need for further research into the experiences of Norwegian Americans who resided outside of typical ethnic colonies, suggesting that such an approach would offer new insights into the complex social dynamics of migration and cultural identity.

Introduction

On 17 May 1931, a group of twenty-nine individuals convened at a private residence in Whitewater, Wisconsin to commemorate Norway's Constitution Day. The event featured a selection of Norwegian cuisine, and the venue was accordingly decorated with Norwegian flags. Throughout the afternoon, attendees engaged in the

singing of Norwegian songs, and young women wearing traditional costumes performed Norwegian folk dances. Such celebrations were not unusual in communities of substantial Norwegian-American populations. In the small town of Whitewater, however, Norwegian Americans made up only a modest minority. The commemoration therefore reflected both Norwegian and American cultural traditions. In addition to Norwegian flags, the American national emblem was also displayed as part of the decorations, and the program culminated with the singing of "America."[1]

In previous research, studies concerning ethnic celebration in the United States have predominantly focused on ethnic colonies or enclaves where the examined demographic constituted a significant presence. For example, scholars have concentrated on Italian-American festivals in New York, German-American festivals in Milwaukee, and Japanese-American celebrations in California.[2] This trend is also identifiable in the field of Norwegian-American history, where scholars often have focused on small towns or rural communities characterized by a significant concentration of Norwegian-American residents.[3] Additionally, historians have, to some extent, directed their attention towards ethnic celebrations in larger urban communities with considerable Norwegian-American populations, including Chicago and the twin cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul.[4] These settlements have housed sizeable Norwegian-American communities, and interesting results can be found through studies of celebrations in these ethnic colonies.[5]

This essay, however, concentrates on a different type of settlement. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Whitewater was not particularly characterized by the presence of Norwegian-born migrants or their descendants. The settlement was founded by internal migrants from the New England region in 1837, and international migrants from various parts of Europe settled in the community over the following decades.[6] Thus, by studying the Norwegian Constitution Day in Whitewater, it is possible to investigate the development of ethnic celebration in a community where Norwegian Americans constituted a relatively small minority. The following research question has therefore been for-

mulated for this study: "How did Norwegian Americans in Whitewater, Wisconsin, celebrate Norway's Constitution Day between 1880 and 1940, and how did this differ from celebrations in communities with larger Norwegian-American populations?" The time frame was chosen because it encompasses an interesting and relevant period in local and national history. Whitewater experienced considerable demographic changes during this period, and the larger societal conditions for expressing ethnic affiliation, for instance through ethnic celebration, were changing in the period.[7]

The commemoration of Norway's Constitution Day, commonly referred to as *Syttende Mai*¸ serves as a main example of ethnic celebration in this essay. These celebrations mark the anniversary of the signing of the Norwegian Constitution in 1814 and are regarded as the most significant annual ethnic celebration associated with Norwegian Americans as an ethnic group.[8] Other forms of ethnic celebration, such as the 1925 centennial that commemorated the beginning of organized migration from Norway to America, received comparatively less recognition among Whitewater residents. The essay therefore concentrates on celebrations tied to Norway's Constitution Day between 1880 and 1940, and it reveals both similarities and differences when comparing Whitewater's celebrations to those in communities with larger Norwegian-American populations. For instance, while celebrations in various types of communities played important roles in the preservation and adaptation of cultural traditions, the Whitewater celebrations stand out as relatively exclusive ethnic events compared to the more inclusive community festivals found in some communities with larger Norwegian-American populations. Consequently, the essay suggests that future research could benefit from a broader exploration of the experiences of international migrants who resided outside of typical ethnic colonies or enclaves. Such a shift in focus could enhance our understanding of how local conditions, including settlement patterns and population composition, influenced the evolution of cultural traditions, including practices tied to ethnic celebration.

Being an in-depth case study, the essay especially concentrates on the local community of Whitewater. However, its objectives ex-

tend beyond the confines of this specific community, as it also aims to explore potential differences between different types of communities. To achieve this broader aim, the essay consults earlier research regarding the purpose and function of ethnic celebration. Historian Ellen M. Litwicki, among others, views ethnicity and other forms of collective identity as socially constructed rather than primordial. Public holidays and commemorations, according to Litwicki, serve as significant sites of this process of invention, with international migrants and their descendants creating ethnic identities through ethnic celebration.[9] Similarly, historian April Schultz asserts that celebrations represent significant sites where meaning is constructed or reaffirmed. Schultz characterizes ethnic celebrations as intricate and continuous dialogues that are part of the broader construction and reconstruction of cultural identities.[10] Furthermore, she argues that the construction of Norwegian-American identities in the early twentieth century was "not a homogenous identity invented and accepted by a homogenous group."[11] Norwegian Americans resided in various types of local communities, with some residing in ethnic enclaves surrounded by ethnic institutions and others inhabiting regions with minimal Norwegian-American presence. Consequently, the purposes and functions of ethnic celebrations, as well as the development of ethnic identities, could differ among residents of different settlement types.[12] The celebration of the Norwegian Constitution Day could therefore play an important role in the creation and recreation of Norwegian-American identities, potentially playing different roles in Whitewater compared to other types of local communities.

