



# Vesterheim

The National Norwegian-American  
Museum & Heritage Center

## Volunteer Newsletter

Fall 2020

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Stay in touch, COVID-19 update:  
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### *#UnNordicFest: About Nordic Fest 2020*

Many of you primarily (or exclusively) volunteer at Vesterheim during Nordic Fest, so I thought you might appreciate knowing how #UnNordicFest was experienced here in Decorah. If you assume that Nordic Fest simply didn't happen, you would be mistaken. I can tell you that the spirit of Nordic Fest was absolutely alive, though in a subtle way, that weekend. Others will have different perspectives, but here's what I saw:

- Several area restaurants made a point of offering Nordic-inspired specialties. The one that caught my attention was delightful *smørebrød* sandwiches by Deli Arts & Letters at The Landing Market, a new food court on the west side of Decorah that opened recently, in the midst of the pandemic.
- On July 25, Vesterheim offered its fifth annual Nordic Fest concert of Nordic and Nordic-inspired music. We've been able to showcase traditional music during Nordic Fest in recent years, inviting Scandinavian musicians through support from Dawn Svenson Holland and Josh Holland in honor of Dawn's father, Gary D. Svenson, one of the original founders of Decorah's Nordic Fest. The 2020 feature was a livestream concert with the Danish band, Gangspil, at one of Denmark's oldest churches on the island of Læsø. It is still available online, at eleven thousand views and counting!

*Smørebrød* sandwiches by Deli Arts & Letters  
at The Landing Market. #UnNordicFest



- Decorah Lutheran Church put on a Nordic Fest Smorgasbord dinner on an exclusively carry-out basis. Festive music was broadcast as you picked up your meal from masked and bunad-clad servers!
- The Nordic Fest Board made sure there were fireworks on Saturday night! The show went on for nearly 30 minutes, bringing folks out of their homes to watch and enjoy, and visit with each other at a safe distance. They also offered an awesome special-issue t-shirt for sale online on a pre-order basis. Proceeds will benefit future fests.

The Nordic Fest Board holds its annual meeting in mid-September and is tending the flame until everyone can gather safely again!



Martha Griesheimer in her “new office” on her porch at home.



Throwback images from Nordic Fest 2019 – We miss you!

## *Kjære frivillige,*

Greetings from my home office! When I wrote to you back in January my sights were set on a “normal” year. I had plans underway for Spring Guide Training, the Nordic Fest Board (to which I represent Vesterheim) was shaping its vision for the big event in July, and I did not dream of having the leisure to send you a second issue of the *Vesterheim Volunteer* this year. In fact, it has been nine years since I was able to write more than one newsletter in a given year. I always enjoy this opportunity to send news and words of appreciation to you, who are among the most deeply connected and dedicated members of the Vesterheim community.

Of course, in mid-March everything shifted. Vesterheim closed its doors, and regular in-person programming was halted. Coordinating events, incoming tours, and volunteers are the public-facing activities of my regular work, so most of my normal responsibilities have evaporated. What a dramatic change it has been!

You may ask how I’ve been occupying myself for these many months. For one thing, I’ve become Vesterheim’s Zoom scheduler. Little did I know how much I would learn about this online conferencing platform in such a short time. I’ve gained a great appreciation for the social connections that are being maintained and even fostered this way, in this time that is overtly characterized by distancing.

From where I sit, silver linings abound in the clouds cast by COVID-19. The museum staff are keeping each other safe by working mostly from home and by following all of the recommended safety protocols when we need to be on-site. I really love my “office” on my three-season porch at home, and I am very thankful to have installed a ceiling fan a while back. The change in daily routine has provided an opportunity to tackle many projects that occurred to me in the past but never had time to follow up on. Cleaning out files and writing up histories and protocols related to my regular responsibilities are just a few things that have kept me busy.

The thing I miss most is seeing many of you on a regular basis! I hope that you are finding your share of silver linings these days as well.

*Beste hilsen, Martha Griesheimer*





## *Silver Linings: Opportunities in an Unprecedented Situation*

Although we are closed to the public, it has been neither quiet nor static at Vesterheim in recent months. In the absence of visitors, a lot of exhibit-related photography and upgrades have been accomplished. Work on the new and improved Heritage Park has been able to move forward on schedule. Programming switched swiftly from in-person to online-only offerings. This has taken a remarkable amount of work in many departments at the museum.

