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EN NORSK-AMERIKANSK FÆRTELLING:
THE NOVELS OF WALDEMAR AGER, EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN
AND THE NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN IDEAL

HIST 489
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Abstract

Americans retaining linguistic and cultural ties with their ancestral homeland, so-called “hyphenated Americans,” experienced great internal and external pressure to assimilate into American society, never more so than the early twentieth century, during the era of Progressivism and the First World War. In response, writers of various ethnic groups emerged to espouse the benefits of maintaining their own language and customs in America. Among them was Waldemar Ager, a Norwegian immigrant living in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, who wished to form a new Norwegian-American identity combining the best elements of Norwegian and American culture. His novels, set in Eau Claire, are not only vehicles for expressing the author’s visions for his people but give us a glimpse of Eau Claire as it was in the nineteenth and twentieth century and the lives of Norwegian immigrants and Norwegian-Americans, not just ideally, but as they were.

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Introduction

Literature espousing the benefits of maintaining cultural and linguistic links to one's ancestral heritage as one becomes Americanized has always been common among the cultural élite of ethnic groups in the nineteenth and twentieth century.¹ W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term "double conscious" in describing what distinguished African-Americans from other Americans. The German-Jewish-American Horace K. Kallen, a Wisconsin resident, addressed the issues of European immigrants of the early twentieth century in his 1924 essay "Democracy *Versus* the Melting Pot." In it, Kallen cited Thomas Jefferson's dictum that "all men are created equal" as "an affirmation of the right to be different" and supported the maintenance of native languages and culture among all immigrant peoples. He even coined the term "cultural pluralism."² He viewed the ideal America as an orchestra, with each ethnicity contributing to a greater American whole.³ A bibliography of immigrant fiction exists among nearly all ethnic groups directly following the height of their immigration and assimilation into American society, such as the Germans and Norwegians of the early twentieth century, the Jews and Italians of the mid-twentieth century and the Hispanics of the late twentieth century. All of whom faced internal and external pressure to cease the use of their native language and culture.

To preserve their traditional language and customs, many of the cultural élite of these ethnic groups took up literature to influence their ethnic brothers and sisters.⁴ Their literature,

¹ Cultural élite refers to people of letters, including novels and newspapers, who possess goals beyond the economic and social-status goals shared by the rest of the immigrant population. For our purposes, this includes writers who wish to preserve their ancestral language and culture, as well as political concerns such as temperance.

² Oyvind T. Gullicksen, *Twofold Identities: Norwegian-American Contributions to Midwestern Literature*. (Germany: Peter Lang, 2004), 131.

³ Peter Thaler, *Norwegian Minds-American Dreams*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 123.

⁴ For the notable minority of immigrant authors favoring linguistic assimilation, see Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, Boston: Godin, 1981, an autobiography of a Hispanic-American, and the various works of Norwegian-American author Andreas Ueland.

usually directed at the author's ethnic group and in his or her native language, was therefore not meant to merely entertain but to influence the readers into preserving their language and aspects of their culture deemed superior to that of America. Appropriately, the literary merits of immigrant fiction suffer in favor of expressing the aims of the authors. Norwegian-American scholar Peter Thaler describes it best: "[their] purpose went beyond art, and it is very difficult not to overburden the artistic framework with a message that is burning in one's heart."⁵

The desire of people to meet their economic and social needs, made easier by through the adoption of Anglo-American culture and language, opposed those aims. To succeed in business, for example, adopting American language and culture allowed one to reach the widest market possible, as well as avoiding the traditional rivalries between ethnic groups. Externally, foreign language and culture threatened the existing American population. English-speaking Americans responded with social and political pressure for complete assimilation into American society, and this pressure was never greater than during the World War I and Progressive era of the early twentieth century.⁶

This era was the peak of Norwegian-American literature. Many of the Norwegian-American authors began their writing careers in newspapers, contributing to the more than 400 Norwegian-language newspapers circulating across the Midwest through the Pacific Northwest.⁷ Wanting both to reach a wider audience and preserve their message beyond the newspaper medium, several of the more ambitious of these writers took to writing novels.

⁵ Thaler, 82.

⁶ The political Progressive movement consisted of affiliates of all political parties as well those in a distinct Progressive Party. Progressivism, which typically sought labor, education and welfare reform as well as the assimilation of ethnic groups into mainstream American culture and language, was particularly strong in Wisconsin. Norwegians were particularly supportive of the state's Progressive party and Progressive-oriented Republicans. See John D. Buenker, "Volume IV: The Progressive Era: 1893-1914" in *The History of Wisconsin*, ed. William Fletcher Thomas, (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1998) for more information.

⁷ Blegen, *Norwegian Immigration to America: The American Transition*. (Northfield, MN: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1940), 300.

These novels, written for and about Norwegian immigrants, typically espoused the goals of the author. These authors wrote specifically about what they knew. That is their characters, settings and even instances are often based upon the experiences of their family, friends and themselves. The success and possibilities present in America no doubt left a positive imprint of America in the minds of the authors of these novels. Indeed, many of them, from poor families in Norway, had no hope of becoming authors in the more socially-stratified society of old country. They also felt threatened by the highly individualistic nature of America and the threat that assimilation into America posed to their heritage. Therefore their goals, in addition to temperance (favored by many Americans), were the maintenance of Norwegian language and the fusion of the best aspects of their Norwegian heritage in a new Norwegian-American identity.

Norwegian-American authors believed a developing Norwegian-American literary genre was essential to the former. As a rather small group of individuals spread across a large swath of the country, these authors enthusiastically supported each other in hopes of fostering further growth in the genre.

If one measures their success by the prevalence of temperance and the Norwegian language, they utterly failed. Their goals of temperance and maintaining the Norwegian language in America are all but non-issues today, and the only literary contribution of Norwegian-Americans still regularly read and acknowledged in wider American literary circles



Norwegian-American writers Waldemar Ager (left) and Ole Rølvaag in Northfield, MN. Courtesy Ager family.

is Ole Rølvaag's *Giants of the Earth*.⁸ The value in these novels, however, is not in their literary quality or furthering the goals of Norwegian-American writers, but, as Thaler describes it, “[understanding] the ideas of the authors and their time.”⁹ In this paper, I wish to show that the novels of the Norwegian-American writer Waldemar Ager of Eau Claire, Wisconsin represent not only his beliefs as a Norwegian-American, but are important sources of the history of Eau Claire and the Norwegian-American experience.

⁸ Ole Rølvaag and Waldemar Ager were good friends, encouraging the writings of each other and communicating often on how best to encourage Norwegian-American culture. Rølvaag, who served as Head of the Norwegian Department at St. Olaf's College and whose son served as governor of Minnesota, is the only Norwegian-American writer better known than Ager.

⁹ Thaler, 103.

Waldemar Ager

Waldemar Theodor Ager was born in Fredrikstad, Norway, near Oslo, on March 23, 1869 to Marinius and Mathea Ager. Ager described a happy, if not economically prosperous, home. His father was a police officer who struggled with alcohol throughout Ager's life. Ager was most devoted to his mother, who was often busy sewing to provide for the family. He also had an older sister Camilla and a younger brother Johan. Ager began attending school at the exceptionally early age of four and a half. Ager's family was Methodist, a minority denomination barely extant for twenty years at the time in predominantly Lutheran Norway.

In 1882 when Ager was thirteen years old, Ager's father immigrated to Chicago while Ager, his mother and siblings moved to Oslo, the capital and largest city of Norway, where he was first exposed to contemporary urban problems. After two difficult years, Mathea took her children to Chicago to live with Marinius again, who ran a tailor shop. His sister recalled on their journey to America, "We sat out on the deck and talked and planned . . . He and I looked at the poor emigrants around us; some were drunk, some danced. They evidently were trying to forget who they were and we kids were disgusted."¹⁰ In addition to forming a common setting in his novels, Ager's memories from the journey no doubt left a lasting impression on the effects of alcohol and losing one's ethnic heritage. Indeed, his obituary in the *Eau Claire Leader* stated he had two lifelong passions, "temperance and racial [ethnic] heritage."¹¹

In 1894 his father passed away, and Ager cited an instance where Marinius was expelled from the local Methodist church for drunkenness as influential in his life. Due to the embarrassment caused by the incident, Ager publically became a Lutheran, which he remained

¹⁰ Camilla Ager, *Memories*. Rozworld's Homepage, 21 April 2008, available from <http://www.rozworld.net/>; internet; accessed 21 April 2008.

¹¹ "Great Throng Attends Funeral of W. T. Ager," *Eau Claire Leader* (Eau Claire, WI), 5 August 1941.

until his death.¹² At the death of his mother nineteen years later, Ager described her life as a “*via dolorosa*” due to alcohol, despite her own temperance.¹³

In Chicago Ager quickly pursued interests that would possess his entire life. He was an apprentice in the rather religious Norwegian-language newspaper *Norden* and joined the Harmony Total Abstinence Society at the age of eighteen.¹⁴ His contributions to various newspapers, most of them temperance-oriented, progressively increased in the following years. In 1892 he moved to Eau Claire, Wisconsin to contribute in the newly founded *Reform*, a Norwegian-language temperance newspaper. Perhaps Eau Claire needed such a newspaper, as the city possessed ninety saloons the year after Ager’s arrival, an undeniably large number for a city of slightly more than 20,000.¹⁵ He managed and edited the *Reform* from 1896 until his death in 1941.

His early contributions display the formation of his Progressive beliefs portrayed later in his fiction years. Even before 1900, Ager criticized socialists for being greedy and lazy. He firmly believed that in America, if not in Norway, that success was available to anyone who worked hard. The capitalist system needed only reform to ensure prosperity and not a revolutionary change in ideology. As his biographer Einar Haugen described it, “[h]e spoke as the self-made man, though representing also his ancestors’ tradition of craftsmanship.”¹⁶

The formation was thus apparent in his mind of the Norwegian-American ideal, a combination of the best traits of Norway (including language) and America. In 1905 Ager

¹² Ager’s descendents remember that, far from being a leader of his Norwegian church, he sat in the back row and was very quiet. He was in fact of little religious inclination; his childhood pastor in Norway later proclaimed him a “born agnostic,” for his routine questioning of Christian beliefs.

¹³ Haugen, *Immigrant Idealist: A Literary Biography of Waldemar Ager, Norwegian American*. (Northfield: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1989), 22.

¹⁴ Haugen, 22.

¹⁵ Louis Barland, *The Rivers Flow On: A record of Eau Claire, Wisconsin from 1910-1960*, (Stevens Point, WI: Worzalla Publishing Co.) 1965, 360.

