



# *“It’s hard to stop a Trane”: A Case Study of Norwegian- American Ingenuity and Identity*

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“It’s hard to stop a Trane” is the story of an entrepreneurial family in the American Midwest whose roots rest in Norway. Their ingenuity in heating and cooling technologies is summarized as a pretext to examining their dual consciousness as Norwegians and Americans. The Trane story is told with comparisons to another Midwestern family, the Adolf Gundersens, also of Norwegian heritage. The Gundersens pioneered group medical practice in the U.S. and provided medical services to a broad patient base in the Midwest, with special importance to the Norwegian American community. Both families established their services in La Crosse, Wisconsin, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and both families pioneered methods and technologies that have had far-reaching impacts transcendent of ethnic and national boundaries.

## **Immigrant identities**

An immigrant’s identity is multi-faceted, dynamic, and socially constructed within a historical timeframe and process. Ethnic identities, like personal identities, operate on a sliding scale and never develop within a vacuum. Identity develops within the process of adaptation to a host society and in response to both internal and external forces, changing through the process of acculturation. It is complex and malleable, responding to changing societal and personal conditions. More specifically, ethnic identity is shaped by the mingling of historical memories, values, and traditions from the home country, interactions with other immigrant groups, and the

myriad influences in a transnational context. Individuals respond to these internal and external forces in varied ways and with a range of outcomes, that is, from strongly overt ethnic expressions to those that are more subdued or not visible at all.

The immigrant generation is generally characterized by primordialist or natural expressions of ethnicity as evidenced by such things as the ethnic language, folk music, and traditional foods. Second and subsequent generations are more commonly characterized by constructivist or contrived expressions of ethnicity. Ethnic celebrations, for example, become constructivist through time, a hybrid of American and Old World preferences and traditions. Similarly, personal identities can contain elements of constructivist ethnicity influenced by a wide range of cultural and personal factors.<sup>1</sup>

Assimilation theorists have studied and demonstrated the importance of European traditions on the development of American identities.<sup>2</sup> Jon Gjerde's work on immigrant settlement and adjustment provided new ways of looking at histories and theories of identity formation, addressing both national and ethnic identifications.<sup>3</sup> He proposed "complementary identities" or dual consciousness as a description of the identities he saw in the rural Midwest. Rather than a melted common identity, conflict between American and European settlers produced complex, multiple, sometimes contradictory, conceptions of identity. In that respect, he noted differences between and within American and European communities. European communities were characterized by more conservative, ethnicized conceptions of identity, and the American more liberal and individualized. A common thread in the literature is the complexity of the transnational, societal, and personal forces that influenced the formation of these identities.<sup>4</sup>

"National identity" is generally broken into ethnic and civic, the former based on identification with bloodlines and traditions and the latter on common laws and principles. "Personal identity" may have an ethnic component, sometimes very strong, combined with other factors such as gender, family, culture, and individual socialization. Scholars have also recognized "relational identities,"

those that come into play in our relations to others, either inside or outside of our group. Psychologists note that ethnicity can be central to self-concept and identity. They have studied ethnic identity as a process of exploration, resolution, and affirmation, noting that identity changes during the process of acculturation. Psychologists also note the importance of social context in identity development, and contextual factors in ethnic identity retention. A common thread in these studies is the recognition that the relationship of ethnic identity to acculturation is complex and that these concepts need to be studied using numerous overlapping indicators.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Trane story: immigrant entrepreneur**

The Trane story begins in Målselv Parish, Troms, Norway with a young printer, Rasmus Michael Trane, and his wife, Christiane Semine Berg Heggelund, and their three children. They were domiciled at Forhaabningshaug, Målselv Parish, with Rasmus listed as a young farmer on property that was heavily cultivated and hosted numerous sheep, a few cows, and a horse. Three young émigrés originally from the parish wrote glowing letters home to their families causing the America fever to flare early and vigorously in this region. From the 1860s sail ships picked up passengers from Trondheim to Tromsø to transport to the New World with many joining the exodus from Troms.<sup>6</sup>

Rasmus Michael Trane and his family left Norway in 1864 as shown in the Målselv Parish emigrant register.<sup>7</sup> Rasmus and Christiane were accompanied by their three sons, Jens/James, seven years, Nicolai, five years, and Ernst two. After sailing eight to ten weeks by sail ship across the Atlantic, they entered the Midwest from New York City, eventually settling on a small farm in western Wisconsin, not far from La Crosse. There Jens/James and his brothers worked the family farm and grew to young adulthood. Not content to turn the soil, Jens/James left the family farm at age 14 to seek his fortunes in nearby La Crosse where he apprenticed with the W. A. Roosevelt Company working as a plumber and steam pipefitter, thus learning the basics of plumbing engineering. Following his apprenticeship, he worked as a journeyman in La Crosse

