
Chapter 14

Ole in Dairyland: Scandinavian Ethnic Humor

Program 14 Performances

1. Jimmy Jenson, "I Left My Heart in Minneapolis."
2. Stan Boreson, "Chickens in a Sack."
3. E. C. "Red" Stangland, "Telling Jokes to Scandinavians."
4. Edwin Pearson, "Comparative Banking."
5. E. C. "Red" Stangland, "The Escaped Kangaroo."
6. Charles Widden, "Lutfisk."
7. Red Stangland and Uncle Torvald, "O Lutfisk."
8. John Berquist, "Hilda, O Hilda."
9. Oljanna Venden Cunneen, "Ole Meets Lena" and "Ole Goes to Church."
10. Olson Sisters, "The Ladies' Aid."
11. Anonymous, "Money for the Church."
12. John Berquist, "Three Uncles."
13. Stan Boreson, "The Yanitor's Tale."
14. Arnold Johnson, "Ay Don't Give a Hoot."

O Lutfisk

Of all the European ethnic groups that settled in the Upper Midwest, Scandinavians figure the most prominently in regional humor. Gift shops, hardware stores, and restaurants in such Norwegian and Swedish communities as Stoughton, Mount Horeb, Westby, Osseo, and Grantsburg, Wisconsin; Spring Grove, Minneapolis, Chisago City, and Duluth, Minnesota; and Decorah, Iowa, all carry jokebooks, buttons, bumper stickers, and novelties stressing Scandinavian jocularly and foolishness. And on local streets, folks have told each other funny ethnic stories for well over a century.

The earliest Scandinavian-American humor derived from the confusion of immigrant tongues with English. Einar Haugen, the Norwegian-American linguist, commented on the presence of "many good-natured stories . . . about the use of English in Norwegian contexts" (Haugen 1969:66–67). Some offered an "exaggerated mixture," as in the case of a man from Waterloo Ridge, Iowa,

who used English and Norwegian words side by side, e.g. "Dæ sprang en hårrå-ræbbit åver råden-trækken-væien; så bynte filleponien kikkespænne-slå" (A *hårrå*-rabbit ran across the road-track-*væi*; then the good-for-nothing pony began to kick-*spenne-slå*).

While largely impenetrable to monolingual English speakers, such babel delighted immigrant Norwegians.

The bilingual pun figured more commonly in humorous anecdotes, however, since a fair number of Norwegian words with one set of meanings coincided with English words signifying things quite different. The Norwegian use of *barn* for child resulted in such comic misunderstandings as "in America they paint all

the 'children' red." The English "grease," meanwhile, is homophonic with the Norwegian *gris*, or pig. When a Yankee farmer told the Norsky hired man to grease the wagon, he came back with a pig in his arms.

While bilingual puns are less common today, a humorous regard for lutefisk flourishes among Nordic and Anglo-Americans alike. In the nineteenth century dried cod was standard winter fare for immigrants, who soaked the board-stiff fillets in a brine including lye, then rinsed and boiled them to enjoy with *grot* (a cream pudding) and *lefse* (a pliant potato-bread resembling the tortilla). Possessing a strong odor and a gelatinous texture, lutefisk inspires powerful emotions among the immigrants' descendants. Some reject it outright as that dreadful-smelling stuff Uncle Ole used to eat, while others consider its annual consumption as an ethnic badge of courage. As Red Stangland put it in a recent song:

O lutefisk, now I suppose
I'll eat you as I hold my nose.

(Stangland 1979:48)

The comic aspects of lutefisk were well established by the early twentieth century when Charles Lindholm authored and produced *The Man from Minnesota*, starring himself as "Charlie Lutfisk," for the Upper Midwest's vaudeville stage. Meanwhile the Swedish singer and dialect comedian Charles Widden recorded a string of codfish jokes as "Lutfisk (The yule fish)" on the Victor label in 1922. The fish's properties even entered into the Wisconsin legislature's debates in 1982. Opponents of a bill requiring businesses to alert workers to the presence of hazardous substances in the workplace remarked facetiously that churches "would have to comply with the law in order to hold their traditional fall lutefisk dinners, since the prepared fish contains lye" (M. Miller 1991). A pair of Norwegian-American legislators introduced an amendment, which narrowly passed, making it plain that the term "toxic substance does not mean lutefisk." Wags in the general public responded with buttons and bumper stickers mimicking the National Rifle Association: "Legalize Lutefisk" and "When Lutefisk Is Outlawed, Only Outlaws Will Have Lutefisk." At the decade's end, others parodied first lady Nancy Reagan's antidrug sloganeering: "Lutefisk. Just say no."

Ole and Lena

While gags regarding lutefisk are one hallmark of Scandinavian-American humor, the characters Ole and Lena are another. The youthful Norwegian and Swedish "newcomers" who arrived in the Upper Midwest in the final decades of the nineteenth century found work chiefly as laborers. Men toiled in the woods, on Great Lakes vessels, and on farms; women served typically as "maids" and "hired girls." Their foibles and misadventures spawned corresponding humorous narratives.

Circulating first in oral tradition, they eventually found their way into jokebooks like George T. Springer's *Yumpin' Yiminy: Scandinavian Dialect Selections*.

Yump, Ole, Yump

In Escanaba, Michigan, they tell the story of Ole and Yon who agreed to meet at the dock to take the ferry to the Eagle's picnic at Maywood. As the time of departure drew near, Yon became uneasy at the failure of Ole to appear and board the ferry. The gangplank was pulled in and the ferry was slowly leaving when Ole, all out of breath, approached the edge of the dock. Yon, excited and anxious that Ole get aboard, cried out: "Yump, Ole, yump. Ay tank ju can mak et in two yumps."

(Springer 1932:32)

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While Ole the lumberjack and hired man has been the predominant male figure in Scandinavian jokes for more than a century, his female counterpart in early collections like Springer's is more often Tillie the maid. Lena's position as Ole's consort has grown, however, over the past few decades, at least partly through the efforts of Eider Clifford ("Red") Stangland.

Red Stangland, born in 1923 in Hetland, South Dakota, was a radio station operator when he launched the Norse Press in 1973 with the publication of *Norwegian Jokes* (Stangland 1979; Wood 1990). *Uff da Jokes*, *Son of Norwegian Jokes*, and *Grandson of Norwegian Jokes* followed, as did five volumes of *Ole and Lena Jokes*. Like Charlie Lutefisk, Charles Widden, George T. Springer, and many others, Stangland is the latest, but probably not the last, of a long line of Scandinavian-American dialect comedians who have entertained Upper Midwesterners through a succession of performances, recordings, and publications.