¹⁶ Haugen, 26.

favorably compared the “special” Norwegian-American culture and heritage with those of Norway and America. Beyond even temperance, this fusion into a distinct Norwegian-American identity supported by the Norwegian language and Norwegian-American culture and literature became his lifelong goal. He claimed the cultural separation of American-born children from their ancestral heritage also separated them in institutions like churches, schools and societies. With the exception of his support for so-called “hyphenated Americans” and a “culturally plural” society, Ager was a model Progressive. Ager therefore must have been comfortable politically in Wisconsin, a bastion of Progressivism and home to various incarnations of the Progressive Party throughout his life.

In 1899, at the age of thirty, he married Gurolle Blestren Ager, with whom he had nine children in the next eighteen years. Their home was happy, with Gurolle serving as the traditional homemaking wife and mother, and Norwegian as the primary language of the house. His wife and mother likely gave Ager his sense of the ideal woman he believed necessary for a successful nation and family. His children described him as very affectionate yet traditional in regards to the role of women and children in the household. As years progressed he was increasingly busy across the region supporting his newspaper while the use of the Norwegian language declined in addition to working on his newspaper at home, where he often slept only two or three hours per night.

If he was not busy enough with *Reform*, he was busy with his interest in fiction. This interest was in no small part due to his desire to maintain his proposed Norwegian-American identity. In a 1905 article in *Kvartalskrift*, Ager ponders: “[s]uppose that there could be created a market here for Norwegian-American literature,” and continues with the probable results.¹⁷ Thus

¹⁷ Ager, Waldemar, trans. Sigvald Stylen, ed. Odd Lovall, “Cultural Possibilities,” *Cultural Pluralism versus Assimilation*, (Northfield, MN: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1977). *Kvartalskrift* was the

Ager began writing fiction of various sorts. As his works were serialized first in *Reform* the sale of his published books represent a lower number than those who actually read them. Regardless, the number of copies of his published works in both English and Norwegian, and indeed the circulation of the *Reform* itself, is limited and is reproduced when the numbers are available.

After experimenting with sketches and short stories, Ager wrote his first novel, *I strømmen* (*In the Stream*), in 1899, the year he married. *I strømmen* sets a precedent in Ager's novels: intentionally vague settings and scenarios that, although essentially familiar to Ager as actual entities, allow his audience to associate them according to their own experiences. In this case, *I strømmen* is set in a town quite similar to Ager's Norwegian hometown in description and the characters are likely based on factual people Ager knew there. Ager devoted much of the novel to the perceived evils of alcohol, and the novel's literary quality suffers accordingly. *I strømmen* is notable as being the only one of Ager's five novels not translated into an English edition and without an American setting and is thus excluded from my analysis.

While Ager's beliefs are so prevalent in his novels as to occasionally supersede literary quality, his novels are tempered by reality. Many of the characters and occurrences are based upon Ager's own experiences. In fact, Ager's viewing of the painting Christ before Pilate while traveling through England inspired his first novel of the same name. Further examination of Ager's novels reveals his beliefs, motivations and experiences.

Christ before Pilate

Believing that Norwegian-American literature was essential to Norwegian-American culture, Ager wrote a novel espousing the benefits of Norwegian-American literature among his other goals. His first attempt to reach his American audience through fiction was, *Kristus for Pilatus: En norsk-amerikansk fortælling* (*Christ before Pilate: A Norwegian-American Story*), written in 1911, described as “the first American novel of major importance published in the Norwegian language” by Norwegian-American scholar Oyvind Gulliksen.¹⁸ The English translation, *Christ Before Pilate: An American Story* (1924), is notable for the omission of “Norwegian” in the subtitle. When presented with a copy of the translation, Ager, aware of its limited appeal, hoped it would sell a mere three or four hundred copies, exemplifying Ager’s limited ambitions early in his literary career. The theme of both the novel and the painting on which it was based, as described by Ager, derive from “the raging desire of a good many people to crucify anything that surpasses their own little understanding and perception.”¹⁹



The painting *Christ before Pilate* as it appeared in Ager's study in 2008.
Courtesy Ager Family.

The novel’s protagonist is Conrad Walther Welde, a young, well-built pastor newly arrived to America from Norway, where he was a member of a privileged family of pastors, to take over the large, wealthy Norwegian congregation in town. Reverend Mosevig, Welde’s

¹⁸ Gulliksen, 96.

¹⁹ Haugen, 69.

antagonist, is old and frail and leads the other, smaller Norwegian congregation. Ager intentionally omitted theological differences between the two congregations, and even their status as Lutheran is unknown, with the likely intention of appealing to all Norwegian-Americans. Ager was aware of the possibility for religious divisiveness, being a former Methodist and now Lutheran. The two churches likely allude to Grace Lutheran Church, spawned from Ager's own First Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1910 in Eau Claire to provide services in English instead of Norwegian.²⁰ The rift within First Lutheran Church regarding the Norwegian and English languages, and by extension cultures, no doubt influenced Ager's writing as he wrote *Christ before Pilate*.

A fictional Eau Claire is likely the setting, although it is described so vaguely that it was a setting recognizable and relatable to anyone familiar with small Midwestern cities. The setting is intentionally obscure to be applicable to the widest range of Norwegian-Americans possible. In later works, Ager urban settings are increasingly similar to Eau Claire and in greater detail due to Ager's increasing experience and fondness for his city. Like Ager's own neighborhood, Welde's is predominantly Norwegian-American and middle-class.²¹ He is so vague that even dates and years are absent. Only the existence of cars within the novel betray the novel's setting in the present (after all, cars were not that prevalent in the years before 1911).

Written before the height of assimilationist pressure during the Progressive era, *Christ before Pilate* portrays a mixed view of American society. Ager first describes Pastor Welde's lifestyle in America as "poor and [living] like other people . . . where poverty was the usual

²⁰ Barland, 311.

²¹ The 1910 Eau Claire City Directory lists among the occupants of Ager's Chestnut Street households with middle-class occupations such as "grocer" and "nurse," as well as numerous Norwegian surnames. The limit of neighborhood social activities to single ethnic groups does not restrict Welde's neighborhood itself to a single ethnicity, in agreement with the ethnic heterogeneity of Ager's neighborhood.

condition,”²² as opposed to that of the aristocracy and privileged clerical class of Norway, where the Lutheran church is supported by the state. Indeed, the average salary of Norwegian-Danish Methodist preachers in the West Wisconsin Conference circa 1915 was \$633, compared to the average \$468 yearly living wage in Wisconsin.²³ The wives of preachers even organized a Preachers’ Aid Society to raise funds for their pensions.²⁴

Remembering class distinctions between themselves and state-appointed officials, many Norwegian immigrants were quite pleased to be able to converse with the likes of bailiffs and pastors as social equals. This comparison was favorable to American society, as Ager believed that a church, then often organized by ethnicity, was necessary to maintain Norwegian language and culture. Fittingly the Norwegian-language Methodist and Lutheran churches in America collaborated to that end.²⁵ The relationship between pastor and parishioners, undivided by class differences in America, was consequently a positive attribute in America.

Ager supplemented this argument with an allegory pertaining to the social welfare responsibilities of churches: several visitors to Pastor Welde’s home office arrive to see Welde sewing buttons on a coat for a poor congregation member. They find this humorous, as this was traditionally a woman’s job, for either a wife or house servant. Welde then informs the men of an anecdote dating from his childhood years at his father’s church in Norway, where his father performed the same button-mending service for his own congregation. He concludes, “[the] buttons did more to keep the . . . Church together . . . than all my father’s syntax.”²⁶ Ager thus

²² Waldemar Ager, *Christ Before Pilate: An American Story*. Trans. J. J. Skordalsvold. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1924), 22.

²³ Ruth Rosen and Sue Davidson, eds. *The Maimie Papers, with an introduction by Ruth Rosen* (New York: 1977), xxvii, states Wisconsin’s 1913 living wage was nine dollars per week. Computing nine dollars over an entire fifty-two week year yields the sum \$468.

²⁴ Andersen, Arlow W. *The Salt of the Earth: A History of Norwegian-Danish Methodism in America* (Nashville, TN: The Norwegian-Danish Methodist Historical Society, 1962), 232.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁶ *Christ before Pilate*, 31.

argued that churches were essential means of social welfare in America (which they indeed were in his day), with the additional purpose in America of concentrating Norwegians together, where their language and culture could more naturally be preserved. Therefore, to Ager churches were most important as a social institution in America.²⁷

Ager tempered enthusiasm for America with critiques of American culture. Ager was particularly critical of the overly capitalist and individualist nature of American society. During one scene, an elderly American woman carrying a basket of potatoes rebuffs a Norwegian immigrant who attempts to assist her, believing he wished to steal them.²⁸ The novel continues to argue against individualism and divisions among the poor of American society by commenting on the physical divisions between households: “the more dilapidated the house, the more solid the fence.”²⁹ The argument here is the extension of the communal and domestic ideals inherent in Norway to America, where Norwegian-Americans specifically are so overtaken by the competitive spirit of America that they forget their traditional Norwegian values.

The mood of the novel is most positive when there is a celebration of Norwegian culture at the large Norwegian church headed by Welde. Here Ager began a theme that continued in his later novels: an unhappy character regains happiness and satisfaction in life by reconnecting with his Norwegian heritage. In this instance, a woman born in America is charged with preparing the lutefisk (the main dish of the dinner and a cultural staple in Norway), which she knows nothing about. She succeeds after much difficulty, and along with Norwegian national costumes, the

²⁷ See both Gulliksen, *Twofold Identities*, 96 and Peter Thaler, *Norwegian Minds*, 90 for further information on American churches as social institutions.

²⁸ *Christ before Pilate*, 34.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 48. Ager’s bias as a member of the professional middle class likely affected this belief as well.

church dinner is a great success and “no one could remember anything like it.”³⁰ The benefits of continuing aspects of traditional Norwegian culture, complete with the tremendous response, are all too apparent.

With the benefits of the Norwegian-American established, Ager then described the means to achieve it in autobiographical fashion. In the novel, Welde ponders starting a new society “of a rather literary nature, with “debates . . . dialogs, recitations, readings, etc . . . that would draw young people.”³¹ Ager recognized that growth and sustenance of Norwegian-American culture was more than religious and linguistic continuation from Norway. It would be distinct from the Norwegian and American cultures although essential to the latter. Therefore it would have to continually develop and make contributions, and with this proposed “new society“ of Welde’s, the Norwegian-Americans would be able to accomplish this.