Focusing on the celebration of Norway's Constitution Day in Minneapolis-St. Paul, historian David Mauk has identified that these events served several functions. Firstly, they contributed to the preservation of a common cultural heritage, fostering a sense of community that distinguished Norwegian Americans from other ethnic groups and the broader society.[13] Secondly, the celebrations encompassed assertions regarding the group's contributions to the United States and the compatibility of Norwegian and American traditions, with the aim of illustrating that Norwegian Americans

had found their rightful place in American society. Additionally, according to Mauk, the Norwegian Constitution Day has been an important site for Norwegian-American leaders to construct a public reputation for their group, shape opinions in both Norway and the United States, and reinforce the group's ties and status in both countries.[14]

Building on the insights of Litwicki, Schultz, and Mauk, among others, this essay explores how Norwegian Americans celebrated the Norwegian Constitution Day in Whitewater, a community where Norwegian immigrants constituted a relatively modest minority. The essay is divided into two main sections. The first provides a chronological overview of the *Syttende Mai* celebrations in Whitewater from 1880 to 1940. The second section adopts a comparative approach, contrasting Whitewater's observances with those in communities where Norwegian Americans formed a larger portion of the local population. This structure allows for an investigation into the development of *Syttende Mai* celebrations in Whitewater, while also providing insights into how the experiences of Norwegian Americans as a local minority shaped their cultural practices in comparison to those in more sizable Norwegian-American communities.

Syttende Mai in Whitewater

Whitewater was established as a settlement in 1837, and its population grew steadily during the following decades. Between 1880 and 1940, the settlement's population ranged from 3,215 and 4,359.[15] Although it initially consisted largely of internal migrants from the New England region, Whitewater also attracted international migrants, primarily from Ireland, Germany, Norway, and England. Norwegian-born migrants began settling in the area in the 1840s, and by 1900 their population had reached 107, constituting 3.1 percent of the settlement's total population. The number of Norwegian-born residents declined over the subsequent decades, with only 27 individuals–less than one percent–recorded as Norwegian-born in the 1940 census.[16] In addition to these foreign-born migrants, about one-third of Whitewater's residents in the early

twentieth century had foreign-born parents. The exact number of American-born residents of Norwegian parentage has not been available, but it is reasonable to assume that they outnumbered the Norwegian-born population.[17] Thus, even though Norwegian Americans never formed a large proportion of Whitewater's overall population, a notable number lived there between 1880 and 1940.

Despite this demographic presence, local newspapers did not accord significant attention to the Norwegian Constitution Day during the nineteenth century. On some occasions, Whitewater newspapers reported on celebrations occurring in other locations, but there is no indication to suggest that *Syttende Mai* was commemorated within the city's borders. For instance, in 1883, *The Whitewater Register* explicitly noted the absence of a public celebration in the local community, stating, "The 17th of May, the Norwegian 4th of July, was celebrated with no little display at Madison and some other places, but Whitewater was not among them."[18] As such, newspaper accounts from the nineteenth century reflect a limited enthusiasm for organizing public events on the Norwegian Constitution Day in Whitewater, despite sporadically acknowledging that the day was observed in other communities.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Norwegian Constitution Day received greater coverage in local newspapers. On several occasions during the 1890s, it was reported that residents of Whitewater participated in events held in other cities, such as Beloit.[19] The language employed in local newspapers during this period suggests that the day had gained wider recognition among its readers. While earlier accounts provided brief explanations of the day's significance, such as likening it to America's Independence Day, reports in the 1890s made more casual references to the event, such as "the Norwegian anniversary."[20] This suggests that the population of Whitewater had become more familiar with the Norwegian Constitution Day, despite the fact that public events were still not widely observed in the local community.

Beginning in 1912, public celebrations on the Norwegian Constitution Day were organized in Whitewater and the surrounding area.[21] These events were predominantly arranged by religious so-

cieties or in partnership with Norwegian-American Lutheran congregations.[22] From the 1880s and onwards, Norwegian Lutheran churches in Whitewater, Heart Prairie, Skoponong, and Sugar Creek were united under a single pastorate.[23] Given their proximity to one another, events held in one location often drew attendees from the others. Accordingly, the *Syttende Mai* celebration in Skoponong in 1912, which was spearheaded by a local Willing Workers' Society and held at the Skoponong Church, also involved the Whitewater community. *The Whitewater Register* reported that the celebration featured Norwegian music and songs, including the National Anthem of Norway.[24] The incorporation of these elements is indicative of a desire to preserve a common cultural heritage among Norwegian Americans in the area.[25]

The main address delivered at the 1912 Skoponong celebration was given in English by Reverend N. G. A. Garness. Garness, whose parents had emigrated from the Hordaland region of Norway, was born in Iowa and served as the pastor of the united pastorate between 1907 and 1920.[26] Following the speech and the general program, attendees were served ice cream and cake. Despite ice cream being commonly associated with more recent celebrations of Norway's Constitution Day, it was not considered a traditional Norwegian dish at the time. The use of English language, as well as the selection of dessert, indicate that the event was not solely an occasion for preserving a common Norwegian or Norwegian-American cultural heritage. Rather, it served additional purposes and reflects how individuals of Norwegian birth and ancestry in the Whitewater area constructed or reconstructed their ethnic identities as Norwegian Americans.[27]

