

The 1910 Norway Census and Return Migration: the Case of Nedstrand

Hans Storhaug

Return migration was the conference theme at the annual AEMI meeting in Stavanger in 2002. This article is a follow up and a result of a preliminary research on return migration that started early in 2003 in Nedstrand in Tysvær commune. The Tysvær area is known as the birth place of Cleng Peerson – who by reporting favourable from America started the exodus from Norway in 1825. In the following decades, many people from this area on the south-western coast of Norway followed their trail. Most of them settled permanently in the new world, but some returned. Their role in the local society has never been investigated, and that is we will try to find out through this research. Readers of this article should bear in mind that the research is still in its initial phase, so the results are accordingly inadequate.

Studying return migration is a complicated task. Those who have been investigating the phenomenon in Norway in recent years have mainly been focusing on the cultural implications of the phenomenon, e.g. new building and furnishing traditions, new equipment for use in the farming and fishing industries, introduction of new words and habits, and so on.

This is of course one important aspect of return migration that also will be part of our project. But for an historical approach, it is essential to get as accurate information of the phenomenon as possible: that means both quantification and identification of the returnees. This could, however, prove to be an impossible task, because of the lack of statistical material. Before turning to the local society of Nedstrand, a brief

description of the situation in Norway could prove useful.

Personal information on people leaving the country are found in the emigrant lists starting in 1867, and usually kept at the local police station. These are now digitalized and available on the Internet. Statistics on immigrants to Norway, including the returning of Norwegian – Americans are, on the contrary, very sparse. However, the implementation of the Immigrant Law of 24 June, 1915 which replaced the law of 1901, made it mandatory for all immigrants to report to the police upon arrival – including Norwegian emigrants who had not acquired American citizenship. The new law put strict demands on residence permit, and made it easier to expel aliens and particularly those defined as vagabonds.

The need for a more strict immigrant law reflects the public feeling that immigration was about to become a threat to the Norwegian society. The Norwegian Minister of Justice from the political Left (Venstre), argued that: "We cannot accept, at a time when the rest of Europe have implemented strict immigration laws to prevent the scum from crossing their borders, that we should become the sewage of Europe, and that thieves, robbers and murderers should enter this country unpreventedly."¹

What he was referring to was not emigrants returning from America, nor people from the third world, but - Swedish guestworkers. In all walks of life, the Swedish guestworkers was considered an essential part of the "vagabond" problem. Today, people would hardly identify a Swede as an immigrant, but in the 1910s and 20s immigration from Sweden was relatively high – in 1910 counting more than 30,000 and in 1920 over 42,000 - representing the largest immigrant group and thus regarded as a threat.²

1910 Census, Norway

I mention this only to explain that return migration in the first decades of the twentieth century, was hardly an issue in Norway. However, there had been a growing concern or interest of America also among the intelligentsia, particularly after 1905 when the Norwegian people had decided to separate from Sweden and invited Prince Carl of Denmark to become King Haakon IV of Norway. In 1906 the Norwegian America was represented at the coronation ceremony of King Haakon and Queen Maud, and in the aftermath of the founding of the Norsemen Federation in 1907 a more official recognition of the Norwegian America followed.

In the 1910 census therefore, people were, for the very first time, asked to answer questions regarding year of emigration and of resettling in Norway, address (place of settlement) at the time of emigration and in America as well as occupation in America.

Table 1 below shows that a total of 17688 considered themselves as returned Norwegian – Americans at the

Table 1: Returned Emigrants in Norway 1871 - 1910.