until he opened his own business in 1886. He was united in marriage to Mary (nee Miller) of Brownsville, Minnesota, a woman of German and Methodist Episcopal background. Their marriage produced a son and three daughters, Susan, Jessie, Reuben, and Stella. Reuben, was born in 1886, the same year James opened his Trane plumbing firm on Pearl Street in downtown La Crosse, not far from the docks on the Mississippi River. La Crosse at that time was a bustling river city, fast growing, host to steady steamboat traffic, and an emerging commercial hub. Chartered in 1856, La Crosse grew by leaps and bounds with the lumber trade which relied heavily on water transportation. The steady influx of immigrants, combined with a strong commercial base, provided an ideal business site for a budding young entrepreneur.<sup>8</sup>



*La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1873. Contributor: George H. Ellsbury, Milwaukee Lith. And Engineering Co., U.S. Library of Congress, Digital "Cities and Towns" Collection. (No copyright issues)*

James demonstrated a bold entrepreneurial spirit in the La Crosse community, growing his business with a combination of hard work, mechanical knowhow, and marketing genius. He was described in the local newspaper as having “an enviable reputation as a workman, which is verified by his excellent business.”<sup>9</sup>



*Trane Plumbing Company, 118 Pearl Street, La Crosse, Wisconsin. Courtesy of the La Crosse Public Library Archives.*

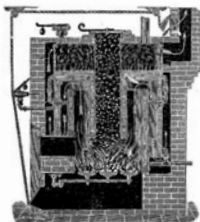
Norwegians in La Crosse constituted a sizable share of his clientele, but he did not limit his services to Norwegian Americans. He advertised broadly and aggressively, almost daily in the regional newspaper, *La Crosse Tribune*, and built a broad clientele from across the greater La Crosse community. His brother, Ernest, worked with James in the family business, while the third brother, Nicholas, also became an engineer and resided in St. Paul, Minnesota.<sup>10</sup>

Young Reuben worked with his father in the plumbing business after graduating from high school, and saved his earnings to fund engineering studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Reuben studied mechanical engineering and upon completion of his degree in 1910, he worked for a time with a Milwaukee machine tools firm, learning the business end of industrial production. He then re-joined his father in the plumbing business in La Crosse, where they changed the direction of their company from plumbing to heating. James had invented the low-pressure vapor heating system and was eager to market his new product. In 1913, with a cap-

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La Crosse City Directory, 1888  
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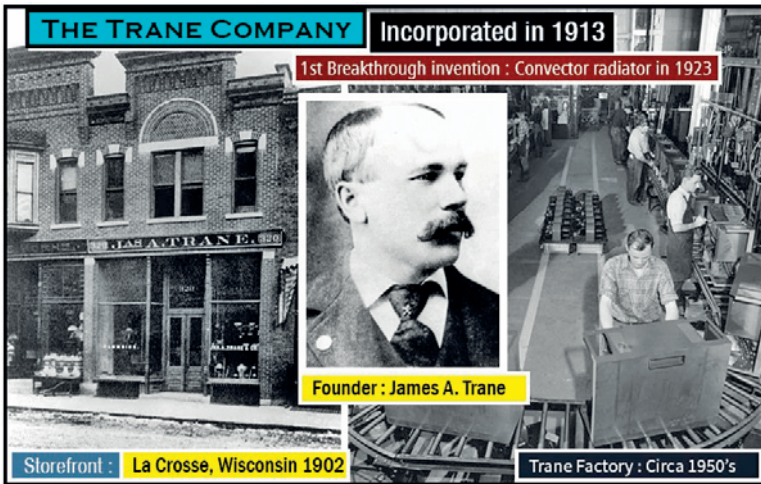
*Trane Ad, La Crosse City Directory, 1888, 410. La Crosse Public Library Digital Archive, Courtesy of the La Crosse Public Library Archives.*

italization of \$20,000, and a half dozen employees, father and son incorporated the Trane Company. In 1916 they moved to Sixth Street in La Crosse, discontinued all plumbing activities, and concentrated on the production of the vapor heating system, specifically steam radiator traps and valves. Within three years they had outgrown their facility on Sixth Street, built a factory at Second Street and Cameron, and grown to 40 employees. Norwegian Americans were among the employees of the Trane Company, but they did not dominate the company's work force. La Crosse was home to a large number of Germans, Dutch, and other west Europeans and Old American workers, and the employment profile of the Trane Company was ethnically mixed from its earliest years.<sup>11</sup>



“IT’S HARD TO STOP A TRANE”