In 1913, a *Syttende Mai* celebration was organized at the Norwegian Lutheran Church of Whitewater. As reported by *The Whitewater Gazette*, the event included a special program featuring "favorite Norse melodies by the choir."[28] Reverend Garness, again, acted as main speaker, and the newspaper noted that his address was appropriate and interesting. In his speech, the reverend discussed the meaning of the day and explained the duty of "American Norwegians" to celebrate the occasion with their compatriots in

the old country.[29] These formulations demonstrate the perceived importance of the day and signify an intention to preserve a sense of continuity or affiliation with Norway and its customs. At the same time, they indicate that a shift had taken place. In the words of the reverend, those in attendance were no longer simply "Norwegians," but rather "American Norwegians." According to Garness, it was their responsibility to celebrate the Norwegian Constitution Day in accordance with this distinction. This illustrates how the event served as a locus for the development of ethnic group identity at the local level. Through his speech, which stressed the obligations of "American Norwegians," the pastor contributed to this process of construction. And ethnic celebration, as argued by both Schultz and Litwicki, served as a site where this process took place.[30]

Although the church played a prominent role in commemorating the Norwegian Constitution Day in Whitewater during the early twentieth century, celebrations were not limited to its premises. In addition to the 1913 church celebration, an event was also organized at the city's Normal School that same year. According to local newspapers, the program was given by Norwegian students at the school and included the national song, performed by a chorus of about twenty voices, and a lecture on "High Lights of Norwegian History." Additionally, the program featured readings of poems by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and performances of Norwegian folk dances in traditional Norwegian costumes. However, alongside these otherwise preservationist program elements, the event also featured a speech on the impact of environment on Norwegian character.[31] This suggests an interest in exploring potential changes associated with migration and location. As such, the celebration of Norway's Constitution Day in Whitewater not only functioned as a site for constructing or reconstructing ethnic group identities, but also as a site for active reflection on how these processes influenced the character of Norwegian Americans in the Whitewater community.

During the following years, annual celebrations were organized in the Norwegian Lutheran Church of Whitewater. In 1916, *The Whitewater Register* acknowledged that it had become a recurring

event by noting that "Norwegian Independence Day on May 17 is always appropriately celebrated in Whitewater each year at the Evangelic Lutheran Church."[32] For the 1916 celebration, the church was decorated with Norwegian and American flags, and an exhibit featuring pictures of Norway was on display. The program, similar to prior occasions, encompassed musical performances and recitations, concluding with various refreshments.

As noted by earlier research, the First World War significantly impacted conditions for cultural and ethnic expression in the United States.[33] Many foreign-born residents, and their American-born descendants, experienced increasing pressure to conform to Anglo-American cultural norms after 1914, with leading political figures promoting the idea of "100 percent Americanism" and demands of complete loyalty to the American war effort.[34] Among immigrant communities, these developments resulted in a reduced enthusiasm for organizing ethnic celebrations, including the Norwegian Constitution Day.[35] These trends also had local implications, as evidenced in Whitewater. Local newspapers indicate that Norway's Constitution Day was celebrated to a lesser extent during and after the war. Sparse reports of celebrations being held in Whitewater during the 1920s suggest that the occasion received less attention than it had in the 1910s, and it is reasonable to interpret this development in the context of broader societal changes during the World War era.[36]

As mentioned in the essay's introduction, a celebration on the Norwegian Constitution Day was organized at a private residence in 1931. Accounts in local newspapers indicate that the day had lost some of its recognition among local residents, with coverage, similar to that of the 1880s, briefly describing the day's significance. *The Whitewater Press*, for instance, noted that Norwegians celebrate "Independence Day" on 17 May and that many Americans of Norwegian birth or ancestry also commemorate the occasion.[37] The 1931 celebration took place at the home of Peter and Clara Nelson on Janesville Street in Whitewater, both of whom were born in Wisconsin in the 1870s to Norwegian-born parents from the Telemark region of Norway.[38] According to newspaper reports from the event,

"everything possible was Norwegian."[39] This was, of course, not the complete picture. The location was decorated with both American and Norwegian traditional symbols, and the program ended with the singing of "America." This event can, therefore, be regarded as a form of Norwegian-American celebration that incorporated cultural elements of various origins in order to demonstrate the compatibility of Norwegian and American traditions. As such, the 1931 celebration can be viewed in the context of the aforementioned objective of demonstrating how Norwegian Americans had found their rightful place within the American society.[40]

Overall, sources clearly suggest that a shift occurred in Whitewater's relationship with Norway's Constitution Day between 1880 and 1940. In the 1880s, there is no evidence to suggest that local residents marked the occasion either privately or publicly. Starting in the 1890s, some residents began participating in celebrations outside Whitewater. In the 1910s, annual public celebrations were held in Whitewater, often organized by individuals affiliated with Norwegian-American religious congregations. However, these celebrations ceased with the United States' entry into the First World War, with no public celebration identified during the 1920s or 1930s. The 1931 celebration, which was more of a private gathering, is an exception that symbolizes a selective and nostalgic connection to Norwegian-American culture and heritage rather than a broader communal tradition.