The novel indeed reads like a manual in this regard. In the novel, young adults at the time turned to cards and drinking for entertainment, much to the chagrin of the traditional first-generation townspeople. In response, Pastor Welde forms a young people’s society that meets in the church’s basement, a common occurrence in Ager’s day. Ager’s optimism regarding the social effects of young people’s societies is rooted in his actual experience. While church societies were prevalent throughout Eau Claire, there were more in Ager’s own First Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran church than he mentioned, including distinct Ladies’ and Young Ladies’ societies. In fact, the Young People’s Society of Ager’s church (alternately known as the Luther League) began planning for what became Luther Hospital, Eau Claire’s largest hospital as of

³⁰ *Christ before Pilate*, 82.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

2008, to offer Protestant healthcare alternate to the Catholic Sacred Heart Hospital. Ager covered the planning and later developments of Luther Hospital extensively in *Reform*.³²

At Welde's insistence, the meetings of the Young People's Society were conducted in Norwegian to reach both the recently-arrived immigrants as well as the wealthier, established, young second-generation Norwegian-Americans, who also spoke English. "A written paper was started and read at their meetings" and Norwegian literature was widely read, and eventually some of the young people were "better versed . . . than the minister himself." Indeed, "no branch of [the pastor's] work gave better promise."³³ The novel even ends with a commentary on the need to aid the youth of the day because "they had no definite aim, no set purpose."³⁴ In this way Ager expressed his goal of establishing a Norwegian-American culture and language supported by Norwegian-American literature. Indeed, Ager viewed his novels as an essential beginning to the formation of this particular literary genre hoped they would become the catalyst for this creation.

Temperance, another motivation for Ager's writings, is less notable within *Christ before Pilate*. Unlike Ager's beliefs towards Norwegian identity in America, Ager only expresses the social problems of alcohol, and does not offer solutions, legally or otherwise. Alcohol is instead poorly without any positive traits. The funeral of a drunkard occupies one chapter, and Welde's sermon is titled "Drunkards shall not inherit the kingdom of God."³⁵ He also preaches on the importance of intervention, and blames the entire town, and not the individual, for the problem of alcohol. However he does not state in what way the town, through individual cases or

³² For more information on the early history of Luther Hospital, and further commentary by Ager's son Trygve, see First Lutheran's website: <http://www.first-lutheran.org>. Ironically, this hospital became so successful it later displaced Ager's house, although the hospital did fund its relocation several blocks away to its current location on E. Madison Ave. in Eau Claire.

³³ *Christ before Pilate*, 90-91.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 277.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

politically, should deal with the problem. Other portrayals of drunkenness occur to remind readers of the consequences of alcohol, such as the observance of “a drunken man stagger[ing] along with uncertain steps,”³⁶ who is otherwise irrelevant to the story. Written nearly a decade before national Prohibition, Ager’s disdain for alcohol and yet lack of political direction is quite fitting for the era. In America there was also popular opposition to alcohol yet no cohesive political opposition to it.

Ager’s passion for temperance was rather conducive to the views of his Norwegian-American contemporaries. Thaler states, “[the] Prohibition movement . . . represented the most vociferous expression of politicized, mainly Protestant, Christianity.”³⁷ The Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, representing thirty denominations across the country, declared of their stated goal of Prohibition in 1916: “[it] was simply gathering up and giving united expression to the expressed desire and will [without exception] of the denominations that comprise the council.”³⁸ Ager, however, merely focuses on the problems, and not solutions to, alcohol in *Christ before Pilate*. Norwegian-Americans themselves were not so vehement in their beliefs to alcohol, yet Methodists were. Ager’s temperance beliefs are then much more in line with his childhood experiences and Methodist upbringing.³⁹

³⁶ *Christ before Pilate*, 266.

³⁷ Thaler, 134.

³⁸ Atticus Webb. *Dry America: A Study for the use of Churches, Sunday Schools, Young People’s Societies, Women’s Organizations, Etc.* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press), 13.

³⁹ Nationally, Norwegian-Americans were less supportive of temperance than other Protestant groups, notably Methodists and Baptists. The Eau Claire City Directories from 1890-1920 reveals that the temperance societies of Eau Claire were dominated by Norwegians. In fact, the word “temperance” only appears in the 1901-1902 City Directory under Ager’s temperance *Reform* Norwegian-language newspaper and his Norwegian *Excelsior* Temperance Lodge.

On the Way to the Melting Pot

Ager articulated his views on alcohol more thoroughly in his second novel, *Paa veien til Smeltepotten* in 1917. As with all his of novels, Ager first serialized it in *Reform*, then with a circulation of 5300. When Ager first published it as a novel, he only had 750 copies printed, so he did not harbor any unachievable ambitions for the novel. Unlike his previous novel, no publisher picked up his novel for an English edition, and it was only translated and published in 1995 as *On the Way to the Melting Pot*.

The novel's protagonist, Lars, is a newly-arrived Norwegian immigrant who quickly becomes enamored with the possibilities in America. Again set in a nameless Midwestern town with a large Norwegian-American population similar to Eau Claire, Lars's ascension to wealth and eventual disavowal of his heritage repeat the theme maintaining aspects of Norwegian culture more thoroughly. Ager contrasted Lars, who throughout the novel becomes a tragic figure as he dispels his Norwegian heritage, with his friend Henry, who becomes the prototypical Norwegian-American (as defined by Ager), as he systematically chooses which traits of the Norwegian and American cultures to adopt.

Written at the height of the First World War when the pressure for assimilation among all "hyphenated" Americans was greatest, Ager's appeals to continue Norwegian aspects (ideals, traditions and particularly language, among them) were also at their clearest. Ager's lack of patriotism during this period is appropriate for his ethnicity; only four of the ten Norwegian-Americans in Congress voted in favor of the declaration of war on Germany.⁴⁰ In fact Ager's

⁴⁰ Ager's wit and sarcasm, noted throughout his fiction, is present in his non-fictional works as well. *Cultural Pluralism*, 102 notes: In a concurrent *Kvartalskrift* contribution, Ager compared assimilation in America to the cultural diversity in Europe: "No Cathedral of Cologne or Notre Dame nor a Cathedral of Trondheim—Billy Sunday tabernacles instead, practical, appropriate places of worship – where souls may be saved 66 per cent cheaper than in any other religious structures."

state of Wisconsin, with its large German and Scandinavian population, was one of the states most opposed to the war.

Written two years before national Prohibition, however, Ager's more-defined arguments against alcohol consumption contain a recognition of alcohol's contribution (through the institution of the saloon) to the maintenance of Norwegian culture, a theme that became more prevalent in his later novels written during Prohibition. *Melting Pot* acknowledges "very little but Norwegian was spoken in the saloon" and that no one there "was ashamed of being Norwegian," and such settings were indeed dwindling rapidly at the time. Yet Ager does not dwell on any possible cultural benefits of alcohol. When Lars first begins patronizing a local saloon, "he could squander a couple of dollars in a single evening," causing him to be "alarmed at his extravagance." When Lars encounters a destitute young man who is selling his possessions presumably for food and lodging, Lars gives him a dollar and "no sooner had the boy got it than he went over to the bar and demanded whiskey."⁴¹

As in his previous novel, Ager also included jabs at alcoholism irrelevant to the plot, such as a lowly cook who is mentioned in only one sentence: he "had studied to become a doctor before drink got the upper hand."⁴² In this way Ager expressed his disapproval of alcohol and the institution of the saloon and their effects, monetarily and emotionally. To ensure his audience understood this topic as a message and not just entertainment, Ager summarized it, citing countless saloon-going men who "had belonged to the upper class. Now they moved from place to place and begged for food . . . and slept under boardwalks."⁴³

⁴¹ Waldemar Ager. *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, trans. Harry T. Clevens. (Madison: Prairie Oaks Press, 1995), 35-36.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 37.

Fortunately there were alternatives to alcohol and Ager suggested them to his audience through this novel. Before Lars begins his rampant Americanization, he notices that the many young Norwegians in the saloon “always talked about having no place to go” and he “wished there had been a Norwegian youth organization or a Good Templar lodge in town.”⁴⁴ Lars also knew that whenever “things got too bad he would join the youth of the congregation at their meetings.”⁴⁵ Once again, Ager’s own experiences, the avoidance of alcohol and participation in church life from an early age, are evident in his writings.

In some respects America itself is portrayed well compared to Norway. Ager is particularly enthusiastic about the social mobility allegedly available to all Americans. At the beginning of the novel, Lars is a young man who just recently arrived from Norway. Sitting on a porch amongst the leading Norwegian-American men of the town, Lars thinks of his friends who “should just see him now in such fine company.” Certainly in Norway, Ager implied, such casual commingling of classes was not possible. Lars further comments that all of these men had once been immigrants like himself, and that none of their children “were going to learn a common trade as they would have in Norway.”⁴⁶ In America, anyone could prosper through hard work, regardless of



A young Waldemar Ager. Courtesy Ager family

⁴⁴ *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, 39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

ethnicity or social status in the old country.⁴⁷ Being of the professional American middle-class himself, Ager's beliefs here clearly transcended ethnicity into his social class.

Ager's critique of America includes negative aspects as well. In fact his more noticeable disdain for America in *Melting Pot*, written during World War I, was likely the result of the Anglicization encouraged through wartime propaganda.⁴⁸ Threatened, Ager countered with national comparisons favorable to Norway. The man of the house where Lars's fiancée serves as a maid questions her wearing of a ribbon in honor of Norwegian Independence Day. When she informs the American household of Norway's political accomplishments, most notably Women's Suffrage, the American family wished to celebrate Norwegian Independence Day, despite not even being of Norwegian heritage, by wearing a ribbon "in honor of the land which does not consider women to be idiots or dumb animals."⁴⁹

Conversely the Norwegian characters often attempt to be as American as possible, particularly with the adoption of the English language, with either comic or tragic consequences. Norwegian-American mothers scold their children in English with such sayings as "shut up" and "I'll knock the stuffing out of you,"⁵⁰ for lack of gentler vocabulary. Such instances are factual observances of Ager that made their way into his fiction. A Norwegian-American pastor who detested the Norwegian language, upon hearing another pastor give a sermon in Norwegian, thanked God that he "could speak decent English and was not like this sinner."⁵¹ The actual

⁴⁷ To the dismay of his boss, Lars begins dressing in the latest American fashion to woo his young daughter. The threat becomes serious when Lars begins sporting a rather impressive moustache. I leave the reader to decide to what degree Lars is based upon a young Ager through the picture above.

⁴⁸ Andersen, Arlow W. Review of *American Idealist*, by Einar Haugen, *The Journal of American History*, 77, 3. (Dec., 1990), p. 1054.