In 1925 Reuben Trane introduced a novel approach to industrial design and production, an approach that became the company’s cornerstone, “human engineering,” i.e., a student training program at the La Crosse location geared to graduates recruited from the strongest engineering programs in North America, e.g., MIT, University of Wisconsin, Virginia Polytech, Michigan State, and Georgia Tech. Students were given detailed technical knowledge of Trane products as well as instruction on their applications. They received additional training as sales engineers in the company’s field offices. Utilizing top talent was a part of his long-range plan for the company, to always aim for the cutting edge in engineering and business practices.<sup>12</sup> He was clearly motivated by the intellectual skill around him, and “worked along with his engineers, often sitting at a drawing board hours at a time while he worked out his own ideas for solving problems.”<sup>13</sup> Reuben wrote: “If the choice were mine, I’d rather lose my business...but keep my engineers together.”<sup>14</sup> In those early years Trane was clearly a family affair, with Reuben as President and General Manager of the firm; his



*The Trane Company, incorporated in 1913, La Crosse, Wisconsin.  
Courtesy of the La Crosse Public Library Archives.*

father, James, as First Vice President; and his brother-in-law, Frank Hood, as Treasurer.<sup>15</sup>

### **Growth of the Trane Company**

Cold Wisconsin winters and World War I provided a combination of favorable conditions for growth of the company. Homes as well as military barracks and war-time factories were ready markets for the new vapor heating systems. In 1923 Reuben invented the “convector radiator” which he called “a heat cabinet” with a fin-and-tube coil, a new system for heat transfer known to be highly efficient in the dissipation of heat. It was quiet and lightweight in comparison to the older, noisy, and bulky cast iron radiators. Markets around the world eagerly absorbed the new concept in heating. In the post-World War I era, Frank Hood, brother-in-law of Reuben, became the director, assistant general manager, and treasurer of the Trane Company. His vision and skill developed financial policies that propelled the company forward for decades to come, achieving success in some of the toughest international markets.<sup>16</sup>

Business boomed in the 1920s and by 1930 the company erected a new, much larger factory at Sixteenth Street and Bennett in La Crosse. The Depression brought stresses and strains to the company, but loyal employees remained with the firm, and undeterred and obviously excited by the challenge, the father-son team pressed on with new, innovative ideas. The company began producing fans during the Depression, for example, intended mainly for Trane’s own central station heating and ventilation systems.<sup>17</sup>

In 1931 Reuben found that his fin-and-tube coil system for heating could also be used for cooling, extracting heat from the air. Thus, in the depths of the Great Depression, the Trane air conditioning industry emerged. For the company, it would become a game-changer. The Tranes put their company into the production of reciprocating and centrifugal refrigeration compressors, specifically, the Turbovac water chiller in 1938, the forerunner of the CenTraVac large commercial air conditioning system. James Trane, founding father of the company, died in 1936, but not before seeing



his company make giant strides in product innovation, with a global presence in both heating and cooling technologies.<sup>18</sup>

With World War II, the Trane Company turned its full attention to production for the war effort, employing at that time 1,500 in its La Crosse plant. Reuben Trane, active in the Liberty Loan campaign, was known to work long hours alongside his company engineers, intent on solving problems, bringing new ideas to fruition on the “home front.” Trane engineers developed a method of brazing thin sheets of aluminum to make military aircraft lighter by one-third at half the cost of former production. “Other war projects included development and production of the first all-aluminum aircraft radiator for liquid cooled engines; and equipment to help prevent ice formation on wings, cool plane cabins, distill sea water for drinking, along with regular heating, cooling and ventilating equipment for ships and war plants.”<sup>19</sup>

After the war, Reuben pioneered the invention of mechanical refrigeration for railroad freight cars, experimenting with the Santa Fe Railroad to carry assorted perishables including frozen foods. The 1950s saw the company expand into other facets of air conditioning, i.e., passenger cars, trucks, and buses, and truck-trailer refrigerated vehicles. The company moved into the atomic age by providing heat exchangers needed to harness atomic energy for power, first supplying the Hanford, Washington, and Oak Ridge, Tennessee, plants. In 1954 the company dedicated its new Trane Research and Testing Laboratory, also known as the House of Weather Magic, with focus on the future role of Trane in atomic energy. They also entered the space race, providing technology to the lunar rover in the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> The Trane philosophy has been to stay in tune with societal trends and human needs.