This arc of development aligns with larger shifts in Whitewater and the broader American society. First, a generational shift occurred. The number of Norwegian-born residents declined over the selected period, indicating that Whitewater's Norwegian-American community predominantly consisted of American-born individuals by the 1930s.[41] Previous research has suggested that the perceived connection to Norway and Norwegian cultural symbols was less pronounced among American-born Norwegian Americans.[42] It is therefore plausible that this generational shift diminished the perceived relevance of *Syttende Mai* for Norwegian Americans in Whitewater. Second, a linguistic shift took place between 1880 and 1940. Until the turn of the century, Whitewater's Norwegian-Amer-

ican congregation predominantly used Norwegian. Beginning in the early twentieth century, English was gradually introduced into congregational activities. By the 1920s, most of these activities were conducted in English.[43] This linguistic transition, which was influenced by the increasing pressures toward Americanism and the simultaneous generational shift, contributed to a transformation in the character of Whitewater's Norwegian-American community.[44] Third, a shift has been found in the church's role as an ethnic institution. Parallel to the linguistic shift, Whitewater's Norwegian-American church became less distinctly associated with ethnic identity. In the late nineteenth century, local newspapers often referred to it simply as the "Norwegian" church, emphasizing its connection to Norwegian language and culture. By the 1930s, while the church was still recognized as a Norwegian-American institution, its association with Norwegian language and culture had weakened.[45] As a result, it no longer served as a natural hub for ethnic celebrations, as it had in the 1910s. This development is, of course, also linked to the broader societal context in the World War era, which constrained the space for expressing ethnic affiliation.[46] Based on these observations, it is evident that cultural and societal trends influenced Whitewater's shifting relationship to Norway's Constitution Day between 1880 and 1940.

A Comparative Analysis

Norwegian Americans across the United States commemorated Norway's Constitution Day between 1880 and 1940. Comparing celebratory practices in different types of communities reveals both similarities and differences, and a comparative analysis helps identify the distinctive characteristics of celebrations in these different settings. Therefore, the following paragraphs adopt a comparative approach which examines the Whitewater celebrations alongside *Syttende Mai* observances in small towns with larger Norwegian-American populations, such as Benson in Minnesota and Stoughton and Moscow in Wisconsin.[47]

This comparative approach reveals several similarities. First, in every examined community, *Syttende Mai* served as an arena for

the preservation of cultural traditions. Cultural symbols brought from Norway, alongside Norwegian-American symbols inspired by Norwegian traditions, were displayed as part of public celebrations in various types of communities. Among other things, these symbols included flags, clothes, music, and food. For example, *Syttende Mai* celebrations in Benson, Minnesota, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often featured the display of Norwegian flags and other symbols of Norwegian culture. Historian Odd Lovoll has analyzed Benson's celebrations, noting that they often expressed demonstrative Norwegian symbols.[48] Similarly, historian Terje Joranger finds that *Syttende Mai* celebrations in Moscow, Wisconsin, incorporated various cultural symbols, including performances of traditional Norwegian folk music.[49] Efforts to preserve cultural symbols and traditions were also evident at the Whitewater celebrations. For instance, Norwegian flags and traditional music were key elements of Whitewater's *Syttende Mai* celebrations in the 1910s. These examples illustrate that similar markers of ethnic identity were displayed across different locations, regardless of the communities' respective ethnic compositions. Even though Norwegian Americans constituted a smaller portion of the overall population in Whitewater compared to Benson and Moscow, they employed the same symbols to affirm their connection to a broader Norwegian and Norwegian-American community. In this way, celebrations in various types of communities helped preserving a sense of common heritage and community among Norwegian Americans.[50]

Moreover, in every examined community, *Syttende Mai* served as an arena for the adjustment, adaptation, and development of cultural traditions. For instance, Joranger's examination of the Moscow celebrations shows how the Norwegian Constitution Day became part of a larger process where Norwegian-born migrants and their descendants could construct and reformulate ethnic group identities in America.[51] Lovoll also emphasizes that Norwegian Americans in Benson used *Syttende Mai* as an arena for the reinvention and recreation of a Norwegian cultural heritage that was transferred from one generation to the next.[52] As noted above, the

Whitewater celebrations featured explicit discussions regarding the changing nature of Norwegian and Norwegian-American character. The celebrations also featured both Norwegian and American cultural symbols, illustrating how it became a Norwegian-American celebration which differed from equivalent celebrations in Norway. Through ethnic celebration, thus, Norwegian Americans in Whitewater reinterpreted traditional cultural symbols into an American context, similar to the situation in communities with larger Norwegian-American populations.[53] As such, *Syttende Mai* celebrations in various communities, regardless of local ethnic composition, served as arenas for negotiations regarding the meaning of being "Norwegian American."[54]