⁴⁹ *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, 114.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

beliefs of Norwegian-American pastors varied, although many, favored bilingualism in church even after the First World War.⁵²

While pressure for assimilation was great, the desire for Norwegian-language services was so great that, as one church conference memorial states, if church services were performed in English, “a large percentage would join other foreign-speaking denominations.”⁵³ Regardless, all of *Melting Pot*'s aspiring Americans came from Norway “[h]ungry after wealth, hungry for prominence and honor, hungry to be something exceptionally grand. And thus it was that they gave up their birthright and their joy of living without knowing what they were doing.” Upon gaining all they sought, “they had the expression that people have who feel they have lost something but are not sure what it is.”⁵⁴ “They had money, they ate good food and wore fine clothes, but they were not happy.”⁵⁵

If that statement is not enough to convince the densest readers of Ager's beliefs, he continued the mockery of American individualism, specifically among Norwegian-Americans and their appearance- and class-oriented culture. In one upper-class Norwegian-American household, the aspiring wife chided her husband for “the great injustice he committed against them in all in being unwill[i]ng to buy a set of china, which they needed so badly, and a player piano, which they could not be without.”⁵⁶ As one young immigrant woman described it, “all of them [Americans] looked as though they were keeping an eye on each other, and that all of them looked offended because they were being watched.”⁵⁷

⁵² Andersen, 243.

⁵³ Andersen, 258.

⁵⁴ *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, 155.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

In contrast is the old culture of Norway, where “people looked better and laughed more . . . It was quite incomprehensible how they could laugh and have fun when they lived only from hand to mouth as so many did.”⁵⁸ In this way Ager criticized the overly individualistic and competitive aspects of Norwegian culture and by extension urged Norwegian-Americans to retain parts of their traditional communal Norwegian culture. Ideally, Norwegian-Americans should adopt only certain aspects of American culture while retaining what is superior of Norwegian culture.

Alternatively, perhaps Ager is only expressing the beliefs of all Progressives of the era; he seeks social and government reform regarding the urban issues of the time. Regardless, he remains particularly critical of those distanced from their own ethnic culture. Ager’s beliefs were quite conducive to those of Norwegian-Americans, who often supported the Socialist political parties in the 1910s⁵⁹ and overwhelmingly supported the Progressive parties throughout the era of *Reform*. Indeed, the Wisconsin historian Jane Pederson states that “Scandinavians . . . surpassed any other group in their support of . . . Progressive reforms.”⁶⁰ Even opposition to alcohol, a corner stone of Ager’s beliefs, was greater among Norwegian-Americans in Eau Claire, where they dominated the area temperance societies, than the rest of America where opposition was less prevalent.

Ager portrays this peculiarity of Eau Claire in the middle of the novel when Lars is now a middle-class store clerk, highly keen on American fashion. Along with his fiancée Karoline, he fondly remembers “the Good Templar [temperance] lodge and the youth organizations back

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵⁹ Gary Marks and Matthew Burbank, “Immigrant Support for the American Socialist Party, 1912 and 1920,” *Social Science History*, 14, 2. (Summer, 1990): 180 emphasizes that Norwegian-American support for Socialist political parties derives from their communitarian way of life in rural Norway.

⁶⁰ Jane Marie Pederson, *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin, 1870-1970*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 56.

home [in Norway], and all the bazaars and get-togethers. Here there was almost nothing to do.”⁶¹ Still representing an ambitious Norwegian immigrant in the novel, Lars founds a Good Templar lodge in his new home, where “they enjoyed singing and readings; they had a handwritten newsletter and much more books. And afterward they played Norwegian games and it was almost impossible to quit.”⁶² All of this takes place, of course, in the Norwegian language and in the spirit of temperance. Ager himself was a founder of the “Excelsior” Temperance Lodge in Eau Claire where, as his biographer Einar Haugen states, “they could hear recitations . . . sing songs . . . [and had] a handwritten newspaper.”⁶³ In fact these activities existed in nearly all of the more than 4,000 Norwegian congregations across the country, and no movement was more popular throughout the congregations than temperance.

The tone of the novel is most positive when it expresses Ager’s goal of the development of the Norwegian-American identity. During a chat between men in the aforementioned porch scene, Ager introduced the archetypal Norwegian-American, who happens to be a plumber. All of the other important men present are impressed to learn that his wife is fully American. In regards to Americanization, he comments that “[m]y wife is proud of what Norwegian she has learned, but your wives are proud of the Norwegian they have forgotten. They don’t even speak it to their children. If my wife and I had had children, they would have learned both languages” and “[today’s children] don’t know anything about their own ancestors.”⁶⁴ Ager knowingly sacrificed literary quality in favor of portraying his beliefs regarding Norwegian culture by including such an ideal Norwegian-American character in the plumber. He admitted as much when he responded to criticism in the Norwegian-language *Minneapolis Tidende*: “I have got

⁶¹ *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, 107.

⁶² *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, 108.

⁶³ Haugen, 8.

⁶⁴ *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, 10-11.

along with a spokesman in the figure of the plumber. But even he should have been omitted, if I had allowed literary considerations to govern me.”⁶⁵

As the men continue the discussion of Americanization, a doctor present describes this lost and unhappy feeling many first and second-generation Norwegians feel as “rootlessness. They are ripped up from the one [culture] and can’t put down roots in the other.” When another man reminds the doctor “of the many Norwegian congregations, schools, organizations, newspapers, and the like that they had. . . the doctor believed there could be results when they took enough soil with them from home to cover over the most tender roots.”⁶⁶ The soil referred to is the preferred aspects of Norwegian culture and language, since, as the plant analogy illustrates, Norwegians can never happily be completely Americanized.

Lars’s best friend Henry personifies Ager’s view of Americanization well. Henry is happiest doing physical labor and speaking the Norwegian language while despising more refined jobs and higher education, which “were not real jobs.”⁶⁷ His own mother, speaking only Norwegian, wishes her son to speak nothing but English and be respectable, wealthy and otherwise American in every way, hoping it was “the will of God that her son should be an exceptionally fine man.”⁶⁸ Eventually he succeeds and she is left alone, and a friend comments to her (as well as to the reader): “wouldn’t it have been nicer for you if your boy, Henry, had married a common working girl and worked with other [Norwegian] folk. Then you could have had someone to be with and have a good time with. There won’t be any home for you there [among the upper-class American friends and family of his wife].”⁶⁹ Henry grows to dislike his managerial job and lack of work at home and spends late nights out with friends. His mother

⁶⁵ Haugen, 95.

⁶⁶ *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, 180.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

reminisces of how happy he was previously when “[h]e was the best one to use a shovel—that’s what they all said.” She then adds naively, “[b]ut what he does now he learned at the university,”⁷⁰ an observation of Ager’s on the over-enthusiasm for American institutions among Norwegian-Americans. Eventually both Henry and his American wife desire a more traditional lifestyle when she states “‘Oh, how happy we would have been if we had been poor and you could go to work and I could make all kinds of good food for you.’ And the look in his eyes showed that he was made very happy by what she said.”⁷¹

In contrast, the rest of the Norwegian-American population is “in full flight from their Norwegian past to their American future,”⁷² as Haugen describes it. None of them were worse than Lars, now calling himself Louis, who was so destitute that he only appeared as a relatively unknown character towards the end of the novel, several chapters after his last mention. Perhaps Lars was a hypothetical version of what Ager himself could have become. He had indeed signed his name as “William Ager” in 1891 when he became an American citizen.⁷³ The novel ends with Ager’s comparison of traditional Norwegian culture with what it was becoming:

There is blue blood in many of those people from Norway. Some of them would rather go hungry for days than ask anyone for help or go poorly dressed than lie and cheat. People whose word is as good as a signed note. [But when they arrived in America] they were ready for the great melting pot. First they stripped away their love of their parents, then they sacrificed their love for the one they held most dear, then the language they learned from their mother, then their love for their childhood upbringing, for God and man, then the songs they learned as children, then their memories, then the ideals of their youth—tore their heritage asunder little by little . . . then there was a great empty void to be filled with love of self, selfishness, greed and the like.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, 178.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁷² Haugen, 90.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 24. In the 1910 census, his name is again recorded as William. Seeing the Norwegian names of his children, it was likely Ager’s decision to call himself William. However, in the 1900 census and again in 1920, his recorded name is Waldemar, spelled incorrectly as “Valdemar” in 1900.

⁷⁴ *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, 196-198.

At the peak of assimilationist pressure during the First World War, Ager was at the peak of his defense of everything Norwegian. This defense led to ridicule of many things American and those that accepted American culture and language too rapidly. As he perceived it, Norwegian-Americans gave up their traditional language and heritage in favor of becoming what they could not be. Nearly a decade passed before Ager wrote another novel, and during that decade things events progressed that limited his ability to write about his most passionate beliefs: Prohibition and the irreversible decline of the Norwegian language.

Sons of the Old Country

Ager's third novel, written in 1926, is starkly different in tone, specifically towards America. Again the setting is an unnamed Midwestern town based on Eau Claire, although *Old Country* is set in the 1860s when the town copes with two major events: a devastating flood and the American Civil War. At the time of the novel's appearance in 1926, the Eighteenth (1919) and Nineteenth Amendments (1920) prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol and granting women's suffrage respectively were established, which along with the declining pressure to assimilate and the rapid decline of the Norwegian language in America limited Ager's motives for his next novel. Around this time Ager even contemplated abandoning the *Reform* in favor of an English magazine, which never occurred.⁷⁵ An English translation by his own son Trygve only appeared in 1983, exemplifying the poor reception the novel received.

Old Country lacks much of the blatant propaganda that characterized Ager's earlier fiction. Instead it is rather romantic in nature, recalling the idealistic history of Norwegian immigrants and their contributions to America. Acknowledging the dwindling chance of maintaining a strong Norwegian identity in America, Ager subsequently wrote more for his own pleasure and interest than for any external causes.⁷⁶ However he also wished to create a history of the Norwegian-American experience using the literary genre known as historical fiction. No

⁷⁵ Betty Ager, interview by Michael Nerbovig, 28 February 2008.

⁷⁶ Ager's fourth and final novel, *I Sit Alone*, is his most reflective and auto-biographical, supports this claim. The novel closely follows Ager's early life through the description of the protagonist, Christian Pederson. Later, the character is symbolically alone in the Dakota Prairie, contemplating his now-bitter life. Its setting puts it out of the scope of this paper.

doubt recalling the countless testimonials of previous generations throughout his life in Eau Claire, Ager likely wished to record their recollections in a fictionalized history of area Norwegian-Americans.⁷⁷

The primary setting of the novel is a town up the Chippewa River from the Mississippi River and is dominated by the lumber industry, while Eau Claire was indeed the largest lumbering center in the United States at the time.⁷⁸ Dissected by a “big [Chippewa] river and a smaller [Eau Claire] one, . . . [it] would eventually become a big city” with “rumors of the coming of a railroad.” Ager even described a specific building, “a grand opera house of two stories with an imposing front that towered almost half again the height of the building proper.”⁷⁹



The Grand Opera House of Eau Claire. Note the "imposing front" that is indeed half height of the two floors below. Photo by author.