In the company’s early years Reuben Trane and brother-in-law Frank Hood were visionary in their plans for international markets. They led the way in establishing dozens of branch offices and factories within and outside of the U.S.; by 1927, there were 23 offices in the U.S. supplemented by offices in London, Tokyo and Shanghai, and factories in the U.S. and Canada. By 1945 there were 66 Trane offices in the U.S. with 200 sales engineers and their early

global presence had expanded greatly. Each branch office was staffed with top-notch engineers with training in sales, graduates of Reuben's training program in La Crosse. From a capital investment of \$20,000 and a few dozen employees in 1913, the company grew to \$45 million in sales by the mid-1950s. Unlike most of its competitors, the company did not install equipment, but focused on innovation, testing, production, and marketing; installation was left to architects and contractors.<sup>21</sup> In 1982 Trane acquired the Central Air Conditioning Division of General Electric and in 1984 it acquired American Standard Inc. American Standard subsequently broke up and in 2008 Trane became a subsidiary of Ireland-based Ingersoll-Rand. Acquisition and merger resulted in the creation of Trane Technologies in 2020, combining Trane with ThermoKing, now with headquarters in Dublin, Ireland. The company reports 29,000 employees in 28 countries with products sold in about 100 countries.<sup>22</sup>

Trane Technologies stands tall as a global giant in heating and cooling technologies to the present day, with annual sales exceeding \$8 billion, and more than 20 manufacturing locations around the world. In recent years it has become a leader in renewable energy projects and energy conservation. The Channel Tunnel or "Chunnel" between Folkestone, England and Coquelles, France is cooled by Trane, the largest cooling system in the world. Trane technology also cools the Kremlin and other well-known structures such as the Statue of Liberty, Washington Monument, SeaWorld, the World Trade Center in China, and the Athens Olympic Sports Complex.<sup>23</sup> Still strongly associated with La Crosse, Wisconsin, Trane remains one of America's great success stories for both its technical genius and business finesse. Their motto has been quoted and promoted for decades: *"It's hard to stop a Trane."*

The Trane Company blossomed as the result of a brilliant combination of human engineering, business finesse, entrepreneurial spirit, and mechanical ingenuity. James and Reuben were innovator-engineers and, between them, they filed 30 U.S. patents. Since its inception in 1913, the Trane Company has designed, tested, manufactured, and strategically marketed its own products. Led by

the Trane family and staffed by expert engineers and marketers, Trane technologies are utilized throughout the world.<sup>24</sup>

Reuben Trane, described as “a genius with a vision” by George Hoel, a former employee, died in 1954 at the age of 67. Former manager of billing, Philip Beckley, remembered him this way: “Reuben stood tall, and was a very fine manager. He knew how to delegate to get things done. He hired good people in key positions, and I believe this is why The Trane Company has been successful.” Ed Cline worked in the convector department for many years and remembered Reuben this way: “He was tall, had a husky voice that commanded attention, knew his way around, and he was all engineer, all inventor.”<sup>25</sup> A *La Crosse Tribune* article described him as “a renowned civic leader.”<sup>26</sup> Committed to education, Reuben Trane endowed engineering scholarships for post-graduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and was a charter member and director of the University of Wisconsin Foundation. Many of the company’s executive, engineering, and sales personnel have been graduates of the post-graduate program established by Trane.

James M. Ritter provided these insights into Reuben as a company leader: “Until his health prevented it, Mr. Trane was always eager to join the company picnics; he enjoyed the people who worked with him, and even when the company had grown beyond his earlier dreams, he could still call hundreds by their first names. He had worked side by side with many of them, for Mr. Trane could operate any of the machines in his factories and occasionally did so in order to demonstrate a point.”<sup>27</sup>

Upon the dedication of the new Trane building in 1954, La Crosse Mayor Ahrens, lauded the contributions of the Trane Company to the La Crosse community: “This company puts money into the pockets of every one of us in La Crosse and the surrounding area. It means jobs and paychecks.” (\$11 million a year into worker paychecks) “This money goes to the grocer, who spends money with the man at the filling station, who spends money at the drug store, and so on. The barber, beauty operator, department store, restaurant—everybody shares in the business Trane Company payrolls create.”<sup>28</sup>

Articles, interviews, and obituaries refer repeatedly to the Norwegian roots of the Trane family. Certainly “word of mouth” built a client base for Trane in the Norwegian-American community, both within and outside of La Crosse, but the company’s Norwegian heritage was not overtly marketed to the public. An article in the *La Crosse Tribune* in 1954 noted: “A fact not too commonly known is that the father (James) was a Norwegian.”<sup>29</sup> The Tranes actively participated in the La Crosse Chamber of Commerce, YMCA, Badger Lodge of the Masonic Order, the La Crosse Country Club, and numerous other non-ethnic organizations.<sup>30</sup> There is no mention anywhere of participation in Nordic associations such as Sons of Norway or a *bygdslag* or any of the German-American organizations.