Before 1871	18		
1871 – 1875	133	0.29	45142
1876 – 1880	123	0.30	40244
1881 – 1885	417	0.39	105704
1886 – 1890	834	1.03	80984
1891 – 1895	2002	3.28	61017
1896 – 1900	2285	6.75	33837
1901 – 1905	2616	2.53	103195
1906 – 1910	9208	10.50	87663
All years	17688	3.17	557786

Table 2: Annual Return Rate 1906 - 1909

Year	Returnees	Percentage	Emigrants
1906	1163	5.29	21967
1907	1627	7.35	22135
1908	2230	26.24	8497
1909	1973	12.21	16152

Source: Census 1 December 1910 (N.O.S. V 182)

time of counting, 1 December 1910. It is important to note that these figures does not include those who returned the same year as they emigrated, nor those who emigrated in the period 1908 – 1910 and came back before 1 December. Nor does this number include 1653 children born in the U.S. Thus the number of Norwegians who had been to America and returned is higher than the statistics show.

The table also reveals a very high increase of returnees in the last five year period – 1906 – 1910, with a return rate of 10.5 percent in contrast to the average 3.17. Many factors might explain this: first of all it is reasonable that the number of returnees are the highest closest to the counting point because those who returned shortly before the census are more likely to identify themselves as Norwegian – Americans, most of them are still alive and relatively few have left again.

But even these explanations might seem insufficient in explaining the high return rate, particularly when the figures show that there also was a dramatic decrease in emigration in this period. It is very likely that the high return rate reflected the economic crisis that hit the U.S. in 1907, also known as the Knickerbocker Trust Panic, and the

relatively prosperous times in Norway at the time. A look at the return rate for each year verifies this theory: The year after US. had experienced the economic crisis, the emigration flood from Norway was cut by nearly a third - from 22135 (1907) to "only" 8,497. At the same time return migration reached a peak with 2230 people, more that 26 percent of the total emigration of that year. The political situation in Norway might also have been a reason for return. In 1905 the Norwegian people had decided to separate from Sweden and invited Prince Carl of Denmark to become King Haakon VII of Norway.

Time spent in America

Most of the returnees had spent relatively few years in America. They were young people who had not had time to settle in the strange country, and they had not been away for so long that they had forgotten about the conditions at home. ³ Table 3 on the next page shows that more than 2/ 5 of the returnees came back after less than 5 years.

The 1910 census also reveals information about place of birth and present address. The results show that most Norwegian - Americans - between 70 – 90 percent returned to their place of birth. Which for most of them meant

*Table 3 Time spent in America
Percentage*

Years	Men.	Women
0 – 2	16.29	14.78
2 – 4	25.68	27.09
5 – 9	32.61	34.52
10 – 19	17.26	16.24
20 and more	7.66	5.11

the countryside – 81.9 percent. 2281 of the them lived in the county of Rogaland according to the Census, making up 11.8 percent of the total group of 19323 returnees– including the children born in America, but only 1.6 percent of the total county population of 136523. Only Vest – Agder had a higher number - 2358 Norwegian – Americans. From a national point of view, the Norwegian – Americans as registered in 1910 census made up less than one percent - 0.8 percent of the whole Norwegian population of 2,383,677.

Age and gender

By comparing the age of the emigrants to that of the returnees, we find

a distinctive change, see table 4. below. While most emigrants were between 15 and 39, most of the returned emigrants were between 20 – 49.

In this group, however, we do not find those 1635 persons born in the U.S.A. Among these there were 584 boys and 580 girls below the age of 15 and 161 men and 179 women between 15 and 25. These figures are of course not complete, but they truly demonstrates that return migration must have had a larger impact on the increase of population than the age distribution among returned Norwegian – Americans indicates.

Occupation

Finally let us turn to occupation. As said already, the 1910 census also gives information about the occupation and life situation in America and after their return to Norway. However, it does not say anything about their occupation or life situation before departure.