Naturally interested in history, Ager no doubt combined historical events of nineteenth century Eau Claire to form a more eventful Midwestern town in which his characters could express the romanticized Norwegian immigrant experience that united all Norwegian-Americans. Specifically, Ager transplanted the events of the Eau Claire flood of 1880⁸⁰ to the time of the

⁷⁷ Fictional history is a common literary genre within immigrant fiction. Notably, 1920 census for Eau Claire, out of a total population of 20,880, lists 1,592 people born in Norway, down from 1,924 in 1910. Ager likely felt a sense of urgency to record the history of Norwegian immigrants as their numbers rapidly succumbed to old age.

⁷⁸ Barland, 334.

⁷⁹ Waldemar Ager. *Sons of the Old Country*, trans. Trygve M. Ager. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 42. This portrayal as a description of Eau Claire is so widely accepted that it appears in Tim Pfaff, *Settlement and Survival: Building Towns in the Chippewa Valley, 1850-1925* (Wisconsin: Chippewa Valley Museum Press, 1994), 9 in its early history of Eau Claire.

⁸⁰ Barland, 385.

Civil War. The actual Dells dam indeed broke, causing the logs stored in the dam's reservoir to destroy much of the town. In *Old Country* however, the ethnic groups of the town symbolically work together to prevent the logs from destroying the town. The actual flood damaged the real opera house beyond repair, and it was demolished in 1884 prior to Ager's arrival.⁸¹ Ager also included numerous historical anecdotes to support the factuality of his novel, such as the closing of the dams in summer due to particularly low water levels,⁸² and the pending arrival of a railroad from the south.

The novel follows the experiences of the protagonist Frederik, a young man who flees his oppressive upper-class life in Norway to find purpose in America. Frederik wishes to make his way on his own as any common Norwegian, and in doing so represents the Norwegian ideal, as opposed to the Norwegian reality of rigid social structure back home. *Old Country* begins with an argument between Frederik and his father as Frederik is about to flee to America. As Frederik leaves down the stairs of his father's office, his father throws a collection of sermons by Hans Nielsen Hauge, which Frederik symbolically picks up and takes with him on the journey to America.⁸³

While touching on the themes of Ager's previous novels, this one focuses on the Norwegian-American identity Ager sought in the America and less on the perils of Americanization. Fittingly, *Old Country* includes American literary themes, such as humor, a Western-style saloon fight and a Mark Twain-inspired steamboat journey.⁸⁴ Taking place around the time of the Civil War, this novel is set much earlier than his other works and may be

⁸¹ Barland, 237.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 363.

⁸³ Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824) was an influential Norwegian revivalist lay preacher and was imprisoned for some time for his defiance of Norway's political and religious establishments. He later became a successful industrialist revered for capitalism tempered by Christian morality. Ager claims literary heritage from Hauge, stating in a 1905 essay: "[s]peaking in a literary sense, we [Norwegian-Americans] belong to the age of Hans Nielsen Hauge." See Gulliksen, 155.

⁸⁴ Gulliksen, 153.

interpreted as the foundation for that identity. Included are the actual exploits of the Norwegian Fifteenth Regiment and Col. Hans Heg, subjects that greatly interested Ager.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Ager explores the place of “Norwegianness” in America more thoroughly than in previous novels.

A distinct pride in Norwegian heritage emerges, especially in the characters’ relation to the Irish. The Irish are “always easy to arouse” and noted for their “fondness for battle.”⁸⁶ Employers favor Norwegians, who “did everything they were asked to do and a little more besides. With the Irish, who knew the language, there were so many ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ and not infrequently a ‘you-go-to-hell.’”⁸⁷ Alternately, the Germans “are willing enough, but they ain’t good for much.”⁸⁸ The English-speaking Irish, Canadians and Yankees “formed a united front against newcomers who did not speak English or who spoke it poorly.”⁸⁹ The native English-speakers concluded: “the only thing to do was to beat the living daylights out of the Norskies and make things so hot for them that they’d pack up and go back where they came”⁹⁰ due to their superior work ethic driving wages down. Of course the Norwegians won that fight, but their remained “a vast mutual respect.”⁹¹ Like numerous instances in the novel, this was based on an

⁸⁵ *Colonel Heg and His Boys*, (Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 2000) published ten years before *Sons of the Old Country* in 1916, is Ager’s collection of letters written by the men of the Norwegian Fifteenth Regiment from the Civil War, representing the contributions of Norwegian-Americans.

⁸⁶ *Sons of the Old Country*, 49.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 62. ⁸⁸ Always ready with a quip, on his honeymoon to New Orleans, by train and traveling through the Illinois plains, he felt compelled to comment on the endless stretch of cabbage fields: “Remarkable heads; they thrive best in manure and sunshine and become an important source of nourishment for cage worms and Germans.” See Waldemar Ager, trans. Eyvind Ager, *Notes From a Vacation Trip*, July 1899. For authors more visceral in their descriptions of Germans, see the Norwegian-American authors Sigrid Undset and Simon Johnson.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 49. The 1880 census indeed states that the three largest groups of foreign born citizens in Eau Claire County are Scandinavians (10%), Germans (9.7%) and Canadian (6.8%), of which many were of Irish ethnicity. More importantly the 1870 census states 20.6% of all workers in Eau Claire were Norwegian-born.

actual occurrence. Fourteen years earlier in 1912, he mentioned a decisive fight at Ole Bruden's saloon in the 1870s.⁹²

In fact, this respect for ethnic differences, was the very foundation of America. These ethnic groups contributed to a wider American identity, which they all belonged to as well. Notably, America is also a source of pride that all ethnic groups strive to belong to. In a non-fictional paper, Ager stated that all peoples must perpetuate "what is best in their respective races . . . [then] shall we have fulfilled our duty toward our country."⁹³ Ager's goal is no doubt to instill a sense of pride in Norwegian-Americans while excusing the lack of financial advancement by many through their start at the lowest economic rung of American society. As described in the novel, Norwegians, as well as most new citizens of Eau Claire, took jobs within the burgeoning lumber industry.

In the saw mill, Ager described his views towards labor in America and by extension Norway. Among the new workers in the saw mill is the protagonist Frederik, who, although never a negatively-portrayed character, often represents traditional upper-class sentiments of Norway. Frederik "had been told that the man [Greger Gregerson] he worked with had been involved in the Norwegian labor movement led by Marcus Thrane, and that he had been forced to flee the country in 1851 to avoid imprisonment or slavery. Frederik had never heard anything good about the Thrane organization."⁹⁴

Gregerson may in fact be a caricature of the real life Marcus Thrane. Thrane (1817-1890) was an influential leader of the Norwegian labor movement that sought, among other things, universal suffrage, farm subsidies, better working conditions and economic opportunities.

⁹² That information can be found in the manuscript of a speech Ager gave in Eau Claire in 1912. It can be found in the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire History Department courtesy of Borgnild Ager.

⁹³ Thaler, 103.

⁹⁴ *Sons of the Old Country*, 50.

He was imprisoned for his actions for several years and immigrated to America in 1862. He received a poor response to his political agitations in America and lived out the rest of his life in Eau Claire, where he died in 1890, two years prior to Ager's arrival. Interestingly, Ager wrote all of his novels on the desk once owned by Thrane, purchased and given to Ager by friends in 1899. The use of that desk throughout Ager's life suggests a fondness for Thrane and is perhaps the best indicator of Ager's opinion of him.⁹⁵

In the novel, Gregersen once believed "ministers and religion as inventions designed to hold the common man down," although it "had long since dawned on him that here [in America] the church was the only available instrument for holding the common man up."⁹⁶ This fits with Ager's beliefs (expressed more thoroughly in *Christ before Pilate*) that the churches in America served important social and cultural purposes without the faults of Norwegian churches (which were state-supported and controlled by the upper class). As the scholar of Norwegian-American literary figures Oyvind Gulliksen states, Ager's portrayal of the experience of the millworkers is positive, and suggests that the Socialist movements common throughout Europe are unnecessary in America.⁹⁷ As a Progressive, Ager believed in the ability of people and the government

The end of the novel, when Frederik, descended from the upper-class of Norway, marries Gregerson's daughter Gunda, descended from the social reform movement of Norway, is a fitting analogy for taking the positive attributes of Norwegian society into the new Norwegian-American identity. Frederik and his wife then make a triumphant, and symbolic, trip home to Norway.⁹⁸ Gulliksen summarizes this symbolic home journey so commonly employed by Norwegian-American writers as a "sense of liberty and justice for which the returnee is able to

⁹⁵ Betty Ager, interview.

⁹⁶ *Sons of the Old Country*, 87.

⁹⁷ Gulliksen, 147-8.

⁹⁸ Ager originally wrote that Frederik and Gunda remained in Norway. Trygve changed this to only a visit in his English translation to make the events fit with the America-oriented plot.

put to use in the old country.”⁹⁹ While the return journey is common in Norwegian-American literature, it was and is common among Norwegian immigrants and their descendants. Gulliksen further argues that Ager’s thesis was “America could change a man for the better,” in this case Frederik and Gregersen, who fled Norway for various reasons.¹⁰⁰ Ager also reflected upon his own personal experiences with the later progression of Gregersen’s life, whose “radical ideas, as they were called, vanished gradually as his flock of children increased.”¹⁰¹

Projecting himself on another character, Frederik remembers that his “[e]xperiences at home [in Norway], and particularly the brutality his father displayed when drunk, had created in him a strong revulsion to both the smell and taste of liquor.”¹⁰² The slurred pleas of a saloon patron reinforce Frederik’s personal beliefs on the effects of alcohol: “I ain’t no good cushtomer of yours, Olshon, but tha’sh only because I ain’t go mush money.”¹⁰³ Contrarily, for the morally-upright owner of Frederik’s boarding house, “it was painful . . . to see how . . . lodgers poured out their dollars in others’ saloons,” for him and his wife “agreed they should not have a saloon.”¹⁰⁴ In this way Ager expressed his views towards alcohol and illustrated the quality of capitalism tempered by morality, alluded to previously through Ager’s reference to the book by Hauge that Frederik brings to America.

Ager expressed the benefits of religion in America through its contributions to Norwegian culture in addition to more traditional roles. After working for several weeks in the sawmill, Frederik, using his one free day each week, “began going to church, which was something he had never cared for before [as an unhappy, upper-class man],” while saying “he

⁹⁹ Gulliksen, 29-31.

¹⁰⁰ Oyvind T. Gulliksen, “In Defense of Norwegian-American Culture: Waldemar Ager’s *Sons of the Old Country*,” *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 19, (1987): 39-52.