### **The Gundersen story**

Trane family identity contrasts in notable ways to that of another prominent La Crosse family, the Gundersens, a family with roots in Åsnes, Solør, Norway. Adolf Gundersen took his medical training at Christiania University (Oslo), and completed his medical degree in 1890. Intent to erase his medical debts, he answered an advertisement in a Norwegian newspaper for a medical doctor needed in La Crosse, Wisconsin, one to assist Christian Christiansen, M.D. Gundersen arrived in La Crosse in 1891 and although he was reticent to remain in the city, which he considered a crude outpost of civilization at the time, he recognized the value of American medical freedom. Moving up through the ranks in medicine would take much longer in Norway than in the American Midwest. Following a trans-Atlantic courtship, Gundersen returned to Norway to marry his Norwegian sweetheart, Helga Sara Isaksætre, also from Solør, Norway.

Adolf Gundersen was entrepreneurial and visionary in medical practice and established a strongly positive reputation in medical circles. He founded the first *group* medical practice in America, the Gundersen Clinic. He was the first medical director for the Norwegian Lutheran Hospital in La Crosse (1899), and he started the La Crosse Lutheran Hospital Training School for Nurses. “The Ap-

pendectomy Limited”, a train running between Minneapolis and La Crosse, unloaded patients near Norwegian Lutheran Hospital where Dr. Gundersen removed inflamed appendices, a pioneer of that surgical treatment. He was among the first to recognize ectopic pregnancies and to advance spinal anesthesia and the treatment of lung diseases.<sup>31</sup>

The Gundersen family was a reminder to Norwegians in the community of the old traditions and social system of their homeland. They were much respected by their fellow countrymen and filled a need for ethnic leadership and identity. The Gundersen medical practice in its first decades was largely a family-run business, intent on helping Norwegian immigrants, shielding them from the perceived excesses of American doctors. Adolf and Helga raised seven sons and a daughter; six of the seven sons practiced medicine (four in La Crosse), and the daughter married into the Midelfort medical family of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. The elder Gundersen advised his doctor sons to “take care of your Norwegian clients.”<sup>32</sup>

Helga was a well-educated and experienced teacher prior to marriage and once married she emerged as the center of authority and matriarch of the Gundersen family. Helga cherished and promoted her Norwegian heritage throughout her lifetime. She insisted on visiting their homeland regularly, raising her children in the Norwegian language and culture, and keeping alive the cultural traditions brought from her homeland. As a family they read and studied the Bible and literature in Norwegian. Helga paid her children to learn poems in Norwegian and hired a tutor to prepare those children for study in Norway. She established the Ibsen Club in La Crosse, which met on Friday afternoons for fifty years, and she was deeply involved in philanthropic and social activities in the greater La Crosse area. To local residents Helga was known as Mother Gundersen and Mother Norway, but she preferred the titles Mrs. Gundersen or the Norwegian form, Mrs. Doctor Gundersen.<sup>33</sup>

The Gundersens were enthusiastic hosts throughout the year, but especially during the Christmas season. In 1897 they entertained 48 guests on Christmas Day, “only Norwegians” as Helga

reported to her mother. Their home was a veritable revolving door of guests, a good share of them from Norway and Norwegian America, including distinguished guests such as Roald Amundsen, Fridtjof Nansen, Carl Hambro, and Crown Prince Olav and Princess Märtha of Norway.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Trane and Gundersen identities**

The Tranes and Gundersens shared many commonalities of experience. The founding fathers set-up their first practices in downtown La Crosse in modest accommodations. Both insisted on strict standards for research and practice. They were innovative in methods and technologies, engaged with the broader community in charitable work, and were steered through the decades by well-educated, forward-looking family dynasties. Both families were counted amongst La Crosse's genteel population and came together in various social and civic activities. From the early 1900s a member of the Trane family operated the Trane Tea Room, hosting social events, receptions, and wedding dinners and receptions, clearly catering to La Crosse's socially affluent. When the house closed in the 1950s, it was described as "a legendary place to dine for genteel society." Helga Gundersen loved to host parties and entertain her



*Trane Tea Room,  
La Crosse,  
Wisconsin. Courtesy of the La  
Crosse Public  
Library  
Archives.*



guests at the Trane Tea Room.<sup>35</sup> In addition to purely social gatherings, these families engaged in philanthropic causes such as the “clean milk campaign” and the La Crosse Home for Children.<sup>36</sup>

The Trane family through its company reached far beyond normal ethnic boundaries; they and their company thrived in a multi-cultural world, adapting quickly and aggressively to the American business environment. Ethnic roots were not overtly expressed in the Trane industry, but ethnic roots most certainly impacted Trane family identity, particularly in a region permeated by Norwegian views and values. Frank Hood Trane, grandson of the founder, died in 2021; his obituary includes the sentence: “Frank’s grandfather had emigrated from Tromsø, Norway in 1864, and with Frank’s father (Reuben) incorporated the Trane Company in 1913.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, a degree of ethnic consciousness/identity is expressed in the third generation. The Gundersens also thrived in a multi-cultural environment but, somewhat different than the Trane family, the Gundersens were known for their overt and ongoing pride and practice of Norwegian heritage. The Gundersens have maintained a strong sense of ethnic identity through the generations. As one of many examples, the Gundersen farmstead was transitioned into Norskedalen Nature and Heritage Center, an open-air museum of early Norwegian-American life near Coon Valley, south of La Crosse.<sup>38</sup>