It is stunning to see how well the pivot to online has been working out. Who knew the range of online programming ideas that were latent here at Vesterheim, and what a warm response there would be to them!

Though many of you are active online, I realize that some of you are firmly grounded and content with snail mail and landlines. I still appreciate these modes of communication myself. Our digital pivot may have missed some of you, so I'd like to give you a peek at what has been happening online at Vesterheim in recent months.

Programming at the Folk Art School has gone entirely online with varied and exciting new options. Support for these programs is provided by the Iowa Arts Council, a division of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, and the National Endowment for the Arts through the federal CARES Act legislation; Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area; and the Huebner Education Fund.

One format is midday conversations with Vesterheim's community of folk artists. Collection Connections are intimate one-hour conversations led by our folk-art instructors, taking a close look at items from the museum collections. The focus is on how the collections continue to inspire folk artists. The size of the "gathering" is limited to 20 so that attendees can interact with each other and share what they are working on at home. These "classes" are offered at a nominal cost to nurture the folk artists who miss getting together for class at Vesterheim.

Monthly online lectures are also being offered. The first two programs have been fascinating! So far, many people from all across the country have participated.

In July, infectious disease researcher Natalie Vestin shared how painting Dala horse figures with rosemaling-inspired designs has helped her to navigate her work processing the data from COVID-19. It held a clear message about the power of

folk art to make meaning in our lives during a pandemic. The August webinar featured Karen Keenan, an expert in Swedish hair jewelry. In September, Robbie LaFleur will explore the extraordinary tapestry works of Lila Nelson.

You will read elsewhere in this newsletter about our special Nordic Fest online concert by the Danish band, Gangspil. This was the second live-streamed concert for Vesterheim this year. Back in May, we presented the first one ever, on *Syttende Mai*, with sponsorship support from Jeff and Marilyn Roverud and the Valdres Lodge Sons of Norway.

When our annual *Syttende Mai* event had to be canceled due to the pandemic, Norwegian-born folk musician Vidar Skrede helped us to celebrate virtually. Vidar has performed and taught at Vesterheim frequently in the past, and gave a delightful concert from his living room in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Both concerts were recorded and are still available to watch online. Go to [vesterheim.org/live](https://vesterheim.org/live) to find these concerts along with many other insights into what has been happening at Vesterheim in recent months.

There is more activity in Vesterheim's Heritage Park than I can cover here. For a long time, the landscaping work focused on infrastructure aspects of the project. Now we are beginning to see the envisioned public spaces, accessibility improvements and aesthetic flourishes being created. A new staircase down the hill between the Valdres House and the Norsvin Mill leads to a welcoming amphitheater area in the shade. There are accessible sidewalks in places that have long needed them, and the brick courtyard near the museum entrance has been completely re-done. Things are looking great, and we'll be open better than ever when circumstances allow.



Livestream concert with the Danish band, Gangspil, at one of Denmark's oldest churches on the island of Læsø.



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## Worth Noting

### New Exhibits:

*Water* and *Trunks, Hearts and Hands* are both ready in place when it is safe to reopen. *Trunks, Hearts and Hands* is an exhibit on immigration that toured nine sites around Iowa in 2018. *Water* has premiered as an online exhibition as well at [vesterheim.org](http://vesterheim.org)!

### Fall Guide Training:

Exciting options are being explored for virtual and limited in-person Fall Guide Training sessions. Current guides and trainees will receive information when plans are set. Let Martha know if you are interested in exploring this avenue for volunteering!

### Online Programs:

We hope everyone will stay healthy and keep Vesterheim in mind: sign up to receive the online newsletter or try an online offering from the Folk Art School, including *Collection Connections*, webinars, and classes. Encourage friends and family to do the same.

### Heritage Park:

The ship sails shown to the right have been hung above the *Restauration* entry plaza. The plaza will be shaped in the outline of the *Restauration* sloop. The original *Restauration* sloop arrived at New York Harbor nearly 200 years ago, and is considered the first organized emigration from Norway to the United States.