¹⁰¹ *Sons of the Old Country*, 122.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

did it to learn more about the language.”¹⁰⁵ The implication is that Norwegians should learn English by their own will and become distinct Norwegian-Americans. While the type of church is not stated, the language is English, and the Norwegians of the town soon begin raising funds for their own Norwegian-language congregation precisely as Ager’s own Eau Claire church was founded.¹⁰⁶

Construction soon begins, and the observing pastor of the new church expounds on the values of churches in America through their social services. He comments on how few Norwegians “cared much about their churches in their home parishes in Norway, but praise be to God they have retained the teachings of childhood years.” In the novel, the Norwegians, while widely disregarding the morally-distant churches in Norway, maintained their traditional values by creating a more supportive church that relied upon the congregation instead of state support and state-selected pastors. Notably, Ager is clearly supportive of the more democratic variation of the church, clearly showing his valuing of what is best from both cultures. And while the church was incomplete during the particularly harsh winter, the Ladies’ Aid Society provided support to the needy that the completed church would provide, again emphasizing the social functions of churches in America. With the donation of lumber by the local sawmills, the local Norwegian-Americans built the church through volunteered labor. In August, 1869, volunteered labor actually built Ager’s First Lutheran church in North Eau Claire with the donation of a lot and lumber from the Eau Claire Lumber Company.¹⁰⁷ The denomination of the church in *Old Country*, is left unknown to appeal to Norwegian-Americans of any denomination.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁶ First Lutheran Church, History of First Lutheran Church, 21 April 2008, available from <http://www.first-lutheran.org/about/history.phtml>; accessed 21 April 2008.

¹⁰⁷ Barland, 121.

In *Old Country*, to gather funds for the construction, the local Norwegians launch a Ladies Aid Society. Like Ager's other novels, *Old Country* contains many enterprising women who serve integral roles in Ager's goals of temperance and preserving Norwegian culture. In fact, as a rule women typically possess more positive traits than the men portrayed in Ager's writing. The first concern of these moral women were the men "who kept spending their time and money in the saloons."¹⁰⁸ As construction goes on, a commentator notes the drinking of men working on the church and questions the appropriateness of such actions. The observing pastor replies, "I admire drunken people who carry planks to God's house more than sober people who carry them away." Ager's portrayals of drunkenness and alcoholism are noticeably less prevalent in this novel, written six years into Prohibition.

Ager now saw saloons (as a single ethnic group usually dominated the patronage of individual saloons) as places of Norwegian cultural exchange, where patrons spoke Norwegian freely and therefore reinforced Norwegian identity, which occurred in increasingly fewer places. Without the saloon there were even fewer places where people spoke Norwegian openly, and Ager's historic portrayal of saloons in *Old Country* is at times reverential. Ager no doubt consciously combined literary elements from both Norway and America to portray the development of the Norwegian-American identity. The saloon is a typical setting in American literature, particularly among Westerns (the Northwoods of Wisconsin served as the frontier in Ager's novel).

In *Old Country*, Olson's Place was a saloon owned and patronized almost exclusively by Norwegian speakers. It was "where all matters of importance were discussed"¹⁰⁹ and customers spoke Norwegian openly. Like his portrayal of churches earlier, Ager now stressed the

¹⁰⁸ *Sons of the Old Country*, 71.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

importance of saloons as social institutions. He even illustrated an example of morality through the saloon when the patrons, with their fair share of alcohol no less, decided to destroy the town's most infamous brothel, which was "a disgrace to the community."¹¹⁰ Eau Claire was indeed home to numerous "houses of ill fame" in the 1800s.¹¹¹ However, Ager's passion for temperance remained, and the smartest Norwegians "steered clear of both the saloons and the smartly-dressed ladies."¹¹² His characteristic portrayals of drunkenness, such as a randomly placed man irrelevant to the plot, "dead drunk . . . sleeping, face down, in the middle of the pathway,"¹¹³ remain.

In comparison to his other novels, Ager muted his attacks on another of his familiar topics, American materialism. They remain, however, and Ager justified his disdain for them on ecological reasons, in addition to moral ones in his earlier novels. When loggers move north to prepare a lumber camp, one laments upon seeing the deforested land, no doubt in Ager's own voice speaking from the future in the 1920s, "It's a terrible waste. They'll be sorry for it later." "It was a sad sight to behold. . . It was as if the entire forest had got down on its knees to beg that what was left be spared."¹¹⁴ Serving as a reminder and tie to Norway, he likely saw the altering of the American landscape as another division between Norway and Norwegian-Americans. Although more importantly, frugality and conservation are traditional Protestant and more recently Progressive traits, and Ager championed them. Stacks of his drafts and manuscripts

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 132.

¹¹¹ Barland, 360. In 1893, three years before Ager's arrival in Eau Claire, the *Eau Claire Weekly Reader* expressed frustration at the ubiquity of brothels on North and South Barstow Street. 1 South Barstow was the address of *Reform*, so Ager was all too familiar with the institution and its societal effects in his early years in Eau Claire. In fact Bonnie Ripp-Shucha notes that mobs destroying brothels were frequent and seen publically as legitimate means of eliminating them. The unnamed brothel in *Old Country* may well be a Chippewa Falls brothel destroyed by such a mob in 1866. See Bonnie Ripp-Shucha, "This Naughty, Naughty City: Prostitution in Eau Claire from the Frontier to the Progressive Era," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 81, 31, (1997) for more information.

¹¹² *Sons of the Old Country*, 174.

¹¹³ Ibid., 194.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 112-113.

preserved at St. Olaf's College, all on the spoilage of his newspaper and other scraps of paper, attest to this. Even his newspaper print shop was located in the most financially advantageous location, which happened to be above a saloon.¹¹⁵

Old Country favors America itself much more than previous novels. Beyond the declining pressure for assimilation at the time of writing, the historical setting allows Ager to portray the ideal America, specifically the ideals that Norwegians should adopt in the formation of their Norwegian-American identity. He then introduces the Civil War in the novel to illustrate the merits of combining Norwegian and American traits through the Norwegian-American contribution to the war.

Old Country argues that their traditional beliefs encouraged Norwegians to participate in the Civil War to end slavery.¹¹⁶ At the onset of the war during one of the numerous important discussions at Olson's Place, one man was thrown out "after venturing an opinion that slaves were 'in a way better than we are up here, getting paid a dollar a day for twelve hours' work. However, another who insisted that slaves were no worse off than poor folks in Norway was not thrown out," implying the greater possibilities in America versus Norway.¹¹⁷ Through the insistence that anyone willing to work hard could prosper in America, Ager reiterated the benefits of the fusion of the best combined traits of America and Norway. Nearly sixty years later in 1925, at the centennial celebration of Norwegian Independence at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds, Norwegian-Americans celebrated their important contributions to "reforms" such as

¹¹⁵ Betty Ager, interview.

¹¹⁶ Support of the war and to end slavery was near universal among the fellow Scandinavian Swedish- and Danish-American congregations, with whom Norway retains close cultural and linguistic ties. Support for the war was split in Norwegian-language congregations due to the close ties between the Norwegian and Missouri (a slave state) Synods. However, support among the people and not the official positions of various churches were by a large majority agreeable with Ager's views. See, Blegen, 108 for more information.

¹¹⁷ *Sons of the Old Country*, 213.

ending slavery and Prohibition.¹¹⁸ While the Civil War occurred before the peak of Norwegian immigration, Norwegian immigration scholar Theodore Blegen notes that the Norwegian immigrants presented “a deep faith in American liberty, [and] an equally deep aversion for slavery” and “went to the battlefields of the South with fervor and loyalty.”¹¹⁹

The exploits of the aforementioned Norwegian-language Fifteenth Wisconsin Regiment consume the final quarter of the novel. Ager is so proud of their accomplishments he included their actual exploits, and the entire Civil War for that matter, despite its detriment to the literary quality of the novel. He suggested that the formation of a volunteer Norwegian regiment was symbolic of Norwegians becoming Norwegian-Americans: patriotic Americans with their own language and traditions.¹²⁰ “The fact that these young Norwegians could also be Americans was not easily grasped by everyone, but those who joined the Norwegian regiment vowed they would show the country they were Americans.”¹²¹ This Norwegian-American identity is clearest through the regiment’s silken banner, which bore American and Norwegian flags and the motto (in Norwegian) “For God and Our Country.”¹²²

He even downplayed the significance of a common Norwegian heritage when one Norwegian-American soldier comments on the broad range of dialects: “They claim they’re Norwegians, and they cuss in Norwegian, but when most of them talk I can’t figure out what they’re saying.”¹²³ As the use of Norwegian declined in America, he appropriately stressed the ideal Norwegian in the ideal America. When he wrote *Old Country*, he no doubt acknowledged the pending irrelevance (if not extinction) of the Norwegian language in America, and therefore

¹¹⁸ Andersen, 254.

¹¹⁹ Blegen, 418-420.

¹²⁰ This is the real life 15th Wisconsin Regiment, led by Col. Hans Heg, and Ager gives a lengthy account of its exploits in the novel. Ager’s *Colonel Heg and His Boys* (1916) is a study of letters written by Norwegian-American soldiers of this regiment, and his portrayal of the war is in part based on their accounts.

¹²¹ *Sons of the Old Country*, 217.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 218.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 217.

romanticized the Norwegian-American experience. Appropriately, he knew that valuing one's heritage is a Norwegian trait.

Conclusion

In his later years Ager was well aware that despite his continued struggles, the Norwegian language in America was doomed. In 1929, the stockholders of the Fremad Publishing and Printing Company in Eau Claire gave the entire company to Ager, likely due to the *Reform's* insolvent financial situation due to the declining use of the Norwegian language and not charity. On his last visit to Norway in 1934, he stated, "One newspaper after the other is going to the devil and soon it will no doubt be our turn."¹²⁴ One can interpret "the devil" as folding or as adopting the English language (which Ager himself pondered numerous times throughout his life). In addition to its poor reception in Norway, Ager's fourth novel, *I Sit Alone*, was by his own admission a "complete failure . . . in spite of good reviews [and hasn't] sold a dozen copies in the past year [its third in print]."¹²⁵ Regardless, Ager ceaselessly supported the cause of Norwegian language and culture while printing *Reform*, touring the Midwest more and support it, earn money and espousing his beliefs until his 1941 death. Thaler described the circumstances well: "Ager confessed that he enjoyed speaking his mind, even if the ultimate impact was limited."¹²⁶

Ager was once widely recognized, and one wonders just how futile his actions were. He did, after all, once share the stage with William Jennings Bryan.¹²⁷ He was once even the nominee for lieutenant governor of Wisconsin under the Prohibition Party. At his funeral,

¹²⁴ Haugen, 148.

¹²⁵ Clarence Kilde, *Dark Decade: The Declining Years of Waldemar Ager*. Norwegian-American Historical Association, vol. 28, 157.

¹²⁶ Thaler, 138.