*Adolf Gundersen, Gundersen Health System, La Crosse, Wisconsin.*



*Helga Gundersen and children in traditional bunads, Gundersen Health System, La Crosse, Wisconsin.*

## Gundersen Health System

A tradition of excellence



Dr. Adolf Gundersen (second from left)

- Gundersen Clinic: Founded by Dr. Adolf Gundersen in 1891
  - Three of his great-grandsons are caring for patients at Gundersen Lutheran today
- Lutheran Hospital: Opened in 1902
- Organizations merged in 1995 to form Gundersen Lutheran

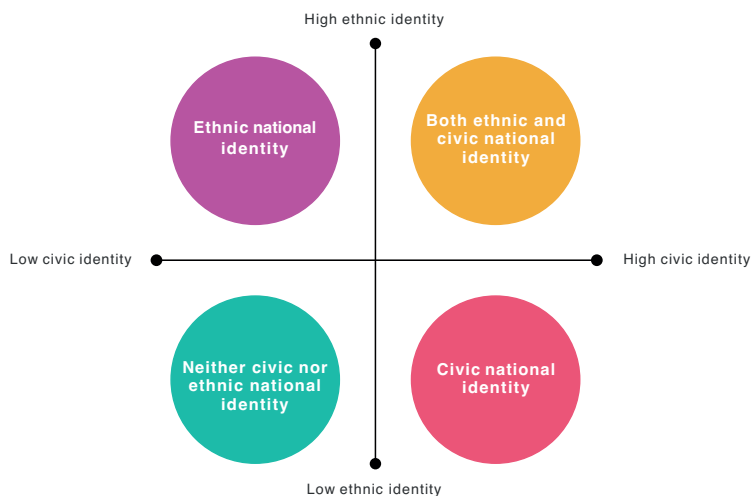
**GUNDERSEN**  
HEALTH SYSTEM.

*Gundersen Health System, La Crosse, Wisconsin.*

### **National and personal identities**

“National identity” can be defined by two dimensions: civic and ethnic, divided into quadrants, i.e., ethnic national identity, both ethnic and civic national identity, neither civic nor ethnic national identity, and civic national identity.<sup>39</sup> From the available evidence, the Gundersens appear to be in the quadrant of high ethnic and high civic identity, whereas the Tranes are in the realm of high civic, but lower ethnic identity. Obituaries of the Tranes and Gundersens note their high levels of civic engagement as well as their philanthropic natures, with many examples of support for charitable, religious, educational, and medical causes.

The founding fathers of the Trane Company each married non-Norwegians, i.e., James married a German-American Episcopalian. Reuben married Helen Katherine Hood, a non-Norwegian Episcopalian, and they raised their three children within Episcopalianism.



*“Figure 4.1 The two dimensions of national identity” from Zsolt Kiss and Alison Park, “The concept of national identity” in British Social Attitudes, NatCen Social Research, 31<sup>st</sup> edition.*

All three of Reuben’s sisters married men who were non-Norwegian. The Gundersens married primarily within the group in the first and second generations. They also maintained strong and intimate linkages with their home community in Hedmark, Norway, visiting often. There is no evidence that the Trane family made regular visits to Norway, nor did they remain within Lutheranism. Did the ethnic identity of the first generation Tranes give way to second ethnic generation rebellion and third generation rediscovery? What seems feasible is that the Trane’s ethnic identity, a hybrid Norwegian and German, diluted their Norwegian ethnic identity across the generations. Ethnic identity retention was obviously strong among the Gundersens. The Gundersen’s “Norwegian” identity is well-known even today in the region, whereas few people in the region would associate any ethnic identity with

Trane. The Gundersens were culturally and romantically Norwegian; the Tranes were bi-cultural on the sliding scale of ethnic identity.

Personal identity refers to the self-concept or self-image that people derive from their culture, ethnicity, gender, family, and process of individual socialization.<sup>40</sup> Ethnicity constitutes one dimension of personal identity; it varies from person to person and changes during the process of acculturation. Scholars have distinguished between internal and external aspects of ethnic identity. Internal aspects such as common values and perspectives may not be obvious to the outside observer. External aspects of ethnic identity would be overt expressions of ethnicity such as ethnic foods and festivals. The Tranes engaged to some degree in ethnic socialization with extended family and friends in the La Crosse community. As they moved up the social ladder, they maintained strong Trane family leadership and influence on the Trane Company. “The company” was certainly an integral part of their self-identification. For the Gundersens, the Gundersen Clinic was most certainly a central element in their self- and family identities. We cannot examine mental processes, what happens inside of the human mind, but we can speculate that the Trane family members held some degree of pride in heritage, and that heritage impacted their personal identities. Undoubtedly, their ethnic identities evolved from one generation to the next, changed in response to contextual factors, and continued to play a role in their socialization within the community.