More interestingly, comparing the Whitewater celebrations to those in communities with larger Norwegian-American populations also reveals several differences. First, the *Syttende Mai* celebrations in communities such as Benson, Moscow, and Stoughton followed a different arc of development compared to Whitewater. In these communities, celebrations often began as small, private gatherings in the mid-nineteenth century, before evolving into large, inclusive community festivals by the end of that century. These festivals often attracted many visitors, and they often drew participation from people of various ethnic and national backgrounds. As such, they were not exclusive Norwegian-American ethnic gatherings, but rather inclusive events considered relevant to a broader public. Such festivals typically involved activities inspired by American celebratory traditions, including baseball games and parades with decorated floats.[55] This trajectory contrasts with the development in Whitewater, where *Syttende Mai* celebrations never turned into broader community festivals.

These differences are connected to a second point: the role of *Syttende Mai* in the building of unity and identity. In communities such as Benson and Stoughton, *Syttende Mai* celebrations evolved into local patriotic events that honored the communities' historical ties to Norwegian-American culture and tradition. In doing so, they served as a resource in the building of local identity and patriotism, while simultaneously contributing to enhancing the public reputa-

tion of Norwegian Americans as a collective entity.[56] The celebrations highlighted the compatibility of Norwegian and American traditions and emphasized that Norwegian-Americanness was part of local history and character.[57] As a result, *Syttende Mai* was not merely an ethnic event, but also a broader celebration of local community and unity across ethnic boundaries.[58] In contrast, the day served different purposes in Whitewater. There, Norwegian-Americanness was not perceived as representative of the local community's character or history. The Norwegian Constitution Day did therefore not function as a tool for the construction of local identity and patriotism, but rather as a resource for creating ethnic togetherness in a more confined and exclusive sense. This contrast illustrates that *Syttende Mai* served different purposes in different types of communities, depending on aspects such as the composition of local populations and the cultural influence of Norwegian Americans on their respective local communities.

A third difference concerns the role of *Syttende Mai* as an arena for business and commercial interests. In the late nineteenth century, the Benson celebrations adopted an overtly American character and became community-wide events that attracted people from diverse national and ethnic backgrounds. Lovoll suggests that these changes were at least partly motivated by a desire to promote business by drawing rural families to the town, which likely contributed to the broad participation of businessmen from various ethnic backgrounds.[59] Similar trends have been found in Stoughton, where local businesses were involved in the planning and execution of the city's *Syttende Mai* festivals.[60] In contrast, as the celebrations in Whitewater never evolved into community festivals, they also did not function as arenas for commercial activity. These celebrations did not attract large crowds from outside the town, and they were therefore not of particular interest to the local business community. Instead, the Whitewater celebrations were largely initiated by religious societies driven by ethno-religious objectives rather than commercial profit. Thus, the celebrations in Whitewater did not include activities aimed at commercial transactions, such as the sale of food, clothing, flags, and other merchandise, in contrast to

those in Benson and Stoughton. This difference constitutes another example of how *Syttende Mai* served different functions in different types of communities. As meaning is constructed and reconstructed during public celebrations, as argued by Schultz, these differences also influenced perceptions of what it meant to be "Norwegian American."[61] Local conditions thereby shaped the celebratory practices on Norwegian-American ethnic holidays, which, in turn, influenced the experiences of Norwegian-born migrants and their descendants.

Even though some elements consistently were present at *Syttende Mai* celebrations across various settlement types, these examples demonstrate some of the differences that can be found when comparing ethnic celebrations in different local contexts. These differences were, at least in part, shaped by local conditions, including the composition of local populations. As such, the examples highlight that the experiences of Norwegian Americans varied depending on the characteristics of the communities in which they settled. Practices tied to ethnic celebration differed between ethnic colonies and other types of settlements. Therefore, it is important not only to study the cultural practices and experiences of international migrants who resided in ethnic clusters, but also to examine the conditions and practices in communities beyond the ethnic colony.

Conclusions

This essay set out to address two main questions. First, it aimed to examine how Norwegian Americans in Whitewater celebrated *Syttende Mai* between 1880 and 1940. The analysis reveals that Norway's Constitution Day was generally not widely celebrated among Whitewater residents during this period. In the 1880s, it was briefly mentioned in local newspapers, but there is no evidence of any organized celebrations taking place in the community. Beginning in the 1890s, newspapers reported that some residents participated in celebrations held elsewhere, but public events in Whitewater were not organized until the 1910s. These celebrations, which were primarily hosted by Norwegian Lutheran churches, occurred annually

for several years before ceasing during the First World War. Aside from a private gathering in 1931, there is no evidence of further commemorations during the selected period. Whitewater's celebrations never evolved into city-wide festivals that included residents beyond those of Norwegian birth or ancestry. Instead, they were largely confined to spaces such as churches or private homes. Still, they incorporated both Norwegian and American cultural symbols, including flags and music, and the English language was often used throughout the selected time period. This suggests that *Syttende Mai* celebrations in Whitewater were shaped by both local conditions and broader societal trends.