¹²⁷ Bryan and Ager both spoke at the May 17th Norwegian Independence celebration in Brooklyn in 1916. While Ager was a Republican and Bryan a Democrat, both were Populists, Prohibitionists and, to varying degrees, opposed to the First World War.

attendees were even reminded that his biography had appeared in “Who’s Who in America” since 1912.¹²⁸ He certainly kept a low profile in his hometown in line with traditional Norwegian modesty. In fact, one of the first things I became aware of in my study of Ager was his ardent stubbornness; he was very traditional in his beliefs and actions and refused to compromise in the least, as noted by his family and all who study him.

In researching this paper, I discovered the vast quantity of research and analysis of Norwegian-Americans and Norwegian immigration. In proportion to its population, this body of work is at least the equal of most any ethnic group in America. Norwegian-Americans drove the initial research in the topic, among them Ole Rølvaag, his former student Einar Haugen and Odd Lovoll of Olaf’s College in Northfield, Minnesota,¹²⁹ Theodore Blegen and Peter Thaler. Combined with several scholars in Norway such as Ingrid Semmingsen, they form the small but acclaimed and prolific nucleus of Norwegian-American scholarship.

All of these scholars essentially take for granted Ager’s Eau Claire settings. They assume the setting is Eau Claire since Ager lived there and to my knowledge wrote no more about it, as most immigrant writers wrote about their own settings. This led to questions beyond Ager’s motivations and life these scholars focused on. I attempted to prove the value of Ager’s novels as historical sources documenting Norwegian-Americans in Civil War-era and early twentieth century Eau Claire. Using the works of previous scholars, I also attempted to prove the reasons and motivations of Ager and how they fit with the greater Norwegian-American population.

¹²⁸ *Eau Claire Leader*, 5 August 1941.

¹²⁹ Northfield, MN and Decorah, IO (home of the Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum) are the two most important centers of Norwegian-American studies, both home to invaluable primary and secondary sources on the subject. The Norwegian-language *Decorah Posten* was published until 1972.

I also arrived at some deficiencies that I believe warrant further research in both Eau Claire and wherever Norwegian-Americans lived. Semmingsen reveals that by the 1840s, Norwegians were aware of the “principle of association,” and that particularly in America, “everything [was] done by societies.”¹³⁰ There is relatively little work on these groups for what must be a vast quantity of source material, notably meeting minutes and attendance figures. Most research instead focuses on immigration and the literary contributions of Norwegian-Americans throughout the United States.

There also remain areas of research on Ager, particularly his involvement with Eau Claire temperance societies. There are several curiosities beyond the scope of my paper but are worth noting here. He was a founding member of the “Excelsior” temperance society several years after his arrival, but in 1912 he is the director of the National Total Abstinence Association in Eau Claire, the only other temperance society in Eau Claire at that time.¹³¹ No known scholarship addresses or even acknowledges his association with a separate (and perhaps rival) temperance society or the reasons for this. Also, the protagonist of Ager’s final novel, the semi-autobiographical *I Sit Alone*, is Christian Pederson. Haugen speculates on the origin of the name but there is no definitive answer. In 1897, when Ager was active in the “Excelsior” temperance society of Eau Claire, a Christ[ian] Pederson was the society’s secretary, and further research may prove a correlation.¹³²

More generally there is a void in research in the letters written to Norway from Norwegian emigrants. In 1881 alone, the 37,000 residents of the Sogn district of Norway

¹³⁰ Ingrid Semmingsen, *Norway to America: a History of the Migration*, trans. Einar Haugen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 144.

¹³¹ *Directory of the City of Eau Claire 1912*, (St. Paul, MN.: Wright Directory Company), Special Collections, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI.

¹³² *Directory of the City of Eau Claire 1897-1898*.

received 10,000 letters.¹³³ I believe this lack of research is due to the much deeper interest in Norwegian-American history among Americans of Norwegian descent. This research would also require extensive knowledge in numerous dialects of the Norwegian language. Semmingsen notes the lack of interest in Norwegian-Americans in Norway at the time of emigration and ponders the effects communication had in the development of Norway. She only speculates and further research is needed.

I feel further research on the travel memoirs of Ager would be most interesting. These memoirs, on his travels from his honeymoon to New Orleans to his several journeys to Norway are nearly devoid of the propaganda that disrupts the narrative of his novels and are truly a joy to read. In fact, Ager published these memoirs in the *Reform* (and they also appeared other various newspapers), much like the travel memoirs of Mark Twain decades earlier. It is well-known among Ager scholars that Twain was perhaps Ager's favorite American writer and a great source of inspiration for Ager's novels. Indeed, Ager's humor and satirical portrayal of American society and even settings, such as a riverboat ride in the beginning of *Sons of the Old Country*, are clearly inspired by Twain's novels. I suggest that if not a comparison between the traveling memoirs of the two, research on Ager's travels as perceptions of Europe and the South through the views of Ager as a Norwegian-American or Midwesterner (or "Northwesterner," as he called himself) would be of great interest if one could find enough material.

In his master's thesis, "Dark Decade: The Declining Years of Waldemar Ager," Clarence Kilde used many unpublished letters by and to Ager. Focusing on Ager's later years (as one may assume from the title), Kilde asserts Ager's three primary goals were temperance, a hybrid Norwegian-American identity and "the creation of immigrant writings as a unique genre of American literature." I argue that the third is inseparably linked to the development and

¹³³ Semmingsen, 166.

maintenance of the proposed Norwegian-American identity. Norwegian-American writers themselves, especially Ager, were quite aware that their novels were to be only the literary aspect of their culture, however futile their actions were to be.¹³⁴

Without the support of church and interest of ensuing generations, there could be no Norwegian language and Norwegian-American culture. From 1915-1940, a span of time between his first and last novel, Ager witnessed the rise of English sermons in traditionally Norwegian congregations from fifteen percent to ninety percent.¹³⁵ The lack of new Norwegian immigrants and competition from other congregations meant that the old Norwegian congregations had no incentive to preserve the Norwegian language. Around this time, Ager's own church, then the First Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church, officially dropped "Norwegian" from its name. The still large Norwegian-speaking population even seemed disinterested in their language and culture and was silent as Norwegian disappeared from churches, schools and the streets.¹³⁶

In the end, I must conclude what is simply implied by the title of Haugen's Ager biography *Immigrant Idealist*: Ager knew the future of his goals of temperance and Norwegian-American culture. As he became more aware of that, the literary quality of his novels increased as these issues became less pervasive in his novels.¹³⁷ Yet his views, his own history, and the history of Eau Claire and the experience of many Norwegian-Americans remain in his novels. In fact, I believe the importance of his novels lies not with their literary status or their real-life

¹³⁴ Kenneth Smemo, in his contribution to *Cultural Pluralism versus Assimilation* "Waldemar Theodore Ager, 1869-1941, also distinguishes Norwegian-American identity and Norwegian-American culture in listing Ager's lifelong goals.

¹³⁵ Semmingsen, 155.

¹³⁶ 658,220 Americans reported Norwegian as their primary language in the 1940 census.

¹³⁷ I personally enjoyed each of his novels successively better than the previous one as he gave less emphasis to his actual aims. In fact, his first works of fiction were merely "temperance tracts," and warrant almost no consideration for their literary attributes while the later novels become increasingly reflective of Ager's own experiences, and enjoyably so.

achievements, but in their documentation of the beliefs of Waldemar Ager and the experiences of early twentieth century Eau Claire and the Norwegian-Americans that lived there.

Bibliography

Primary Sources (Ager's novels)

Ager, Waldemar, *Christ before Pilate: An American Story*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1924.

Novel involving local pastor in a setting quite similar to Eau Claire and portrays religious bigotry and prejudice by the immigrants. Inspired by a painting of the same name, the novel contains his usual negative views of alcohol, but more importantly begins his goal of the creation of Norwegian-American literature. The novel itself is the most important aspect of it. Also included is a reflection of the rigid social and religious structure of Norwegian-American congregations.

Ager, Waldemar, *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, trans. Harry T. Cleven. Madison: Prairie Oaks Press, 1995.

Ager's second novel staged in an American setting (again, similar to Eau Claire), *Melting Pot* focuses on the problems of assimilation into American culture, including capitalism. Problems involving communities and generations are emphasized. The novel was written during World War I and the accompanying movement against non-Anglo-American culture and language.

Ager, Waldemar, *Sons of the Old Country*, trans. Trygve M. Ager. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

This novel was written during Prohibition and an influx of Norwegian-American literary contributions around the Midwest. The setting is essentially Eau Claire, circa 1850. The novel argues in favor of a permanent Norwegian-American subculture that would contribute to America. Specifically Norwegian-American contributions to the Civil War are included, specifically mentioning Colonel Heg, a Norwegian-American who Ager was acutely interested in. Curiously, the institution of a saloon is romanticized, as Ager now recognizes its former importance as a place where Norwegian was freely spoken and therefore helped maintain Norwegian distinctness.

Primary Sources (other)

Ager, Waldemar. *A Reform Sampler: Selections from a Norwegian Language Newspaper* trans. Genvieve Hagen and Alf Hjemboe. Eau Claire, WI: Waldemar Ager Association, 1998.

This is a collection of translated newspaper contributions from the *Reform* a Norwegian language newspaper in Eau Claire that Ager edited and contributed to. Like his essays, I will use the arguments made in the paper by Ager to support my claims about Ager's beliefs and motives in his novels.

Ager, Camilla. *Memories*. Rozworld's Homepage, 21 April 2008, available from <http://www.rozworld.net/>; internet; accessed 21 April 2008.

A collection of letters written by Ager's sister Camilla. Provides information of Ager, especially as he was during his youth, as well as some early family history.

Ager, Waldemar. *Cultural Pluralism versus Assimilation: The Views of Waldemar Ager*, ed. Odd. S. Lovoll (Northfield: The Norwegian American Historical Association, 1977).

This is a collection of essays arguing against assimilation and in favor of a distinct Norwegian-American culture, several by Ager. I will use his non-fiction essays to support my claims of his arguments in his novels. The usefulness of this is then only limited to supporting existing claims and not to provide material for analysis. Lovoll, of St. Olaf's College, is one of the foremost Norwegian-American scholars.

Ager, Waldemar. [Untitled Speech Manuscript], 1912; available at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire History Department, courtesy Borghild Ager.

Manuscript of speech he gave in Eau Claire in 1912. The precise location and reason for the speech are unknown, but it suggests Ager wrote about historical events in his fictional literature by showing his own awareness of historic events similar to occurrences in his novels.

Directory of the City of Eau Claire. St. Paul, MN.: Wright Directory Company, 1895-1920. Special Collections, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI.

The various city directories of Eau Claire provide statistics and minor details, including information on Ager, his neighborhood and *Reform*, to support claims in my paper.

Eau Claire Leader, 5 August, 1941.

Provided obituary information on the funeral of Waldemar Ager. There was relatively little coverage of him previously, presumably since any newspaper coverage of Ager was deferred to his own *Reform*.

Secondary Sources

Ager, Betty. Interview by Michael Nerbovig, 28 February 2008.