Table 5 on the following page shows that close to forty percent of all the

Table 4 Age and Gender. Emigrants and Returnees

Age	Age at departure Percentage		Age at returning. Percentage		Age by 1. December 1910	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Below 15	3.12	7.77	1.48	4.93	1.06	3.22
15 – 19	16.10	17.95	1.36	2.91	0.47	1.59
20 – 29	55.24	50.77	38.70	42.17	17.02	24.62
30 – 39	16.24	14.24	34.42	29.73	29.62	28.84
40 – 49	5.88	3.86	14.04	10.44	25.73	21.56
50 – 59	1.94	2.36	5.77	5.24	15.07	11.20
60 and more	0.65	1.36	3.53	3.79	9.94	7.92
Unknown	0.83	1.69	0.70	0.79	1.09	1.05
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

*Table 5 Economic activity**Returned Norwegian-American men*

	<i>Occupation in the U.S</i>		<i>Occupation in Norway after resettling</i>	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Farmers	1469	10.26	5664	39.58
Tenants and farmworkers	2411	16.85	1156	8.08
Forestry, fishing and whaling	1447	10.11	1377	10.61
Mining and industry	5531	38.64	2475	11.00
Wholesale and retail trade	646	3.51	951	6.46
Water transport	838	5.86	294	2.05
Income from capital, pensions etc.	7	0.05	584	4.08
Recipients of assistance	1033	7.22	811	5.68

Norwegian – American men who returned had been working in mining, quarrying and industry. The second largest group was tenants and farm workers, while farmers only constituted around 10 percent of those turning back. Back in Norway nearly 40 percent became farmers, while those attached to mining and industry only applied for 11 percent. Thus there was a clear shift from a lower to a higher working position when moving back to Norway. It is particularly interesting to see the high percentage of returnees that became farmers in Norway. This might be explained by the fact that most Norwegian emigrants were farmers, and that they during their years abroad had been able to save enough money to buy their own farm. It is also striking, but not surprising, that people living on their capital or pensions increased dramatically – from 7 to 584 persons. They obviously belonged to the successful returnees.

Nedstrand 1910 Census

What is the situation in the local community of Nedstrand - our chosen case study? Together with Nedstrand historical museum and society we have started to collect all kinds of information, photos and items that can shed light over this part of the emigrant history. We are also making recordings of people who have returned from America themselves or have friends or relatives who have relocated in Nedstrand. These are the practicalities connected with the project. Our main concern, however, is the statistical material and the possibilities of identifying the returnees. This is normally a huge task, but since Norway is in the forefront in digitalisation of historical material, and the Digital Archive in Norway already has completed the 1910 census for Rogaland, we are in the lucky situation that we can operate this huge material from our personal computers. This gives us a unique possibility to identify all people living in Nedstrand on 1 December 1910, including the

returnees. And this is my findings:

Nedstrand was then a small community north of Stavanger with a total population of 1704 persons supporting themselves by farming and fishing. The inhabitants were staying on 66 different farms and I found returnees on 20 of these farms, close to one third, 28.78 percent to be correct. Table 6. below is listing homesteads (gaard and plads) the returnees lived on in 1910.

*Table 6 Nedstrand 1910
Farms with returned emigrants*

Næset (plads)
Stølen
Hustoft (gaard)
Toftøsund nordre (plads)
Topnes (gaard)
Slettedalsteigen (gaard)
Øielaupen (gaard)
Li Ytre (gaard)
Amdal Ytre (gaard)
Silgjerd
Kvalvik
Kallevaag
Bjelland
Helle nedre
Holmen Bustad
Alfstvedt
Helle nedre
Nygaard
Øverland Nymark

However, living on close to one third of all the farms in Nedstrand, the returned emigrants did not represent a large group of persons. According to the census return they counted not more than forty persons or 2.34 percent of the total population. And not all of them had relocated in Nedstrand, since eight were born in America. Except for one,

all these children were living together with their parents, the 39 years old Ole Rødne and their mother Anna, 35. The children were from one to thirteen years old. Table 6 below demonstrate the age and gender distribution among all the returnees. It is a striking fact that among this small group of young people, men outnumbered women by almost 6 to 1.