Second, the essay aimed to analyze how the celebration of Norway's Constitution Day in Whitewater differed from celebrations in communities with larger Norwegian-American populations. While some similarities have been identified–such as the role of *Syttende Mai* in the preservation and adaptation of cultural traditions–the differences demonstrate how local conditions shaped celebratory practices. In Whitewater, events tied to Norway's Constitution Day appeared as relatively exclusive ethnic commemorations, in contrast to the more inclusive community festivals observed in Benson, Moscow, and Stoughton. Moreover, differences have been identified regarding the role of *Syttende Mai* in the building of ethnic identity and local patriotism, as well as in the involvement of business and commercial interests. While these differences are unsurprising given the varying size and influence of Norwegian-American populations in these communities, they illustrate how local conditions influenced the experiences of Norwegian-born migrants and their descendants.

By highlighting these differences, this essay demonstrates that the Whitewater celebrations, in some respects, served different functions from those in communities with larger Norwegian-American populations. This, in turn, illustrates how Norwegian Americans who settled in ethnic colonies encountered different conditions than those who lived outside of such enclaves. As such, the study shows how local-level conditions influenced cultural practices, including those tied to ethnic celebration. Given the role of ethnic

celebration in the development of ethnic identities, these local-level differences played important roles in shaping how Norwegian-born migrants and their descendants negotiated their ethnic identities as Norwegian Americans. As such, future research could benefit from further exploration of international migrants who resided outside of typical ethnic colonies. This approach would provide new insights into the complex social dynamics of international migration, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how local conditions shaped the cultural practices and identities of American immigrant communities.

Notes

[1] "Norwegian Independence," *The Whitewater Press* (newspaper, Whitewater, Wisconsin), 21 May 1931, 1; *The Whitewater Register* (newspaper, Whitewater, Wisconsin), 21 May 1931, 1.

[2] For examples, see Bénédicte Deschamps, "Chapter 6 Italian Americans and Columbus Day: A Quest for Consensus between National and Group Identities, 1840-1910," in *Celebrating Ethnicity and Nation: American festive culture from the Revolution to the early twentieth century*, eds. Jürgen Heideking, Geneviève Fabre, and Kai Dreisbach (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001); Heike Bungert, "Demonstrating the Values of 'Gemüthlichkeit' and 'Cultur': The Festivals of German Americans in Milwaukee, 1870-1910," in *Celebrating Ethnicity and Nation: American festive culture from the Revolution to the early twentieth century*, eds. Jürgen Heideking, Geneviève Fabre, and Kai Dreisbach (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001); Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American celebration and conflict: A history of ethnic identity and festival, 1934-1990*, vol. 8 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[3] For example, see Odd Lovoll, *Norwegians on the Prairie: Ethnicity and the Development of the Country Town* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006), 119-123; Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, "Lokale eller nasjonale kollektive identiteter? Etnifisering og identitetsbygging blant norske immigranter i Amerika," *Historisk tidsskrift* 89, no. 2 (2010); Trond Espen Teigen Bjoland, "The Development of an Ethnic Colony: Stoughton, Wisconsin 1850–1920," *Norwegian-American studies* 40, no. 1 (2022).

[4] Odd Lovoll, *A Century of Urban Life: The Norwegians in Chicago Before 1930* (Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association Distributed by The University of Illinois Press, 1988), 245-249; David Mauk, "Syttende mai Vignettes from Minneapolis-St. Paul. The Changing Meaning of Norway's Constitution Day in the Capital of Norwegian America, 1869-1914," *American Studies in Scandinavia*, no. 34 (2002).

[5] For example, Jon Gjerde explores the dynamics, tensions, and relationships in Midwestern communities. As cultural patterns and traditions were carried westward, they were modified and influenced by their new environments. Moreover,

Gjerde highlights the importance of religious societies in these processes, and the church also played an important role in the celebration of Norway's Constitution Day. See Jon Gjerde, *The minds of the West: Ethnocultural evolution in the rural Middle West, 1830-1917* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 19-20.

[6] The formation of Whitewater was, among other things, discussed at the city's seventieth anniversary in 1907. See *The Whitewater Home-Coming: Held July 4-7, 1907*, (Whitewater: The Register Print, 1907), 8-11.

[7] These conditions rapidly changed around the time of the First World War, and it is chosen to include a period before and after the war to explore potential changes during this period. See Orm Øverland, "From Melting Pot to Copper Kettles," in Werner Sollors, *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (NYU Press, 1998), 50.

[8] Odd Lovoll, *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People*, Rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, published in co-operation with the Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1999), 277-281.

[9] Ellen M. Litwicki, ""Our Hearts Burn with Ardent Love for Two Countries:" Ethnicity and Assimilation at Chicago Holiday Celebrations, 1876-1918," *Journal of American ethnic history* 19, no. 3 (2000): 4-5.

[10] Schultz especially focuses on the 1925 Norwegian-American Centennial, but she also discusses ethnic celebrations more broadly. See April Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade: Inventing the Norwegian American Through Celebration* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 12-13, 19.