### **Summary**

In summary, the ethnic identities of these two families represent social constructs that evolved from ongoing negotiation with a multi-cultural America. The findings are consistent with Gjerde’s model of dualism and complementary identities. Both families expressed pride in ethnic roots, identification with Norway, the Gundersens more deliberate and overt in their ethnic expressions than the Tranes. Both families took an active role in civic affairs and engaged in local and national civic campaigns. The study raises

questions about ethnic identity retention through the generations, and the relationship of ethnic identity retention to contextual factors and acculturation. How did marriage outside of the group impact, perhaps dilute, a sense of Norwegianness? Did religious affiliation outside of Lutheranism diminish ethnic identity? How did social mobility affect the Trane concept of ethnicity? Was it created and re-created at the level of everyday interactions? How did ethnic hybridity impact personal identity? These are questions with complex answers, where research is ongoing and results often ambiguous. Good research requires integrative and correlative approaches, sorting out the overlapping variables to tell a fuller story. To some of these questions, there may never be answers, because the researcher cannot penetrate the minds of those who lived in years past. The Trane and Gundersen entrepreneurs each made significant, lasting, and transnational contributions, far beyond their early endeavors in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Both stories are rich with material to inform us on the Norwegian-American experience while also deserving of a place in the larger literatures on ethnic identity formation and retention.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Reference to the monograph by psychologist Maykel Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, Chapter 3, European Monographs in Social Psychology (New York: Routledge, 2005), 74-90.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the history of assimilation theory, see Donna Gabaccia, "Is Everywhere Nowhere? Nomads, Nations, and the Immigrant Paradigm of United States History," *Journal of American History*, v. 86, n. 3 (1999): 1115-1134.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Gjerde, *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997); *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway to the Upper Middle West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Several classic works address identity formation in both rural and urban settings as, for example: John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Robert C. Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted: The Trans-Atlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Middle West, 1835-1915* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); and Kathleen Neils Conzen, *Making Their Own America: Assimilation Theory and the German Peasant Pioneer* (Providence, Rhode Island: Berg Publishers, 1990). For a sociologist's perspective, see Ewa Morawska, "The Sociology and Historiography of Immigration," in *Immigration Re-*



*considered: History, Sociology, and Politics*, ed. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, 187-241 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> For examples of this work, see: Joane Nagel, “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture,” *Social Problems*, v. 41, issue 1 (1994): 152-176; J. S. Phinney, “Ethnic Identity and Acculturation” in eds. K. M. Chun, P. Balls Organista, and G. Marin, *Acculturation: Advances in theory, measurement, and applied research* (American Psychological Association, 2003), 63-81. Others have noted the distinction between internal and external aspects of ethnic identity and the variation between ethnic groups in ethnic identity retention through the generations. See, for example: Wsevolod W. Isajiw, Giuliana Colalillo, and Tomoko Makabe, “Ethnic Identity Retention,” Research Paper 125 (Toronto: University of Toronto, Centre for Urban and Community Studies, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Målselv sokneprestembete, Ministerialbok nr. 3, Statsarkivet i Tromsø 1853-1863, baptisms 27, 42, 73; Målselv sokneprestembete, Ministerialbok nr. 3, Statsarkivet i Tromsø 1853-1863, weddings 169; Rachel Gibson, “Trane. Ancestors of Jens Alexander Martin Rasmusen Trane,” 2018, 1, manuscript at the La Crosse Public Library Archives, La Crosse, Wisconsin.

<sup>7</sup> Målselv sokneprestembete, Ministerialbok nr. 4, Statsarkivet i Tromsø 1863-1872, Inn- og utflyttede, 228. Rasmus Trane died in 1888, and his remains were interred with a Lutheran ceremony in a cemetery near La Crosse, Wisconsin. His widow, Christiane/Kristine, age 76, is listed in their son’s household (James and Mary) in the 1900 La Crosse County census.

<sup>8</sup> Gibson, “Ancestors of Jens Alexander Martin Rasmusen Trane,” 1; James A. Trane obituary, *La Crosse Tribune*, January 25, 1936, 1. La Crosse City Directories, online 1866-1924, yielded useful information on the Trane family and company. See also, *Historic La Crosse: Architectural and Historic Record* by Joan M. Rausch and Richard H. Zeitlin (La Crosse: Historical Researches, Inc. and Architectural Researches, Inc., prepared for the La Crosse City Planning Department).