*Table 7 Nedstrand 1910
Age and gender distribution among
returned emigrants*

	Men	Women
Below 15	6 ^{*1}	1
15 – 19	9	1
20 – 29	11 ^{*2}	3
30 – 39	7	1
40 – 49	2	-
50 – 59	0	-
60 and more	0	-
Unknown	-	-
Total	35	6

*1 All born in America. Age 1 – 13

*2 Incl. 1 person born in America. Age 22.

Places and years in America.

The 1910 Census also provides valuable information about where in America the people from Nedstrand had settled and how long they stayed in the New World. Except for one person, all of the emigrants stayed in the typical "Norwegian" area - the Midwestern states - although with a heavy overrepresentation in the states of Illinois and North Dakota.

While quite satisfactory in regards to the places where the returned had stayed, the census information is rather insufficient regarding information about time spent in America. That column in the census is blank for half

of the returnees. Loss of memory or unwillingness of the informant might explain this, but without further speculations of the reasons, the results from the counting are presented in tables 8 and 9. From table 9, it is quite obvious that the majority of those who had been to America only stayed for a short period of time, one year or so.

*Table 8 1910 Census. Nedstrand.
Places in America*

Illinois	12
North Dakota	9
Iowa	5
South Dakota	3
Minnesota	2
Washington	1

*Table 9 1910 Census. Nedstrand
Years in America*

Years	Returned emigrants
13	1
12	1
8	1
2	1
1+	8



Tor Johan Jonsen Rødne and his son Johannes. Picture taken around 19120 by unknown photograprer. Private collection.

The Story of Johan Rødne

The above information is what the 1910 census tells us. But what it does not explain is why Johan Rødne, or Tor Johan Jonsen Rødne, the owner of a carrier and garage business, did not inform the census agents in 1910 about his stay in America. He is not listed as a returned emigrant. Although, we still do not know his date of departure, we know made a good living in Church ferry, North Dakota. After several years abroad, Johan Rødne came to Nedstrand in 1904 with his savings and married Dorthea. He



The house of Tor Johan Jonsen Rødne, near Kvam in Nedstrand, built in 1908. Photo: Hans Storhaug

must have been rather well off, because four years later, in 1908, he built one of the finest houses at Nedstrand, almost a copy of the one he had in America. Johan Rødne died in 1944, and his son Johannes took over and kept it in such a good shape that he in 1990 received the Nedstrand Community Cultural and Preservation Award. Johannes died a few years ago, with no heirs, and donated the house and all its interior, furniture, photos and America letters to a young carpenter who is now rehabilitating it. Thanks to the launching of this project, we will now be able to document and preserve the story of Johan Rødne and hopefully the whole emigration story of Nedstrand.

dtSearch. Creating a Document Index.

The 1910 census is of vital importance in counting and identifying the returned emigrants in Norway. What can prove to be of similar – or even more important tool, is the indexing software program dtSearch, which creates a document index in matters of seconds. A document index is a database that stores the locations of all of the words in a group of documents except for noise words such as but and if. Once you have built an index for a group of documents, dtSearch can use it to perform very fast searches on those documents.

The program has been tested in the search for emigrants and returnees in Nedstrand, by indexing the local history books, and the result is astonishing. In seconds it indexed the two volumes of Nedstrand history book (Tysvær Gard og Ætt, Vol. 6 and 7:2001) with more than 1700 pages, and searching for the word Amerika and USA gave altogether 825 scores.

The findings verify the long emigration traditions of Nedstrand, and demonstrate the effectiveness of the search program. Now dtSearch will be used to organize all information about the people who left Nedstrand and settled permanently in America, as well as those who returned to their home land.

Notes

¹ Fuglerud, Øivind, Migrasjonsforståelse. Flytteprosesser, rasisme og globalisering:111, Universitetsforlaget 2001.

² Fuglerud, Øivind:111

³ Semmingsen, Ingrid, Veien mot Vest, Utvandringen fra Norge 1865 – 1915:460, Oslo 1950.