Interview with Ager's great-granddaughter at Ager House in Eau Claire. Provided excellent intimate family observations and history, as well as the benefit of witnessing Ager's home and where he wrote. I am very grateful to Betty for granting me the interview, sharing his home and providing insightful information and photographs.

Andersen, Arlow W. Review of *American Idealist*, by Einar Haugen, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 77, No. 3. (Dec., 1990), p. 1054.

Review of Einar Haugen's biography of Ager describing it as focusing on Ager's writing and less on his life than most biographies. This made the work particularly interesting to me, since my paper will focus on Ager's beliefs in comparison to those of other individuals and groups of his time.

Andersen, Arlow W. *The Salt of the Earth: A History of Norwegian-Danish Methodism in America*. Nashville, TN: The Norwegian-Danish Methodist Historical Society, 1962.

Gives insight into the social function of Norwegian churches in America, although obviously omits Lutheran churches, of which the majority of Norwegian-Americans belonged.

Barland, Lois. *The Rivers Flow On: A record of Eau Claire, Wisconsin from 1910-1960*, Stevens Point, WI: Worzalla Publishing Co, 1965, 360.

Provides a history of Eau Claire and Eau Claire area institutions, such as businesses, buildings, churches and schools. Also provides some statistical information. Valuable in helping me verify the history of area churches at the time of Ager's writing.

Blegen, Theodore, C. *Norwegian Immigration to America: The American Transition*. Northfield, MN: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1940.

A huge work by an author mostly interested in Norwegian immigration, as the title suggests. His previous work, *Norwegian Migration to America, 1825-1860*, focuses on a period that is relatively devoid of distinctly Norwegian-American cultural contributions and is beyond the realm of my topic. This work extends further and is of more use to me.

Buenker, John D. "Volume IV: The Progressive Era: 1893-1914" in *The History of Wisconsin*, ed. William Fletcher Thomas. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1998.

Large work on the history of the Progressive era in Wisconsin in the highly recognized *History of Wisconsin* series. Very important in comparing Ager's views to those of the Progressive movement and the general history of Progressivism as well.

Daniels, Roger. *Coming to America*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990.

A broad history of immigrant experiences in the United States. Included is an examination of the Bennett Law in Wisconsin (p. 160), which mandated English instruction in public schools at least 16 weeks per year, inciting much German resistance. Of only minor importance.

Ferraro, Thomas J. *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

This scholarly work focuses on the works of immigrant writers in the 1900s. Its value to me is limited due to its focus on the 1900s (only the beginning of which is relevant to my topic) and the Northeast, specifically the Jews and Italians, unfortunately.

First Lutheran Church, History of First Lutheran Church, 21 April 2008, available from <http://www.first-lutheran.org/about/history.phtml>; accessed 21 April 2008.

Provided valuable historical information on Ager's church in Eau Claire, WI, even providing quotations from Ager's son Trygve.

Garret, Leah. "Shipping the Self to America: The Perils of Assimilation in Glatshcheyu's and Shapiro's Immigrant Novels." *Melus*, Vol. 26, No. 3, (Autumn, 2001), p. 203-229.

Journal on two Yiddish language novels. The writers of these novels argue in favor of maintaining the use of their native language and culture. This is of limited use to me, since I am focusing on the Midwest, and these novels take place on the East coast and Jews are not well-represented in the Midwest.

Gulliksen, Oyvind T., *Twofold Identities: Norwegian-American Contributions to Midwestern Literature*. Germany: Peter Lang, 2004.

Work providing information pertaining to other Norwegian-American writers as its title implies. Two chapters are devoted to Waldemar Ager. This allows me to compare his ideas and motives with his contemporaries (non-English, particularly Norwegian, writers, which are one of the main groups I am focusing on in my analysis).

Hansen, Marcus L. "The History of American Immigration as a Field of Research. *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 32, No. 3, (April 1927), p. 500-518.

This article claims that ethnic leaders representing all of the major ethnic groups in America at the time strived to maintain the use of their native language. Specifically it argues that school boards were pressured across the country to encourage English use and that newspapers aided the transition to American culture through the dissemination of knowledge of the "outside" world or greater America.

Haugen, Einar, *Immigrant Idealist: A Literary Biography of Waldemar Ager, Norwegian American*. Northfield: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1989.

Currently this is the only full length biography of Ager. The biography, as its subtitle implies, relies strongly on Ager's own writing, fiction and non-, to support its claims. This is the most important secondary source available to me, as I can use it to support any of my own claims while being provided a large quantity of other information, such as reactions to Ager, the context of his life and other relevant writers of the time.

Clarence Kilde, "Dark Decade: The Declining Years of Waldemar Ager." *Norwegian-American Historical Association*, vol. 28, 157.

Master's thesis focusing on the later years of Ager's life. Limited use to me, although I can compare my work to the thesis and use it to support my own paper.

Marks, Gary and Burbank, Matthew. "Immigrant Support for the American Socialist Party, 1912 and 1920. *Social Science History*, Vol. 14, No 2. (Summer, 1990), p. 175-202.

Article summarizing support for socialism among various ethnic groups. Ager, if not a socialist outright, was a proponent of communal ideals (versus more independent capitalist ideals more common in the United States). This article supports my argument that this was in agreement with the general Norwegian sentiment at the time, citing examples in both the United States and Norway (p. 180).

Meyer, Carl S. "Lutheran Immigrant Churches Face the Problems of the Frontier." *Church History*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Dec, 1960), p. 440-462.

Journal containing information on church and congregational life and activities during Ager's time. The article particularly states: "the important thing was that a place existed where the mother tongue was spoken. . . where customs were familiar." This argues the importance of both the institution of the church and the native language as instrumental to maintaining ties within ethnic groups.

Øverland, Orm. *The Western Home: A Literary History of Norwegian America*. Champaign, IL: The University of Illinois Press: 1996.

Another overview of Norwegian-American writers. Specifically supports the historical accuracy of *Sons of the Old Country*.

Pederson, Jane Marie. *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin, 1870-1970*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992.

Book on rural family structure with information on Norwegian-American families, lifestyles and voting patterns that help support various points throughout my paper.

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

A useful history of western Wisconsin, including Eau Claire and the first two decades that Ager lived there. More enjoyable for the historical photographs than actual information.

Ripp-Shucha, Bonnie. "This Naughty, Naughty City: Prostitution in Eau Claire from the Frontier to the Progressive Era," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 81, 31, 1997.

Scholarly article on prostitution in Eau Claire spanning precisely the settings of Ager's novels. While Ager only mentions prostitution in *Sons of the Old Country*, set in the 1860s, it provides valuable insight into his views of it and its effects in the 1860s and the 1920s, when he wrote the novel.

Rosen, Ruth and Davidson, Sue, eds. *The Maimie Papers, with an introduction by Ruth Rosen*, New York: 1977, xxvii.

The introduction gives information on wages in early twentieth century Wisconsin. This verifies my claim that the average salary of Wisconsin Methodist preachers is in relatively “middle-class.”

Scott, Nelson W. “The Viking Invasion: an Historiography of Norwegian-American Literature and its Role in Norwegian Immigration and the Founding of Vesterheimen within America.” Master’s Thesis, Humboldt State University, 2005.

Master’s thesis providing some useful arguments and analysis of secondary works. Included is the claim that temperance was the single most important issue for immigrant writers. This helps me determine how agreeable the beliefs of immigrant writers were to Ager’s.

Semmingen, Ingrid. *Norway to America: a History of the Migration*, trans. Einar Haugen. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976.

Scholarly work giving a general history of Norwegian immigration to America with some general history of Norway. Provides information on the common people of Norway and religious beliefs, but more importantly political activism. This allows me to compare Ager’s beliefs with the average Norwegian-American.

Skardal, Dorothy Burton. Review of *Sons of the Old Country* by Waldemar Ager. *Melus*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Winter, 1985), p. 88-95.

Review identifying the novel as a “historical novel.” The review states it is a cross-section of Norwegian immigrant life with incidents based on oral-history accounts. This supports my argument that the novel is as stated above and not mere fiction for entertainment. This also helps me determine to what degree Ager’s beliefs are to Norwegian-Americans of the day.

Smemo, I Kenneth. Review of *The Western Home: A Literary History of Norwegian America*, by Orm Overland, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 84, No. 3. (Dec., 1997), pp. 1104-1105.

Review of Orm Overland’s *The Western Home*. The review calls this work as the single most important source for Norwegian-American literature, citing its “impeccable research and [annotation].”

Thaler, Peter, *Norwegian Minds-American Dreams* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

Gives excellent analysis (including a chapter on Ager) to the works and actions of Norwegian immigrants at the time. While explaining the context of Ager's work, it also provides information on what other Norwegian-American intellectuals were doing at the time, allowing me to compare Ager with contemporaries.

Thompson, William Fletcher, ed., *The History of Wisconsin Volume III: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1939* by Robert C. Nesbit. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1985.

Volume that provides me with general information, although specifically about society in Wisconsin at the stated time. This helps me determine how society was structured (common jobs, level of urbanization, etc.) and how Ager's beliefs related to them. Ethnic groups are also included.

Thompson, William Fletcher, ed., *The History of Wisconsin Volume IV: The Progressive Era, 1883-1914*, by John D. Buenker. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1998.

This volume too provides me with more general information, although specifically information pertaining to the Progressive movement. Progressivism's anti-ethnic attributes are important and understanding the reaction and participation of various groups in Wisconsin is important in understanding Ager's place among them.

Webb, Atticus. *Dry America: A Study for the use of Churches, Sunday Schools, Young People's Societies, Women's Organizations, Etc.* Nashville: Cokesbury Press.

An undated yet noticeably old study, as its subtitle suggests, on effects of churches, etc. on the Prohibition movement. It should be noted that it is relatively biased, as Sen. Morris Sheppard, writer of the 18th Amendment, penned the introduction.

Weinberg, Daniel E. "Viewing the Immigrant Experience in America through Fiction and Autobiography: With a Select Bibliography." *The History Teacher*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (May, 1976), p. 409-432.

Article comments on the high correlation between subjects in immigrant literature and actual events and settings. It contains an excellent bibliography with other notable Norwegian writers: Andre Anonsen, Theodore Blegen, Johan Bojer, Hjalmar Boyesen, Sverre Nord, Birger Osland, Ole Rolvaag and Hans Shellrud.

Zempel, Soveig. Review of *On the Way to the Melting Pot*, by Waldemar Ager, trans. Harry T. Cleven. *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 17, Issue 1 (Fall, 1997), p.111.

Review by a Norwegian that comments negatively on the literary qualities of the novel but positively on the historical accuracy and usefulness of it. This helps me determine how fitting Ager's arguments are to the time (since the historical accuracy is supported by this review).