[11] Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade*, 19.

[12] Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade*, 19.

[13] In the discussion of this preservationist view, Mauk refers to the argumentation of Kathleen Neils Conzen. See Mauk, "Syttende mai Vignettes from Minneapolis-St. Paul," 33; Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Ethnicity as Festive Culture: Nineteenth-Century German America on Parade," in Werner Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity* (Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1989), 44-76.

[14] Mauk, "Syttende mai Vignettes from Minneapolis-St. Paul," 45-53; David Mauk, *The Heart of the Heartland: Norwegian American Community in the Twin Cities* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2022), 224-229.

[15] Albert C. Beckwith, *History of Walworth County, Wisconsin* (Indianapolis: Bowen, 1912), 461-462; Richard N. Current, *Civil War Era, 1848-1873*, Volume II (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2014), 30-31; Trond Espen T. Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin" (PhD dissertation, University of Bergen, 2024), 72-74.

[16] Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin," 74-76.

[17] In 1900, Norwegian-born residents made up around 19 percent of Whitewater's foreign-born population. That same year, 1,178 Whitewater residents were born in the United States to foreign-born parents. If we assume that 19 percent of these US-born residents had Norwegian-born parents, this suggests that more than 200 Whitewater residents were of Norwegian parentage in 1900. See Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin," 74-76.

[18] The Norwegian Constitution Day was rarely mentioned before 1890, but celebrations in other communities were reported on some occasions. For example, see "Local," *The Whitewater Register*, 24 May 1883, 3; "News Notes," *The Whitewater Register*, 15 May 1884, 2.

[19] Whitewater residents also celebrated the Norwegian Constitution Day in neighboring communities after the turn of the century. In 1906, for instance, *The Whitewater Register* reported that a large gathering of "Norse men," including some from Whitewater, celebrated at the Pfister in Milwaukee. See *The Whitewater Register,* 22 May 1890, 4; *The Whitewater Register*, 14 May 1891, 5; "Local," *The Whitewater*, 18 May 1906, 1.

[20] Local newspapers, among other things, described the day as "Norwegian Independence day" and as "the Norwegian anniversary." See *The Whitewater Register*, 30 May 1895, 6; *The Whitewater Register*, 13 May 1897, 5.

[21] Private gatherings were likely organized at an earlier stage, but public events have not been identified prior to 1912. See "Corner Grove Valley," *The Whitewater Register*, 17 May 1912, 5.

[22] The importance of religious societies as social or ethnic institutions has been noted by numerous scholars. For example, Jane M. Pederson highlights the role of religious institutions in the preservation of cultural traditions. According to Pederson, local unity and ethnic identification has been closely tied to religious societies. See Jane Marie Pederson, *Between memory and reality: Family and community in rural Wisconsin, 1870-1970*, History of American thought and culture, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 116-117, 130.

[23] This is being discussed in several sources from the early twentieth century. For example, see Beckwith, *History of Walworth County, Wisconsin*, 469; Olaf Morgan Norlie, *Norsk Lutherske Menigheter i Amerika 1843-1916: 1*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1918), 127-129.

[24] "Corner Grove Valley," *The Whitewater Register*, 17 May 1912, 5.

[25] This aligns with Mauk's perspective on the function of ethnic celebration, especially regarding its role in the preservation of cultural heritage and the building of ethnic community. See Mauk, "Syttende mai Vignettes from Minneapolis-St. Paul," 33.

[26] Information on Reverend Garness' role as pastor in the joined pastorate is found in local newspapers and in Norlie's book on Norwegian Lutheran congregations. Information on his birth and ancestry is found through Family Search. See "Locals," *The Whitewater Register*, 1 July 1920, 1; Norlie, *Norsk Lutherske Menigheter i Amerika 1843-1916: 1*, 1, 127-129; U.S. Census, 1910, NARA microfilm publication T624, Nels C A Garness (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration). Available online at Family Search: https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MP25-L27.

[27] This may be seen in the context of Litwicki's and Schultz' perspectives on ethnic celebrations as sites of change and construction of ethnic group identities. See Litwicki, ""Our Hearts Burn with Ardent Love for Two Countries": Ethnicity and Assimilation at Chicago Holiday Celebrations, 1876-1918," 4-5; Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade*, 12-13.

[28] "Notes of Town News," *The Whitewater Gazette* (newspaper, Whitewater, the

United States), 22 May 1913, 5.

[29] "Notes of Town News," *The Whitewater Gazette*, 22 May 1913, 5.

[30] Litwicki, ""Our Hearts Burn with Ardent Love for Two Countries": Ethnicity and Assimilation at Chicago Holiday Celebrations, 1876-1918," 4-5; Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade*, 12-13, 19.

[31] "Normal Notes," *The Whitewater Gazette*, 22 May 1913, 5.

[32] "Observe Independence Day," *The Whitewater Register*, 19 May 1916, 1.

[33] For example, see Øverland, "From Melting Pot to Copper Kettles," 50.

