The Norwegian-American Historical Museum  
By Dale Nimrod

It started with an 1877 gift of a bird egg collection to Luther College. The eggs plus a few other donated articles formed the nucleus of what was to become the Norwegian-American Historical Museum, now known as Vesterheim.

The museum’s first home was Luther’s Main Building and the “Chicken Coop” behind it, later Sunnyside and Koren Library. An outdoor exhibit, including the Egge/Koren cabin, acquired in 1913, was situated on the hillside where Jenson-Noble Hall of Music now stands. In 1932 the college moved the indoor collection to its present location, the vacated Lutheran Publishing House building in downtown Decorah.

Two Luther faculty members played a large role in envisioning the potential of a carefully managed and focused museum:

Professor of music Haldor Hanson was curator from 1895 to 1902. During his term the faculty formally established Norwegian immigrant materials as the focus of the museum. Hanson recognized that, after a half century or more in this country, immigrants were replacing and abandoning things they had brought from Norway—tools, utensils, furniture, clothing, letters and papers. So he initiated the active solicitation of objects. He even invited students to participate in collecting when they were home during vacation periods.

Knut Gjerset, professor of history, was curator from 1922 to 1935. Under his direction the museum was taken to a new level of development that commanded national recognition. Its name became the Norwegian-American Historical Museum. Gjerset was put in charge of a special exhibition in St. Paul in 1925 to commemorate 100 years of Norwegian emigration to the United States. As a result of his promotional work, a group of museums in Norway assembled a gift of 27 crates of materials for the museum here to strengthen cultural ties between the two countries. Gjerset worked hard on appropriately displaying the museum material to make it useful for education.

During the 1960s a museum corporation separate from the college was established with responsibility for the care and management of the collection. The arrangement provided access for educational use by students and faculty of the college and stipulated that the museum remain in Decorah.

The museum is a major attraction for visitors, and it continues to serve its original mission as well. For example, a trip to the museum has been a part of Luther's Paideia program for all first-year students in conjunction with a reading of Elisabeth Koren's 1853-55 pioneer diary. Examination of the very cabin which Elisabeth and her husband shared with the Egges as the Korens began their ministry here makes for an exceptional educational experience.