<sup>9</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, July 29, 1910, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Gibson, “Trane. Ancestors of Jens Alexander Martin Rasmusen Trane,” 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> James M. Ritter, “History of the Trane Company,” manuscript, La Crosse Public Library Archives, 1984, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Reuben Trane’s “human engineering” approach is mentioned in numerous sources as, for example, *La Crosse Tribune*, April 24, 1927, 13; *La Crosse Tribune*, September 7, 1954, 1; and *La Crosse Tribune*, April 28, 1946, 9.

<sup>13</sup> James M. Ritter, “The History of a Person. Reuben N. Trane,” manuscript at the La Crosse Public Library Archives, 1993, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, September 7, 1954, 1.

<sup>15</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, April 24, 1927, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Trane Technologies, “Our History,” <https://www.tranetechnologies.com/en/index/our-story.html> and James Ritter, “History of the Trane Company,” 1-4.

<sup>17</sup> James M. Ritter, “History of the Trane Company,” 1. See also, Mick Schwedler, Eric Sturm, and Jeanne Harshaw, “100 Years of Trane History: An Applications Engineering Perspective,” *The Trane Engineers Newsletter*, v. 42, n.1, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> James M. Ritter, “History of the Trane Company,” 1.

- <sup>19</sup> James M. Ritter, "The History of a Person. Reuben N. Trane," 4.
- <sup>20</sup> James M. Ritter, "The History of a Person. Reuben N. Trane," 2-4. The Trane Company publication, *Weather Magic*, includes a summary of the growth of the company up through 1945, including floor space, sales, and branch office locations, "The Story of Trane," 1945.
- <sup>21</sup> "Biographical information on Reuben N. Trane, President of the Trane Company", prepared by Campbell-Mithun, Inc., August 4, 1954 and revised August 10, 1954, page 6, held in the La Crosse Public Library Archives.
- <sup>22</sup> "For over a century, Trane has seen more than the building. We've seen opportunities to build life," from the Trane Company website; and "Trane" from Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trane>
- <sup>23</sup> "Famous Trane Buildings" from *Wayback Machine*. Trane Archives, December 2007.
- <sup>24</sup> Trane is not mentioned in the classic work by Kenneth Bjork, *Saga in Steel and Concrete: Norwegian Engineers in America* (Northfield, Minnesota: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1947). Laurann Gilbertson provided a one-page summary, "James and Reuben Trane," in *Vesterheim*, 18, no. 2 (2020): 20.
- <sup>25</sup> "Reuben N. Trane...his industrious vision endures," *Trane Triangle* (La Crosse: Trane Company Publication, Fall 1997), 4.
- <sup>26</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, August 14, 1951, 4.
- <sup>27</sup> James M. Ritter, "The History of a Person. Reuben N. Trane," 6.
- <sup>28</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, "Dedicates New Trane Building," May 24, 1954, 1.
- <sup>29</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, September 30, 1954, 18.
- <sup>30</sup> James M. Ritter, "The History of a Person. Reuben N. Trane," 5-6.
- <sup>31</sup> Susan T. Hessel, *Medicine: The Gundersen Experience, 1891-1991* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Gundersen Clinic, 1991), 1-20. Adolf Gundersen (1865 – 1938) passed away unexpectedly while visiting his eldest son on the family farm in Norway. Helga Gundersen, born 1867, passed away in 1951.
- <sup>32</sup> Hessel, *Medicine: The Gundersen Experience*, 16.
- <sup>33</sup> Hessel, *Medicine: The Gundersen Experience*, 31-42.
- <sup>34</sup> Hessel, *Medicine: The Gundersen Experience*, 38.
- <sup>35</sup> Anita Doering, "Trane Tea Room Hosted La Crosse Society," manuscript at the La Crosse Public Library Archives, 2014.
- <sup>36</sup> Ritter, "The History of a Person. Reuben N. Trane," 6.
- <sup>37</sup> Obituary of Frank Hood Trane, *La Crosse Tribune*, January 13, 2021. Frank Hood Trane is interred with other family members in the Trane-Hood Mausoleum in Oak Grove Cemetery, 1407 La Crosse Street, La Crosse, Wisconsin.
- <sup>38</sup> Refer to the Norskedalen website: [www.norskedalen.org](http://www.norskedalen.org)
- <sup>39</sup> Zsolt Kiss and Alison Park, "The concept of national identity" in *British Social Attitudes*, NatCen Social Research, 31st edition.
- <sup>40</sup> These concepts are discussed at length in Stella Ting-Toomey and Tenzin Dorjee, *Communicating Across Cultures*, 2nd ed., Chapter 4 – "Immigrants' Acculturation Process and Intergroup Contacts" (New York: Guilford Press, 2019), 101-134.