[34] According to Orm Øverland, the American perception of immigrants shifted in 1914 due to the commencement of the war in Europe. The following Americanization campaigns, as argued by Øverland, resulted in severe public and private reactions against immigrant languages and cultural expressions. This contributed to a decline in ethnic celebrations among Norwegian Americans, both locally in Whitewater and more broadly, during the years following the First World War. Mauk identifies a similar development in his study of the twin cities. See Øverland, "From Melting Pot to Copper Kettles," 50; David C. Mauk, *The Heart of the Heartland*, 236; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925,* 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 204-207.

[35] Øverland, "From Melting Pot to Copper Kettles," 50; David C. Mauk, *The Heart of the Heartland*, 236;

Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, 298-300.

[36] An exception is identified in 1922, where the Norwegian Ladies' Aid organized a celebration on 17 May. See "Social Happenings," *The Whitewater Register*, 25 May 1922, 1.

[37] "Norwegian Independence," *The Whitewater Press*, 21 May 1931, 1.

[38] Information about their birth and ancestry is found through Family Search. See U. S. Census, 1930, NARA microfilm publication T626, Peter Nelson (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration). Available online at Family Search: https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:X937-69Q; U. S. Census, 1930, NARA microfilm publication T626, Clara Nelson in household of Peter Nelson (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration). Available online at Family Search: https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:X937-69Q.

[39] *The Whitewater Register*, 21 May 1931, 1.

[40] The Norwegian Constitution Day was occasionally briefly mentioned in local newspapers later in the 1930s, but there are no reports of any public celebrations in Whitewater during the decade. In 1934, for instance, *The Whitewater Register* simply noted that "This is Norwegian Independence Day." See *The Whitewater Register*, 17 May 1934, 1.

[41] Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin," 72-78.

[42] For instance, Lovoll has highlighted the reduced use of Norwegian language among American-born generations, especially after the First World War. This development illustrates how changes in cultural expression among Norwegian Americans was tied to generational shifts. See Lovoll, *The Promise of America*,

327-328.

[43] Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin," 117-118.

[44] Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin," 117-118; Lovoll, *The Promise of America*, 298-300.

[45] Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin," 127-129.

[46] Øverland, "From Melting Pot to Copper Kettles," 50.

[47] For information concerning the demographic composition of these communities, see Lovoll, *Norwegians on the Prairie*, 89; Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin," 56-62; Joranger, "Lokale eller nasjonale kollektive identiteter?"; Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, "The Migration of Tradition? A Study on the Transfer of Traditions Tied to Intergenerational Land Transfers among Emigrants from the Valdres region, Norway to the Upper Midwest and their Descendants for Three Generations, 1850-1980" (PhD dissertation, University of Oslo, 2007), 189.

[48] Lovoll, *Norwegians on the Prairie*, 78, 120.

[49] Joranger, "Lokale eller nasjonale kollektive identiteter?"

[50] This aligns with the preservationist perspective mentioned by David Mauk, as discussed in the essay's introduction. See Mauk, "Syttende mai Vignettes from Minneapolis-St. Paul," 33.

[51] Joranger, "Lokale eller nasjonale kollektive identiteter?"

[52] Lovoll, *Norwegians on the Prairie*, 173.

[53] This aligns with the perspectives articulated by Schultz, who has highlighted that public celebrations often function as arenas for the construction and reconstruction of cultural symbols and ethnic identities. See Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade*, 12-13, 19.

[54] This negotiation process also involved a construction of cultural memories that demonstrated their distinctiveness as an ethnic group. Even though Norwegian Americans in Whitewater experienced different local conditions compared to those in Benson and Moscow, this process transpired in each community. See Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin," 246-252.

[55] Lovoll also finds that the Benson celebrations over time assumed greater exclusivity, as the community festivals sometimes were replaced by smaller observances organized by secular Norwegian-American societies, including the Sons of Norway. See Lovoll, *Norwegians on the Prairie*, 78, 119, 173; Joranger, "Lokale eller nasjonale kollektive identiteter?"; Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin," 216-223.

[56] This way, the celebrations in Benson and Stoughton served some of the functions noted by Mauk, as mentioned in the essay's introduction. See Mauk, "Syttende mai Vignettes from Minneapolis-St. Paul," 45-53; Mauk, *The Heart of the Heartland*, 224-229.

[57] David Mauk also notes that the Norwegian Constitution Day often was used to demonstrate the compatibility of Norwegian and American traditions. See Mauk, "Syttende mai Vignettes from Minneapolis-St. Paul. The Changing Meaning of Norway's Constitution Day in the Capital of Norwegian America, 1869-1914," 45-53; Mauk, *The Heart of the Heartland*, 224-229.

[58] Lovoll, *Norwegians on the Prairie*, 78, 119; Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin," 216-223, 253-255.
[59] Lovoll, *Norwegians on the Prairie*, 77-78, 119-123.
[60] Bjoland, "Norwegian-American Identities in Small-Town Wisconsin," 216-223.
[61] When celebrations in different communities involved different types of cultural expressions, different elements were included in the negotiation process regarding what was considered to be part of Norwegian-American culture and character. See Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade*, 12-13, 19.