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TELESOGA, TELENEWS, AND EDITORS

Introduction

Today, several generations removed from the mass migration that uprooted our ancestors, we still feel that connection to our past and our indebtedness to Torkel Oftelie, the creator and first editor of *Telesoga*. Torkel was 30 years old when he left Norway and 51 when he began recording stories from the Norwegian settlements in the Midwest. Had it not been for his wife who preceded him to America, he doubted that he would have come. In a 1936 article for the *Decorah Posten*, he wrote that "It was so painful to leave that I am not able to express it..." No doubt it was this feeling, in part, that made him reach out to others who, like him, were uprooted. "We must see to it that the Telers are not forgotten," was his motto.

The following pages begin with a biographical sketch of this extraordinary man, followed by nine editors who found it impossible to follow in his footsteps but who have tried to live up to his motto. Torkel was editor for sixteen years; N. N. Rønning, for five; Hilbert & Lillian Thompson, temporary, for one; Carol Nelson and Lorna Anderson, co-editors, for ten; Shelley Jerviss and Jim Skree, co-editors, for seven; Robert Christensen, for five; and Alice Kirn, presently in her fourth year. Two of our presidents, Janet Frye and Arnold Ness, edited two issues in 1998 and also helped out with printing tasks.

Torkel published four issues a year, varying in size from 19 to 66 pages. He did most of the writing himself. The first issue was printed in Fergus Falls and included information about the newly formed Telelaget and a picture of Pastor Bondahl, the first president. Every successive issue included a list of Telelaget officers and the following purpose statement:

*Telesoga is a quarterly magazine devoted to the history
and reminiscences of Telemarkingar in America.*

In 1910 S. B. Salverson, secretary of Telelaget, was named business manager for *Telesoga* and the printing was moved to Fargo, North Dakota. When N. N. Rønning succeeded Salverson as manager in 1914, the printing was moved to Minneapolis. Membership in Telelaget was fifty cents a year. A subscription to *Telesoga* sold for fifty cents or twenty cents a copy. Torkel worked hard to enroll people in Telelaget and to raise money for financing the publication. Most of his work, however, was done at his own expense.

Torkel's 53 issues along with his 128-page yearbook, all written in the Norwegian language, are a gold mine for researchers and genealogists. Torkel traveled from settlement to settlement collecting stories, genealogies, biographies, sketches, anecdotes, ballads, poems, and pictures. Many of the issues feature churches, so important to every settlement. The March 1939 issue is a collector's item with its numerous drawings by the renowned artist Herbjørn Gausta. The December 1921 issue documents the participation of Norwegians in World War I with pictures of those who served. Nearly every one of the 53 issues includes pictures—farms, farm machinery, logging, animal life, portraits of early pioneers, and more. Torkel included, as well, incidents from the lighter side of life, such as Ole H. Forsyth's birthday party. Ole posted a public invitation to all the Oles. Twenty-two showed up. Torkel included a picture of the twenty-two, as well as a long poem commemorating the event written in English by "Scandy" (Benhardt Findreng), a poet from Houston, Minnesota. The first stanza reads as follows:

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Ole Forsyth's invitation to the Oles far and near
Was accepted by the Oles who responded with a cheer.
The Oles came in bunches, two by two and single file,
All rigged in best attire in the latest Ole style;
There were Oles from everywhere, where Oles could be found.



The Ole Party from Telesoga, September 1913

Top row left to right: Ole Amundson, Ole Dybing, Ole Norskog, Ole Kittelson
Second row: Ole Gordon, Ole Oleson, Ole Guttormson, Ole Forsyth, Ole
Runningen, Ole Laugen, Ole Peterson, Ole Ingvalson
Third row: Ole Birkeland, Ole Gjermanson, Ole Eliasson, Ole Erickson, Ole Flatten,
Ole Findreng Lower row: Ole Eliasson, Jr., Ole Odegaarden, Ole Lee, Ole Hornseth

Torkel's final writing for *Telesoga* was an 128-page yearbook in 1926, a culmination of his activities as historian. He was now 70 years old.

The next issue of *Telesoga* appeared in 1938, edited by N. N. Rønning, celebrating one hundred years since the first emigrants left Telemark in 1837. Several of the articles in the 68 pages highlighting people and events were for the first time written in English.

There would not be another *Telesoga* until 1950 when N. N. Rønning, who had served as Torkel's business manager, made a strong appeal to raise \$1,000 to "publish an enlarged and improved *Telesoga*." He edited four annual issues with contents both in Norwegian and English. He stated his purpose "to furnish its members information about their ancestors in Telemark and their ancestors in this country and to serve as a bond between all interested persons with more or less Tele-blood in their veins." The four issues were published by the Tele Historical Society, a branch of *Telesoga*, whose "chief purpose," he wrote, "was to publish *Telesoga*..." The copies were printed by Mohn Printing Company in Northfield, Minnesota. These four issues, ranging from 33 to 50 pages,

do not include a list of Telelaget officers, but are rich in historical content.

Rønning's last issue was in 1953 and publication did not resume until 1980 with Hilbert and Lillian Thompson serving as temporary editors. By this time all articles were written in English only. Hilbert, president, and Lillian, secretary, were among those who reactivated Telelaget in 1979. In 1981 Lorna Anderson and Carol Nelson became co-editors and kept a lively *Telesoga* going for ten years. They published twice annually. The issues included letters from readers, book reviews, poems, drawings, art, membership lists, memorials, in addition to heritage stories. Many of the issues were devoted to *stevne* activity, including registration forms and program agendas, which since 1994 have been included in *TeleNews*, Telelaget's newsletter published whenever deemed necessary.

Telesoga was Telelaget's only publication for 87 years. In 1994 the Telelag board, under the leadership of Arnold Ness, decided that the *Telesoga* should include only articles of lasting value, such as family stories and settlement histories (as written in the early *Telesoga* when Torkel Oftelie was the editor.) The board decided to print a second publication, a newsletter, that would keep members informed about *stevner*, Telelag tours, *bygdelag* events, and current Norwegian events. The newsletter would be called the *TeleNews*.

The first editor of the *TeleNews* was Lois Johnson from Roseville, Minnesota. Lois continued as editor for two years until 1996, when Norma Helin from Nora Springs, Iowa, succeeded her. Norma remained editor until 1999. Elaine Nordlie from Dassel, Minnesota, became editor at this time and served until 2002, when she was elected president of Telelaget. Jim Skree, who served many years as co-editor of the *Telesoga*, became *TeleNews* editor in 2002 and continued until 2006.

At a September board meeting in 2006 it was agreed that the task of publishing, printing, and mailing was very time-consuming for one or two people. The decision was made to add an assistant for printing and mailing. Husband and wife, Pete and Karen Christianson, are the present editors of *TeleNews* and Helen Steele is the assistant.

Shelley Jerviss and Jim Skree were co-editors of *Telesoga* from 1991-1997. Quoted below are excerpts from Shelley's appeal for articles [May 1992] entitled "Please Help Us." Written in the spirit of Torkel, Shelley's appeal describes the purpose of *Telesoga* and reflects the work that she and Jim did during their years as editors.

"We invite you to submit your own writings or photocopies of articles of interest. We are interested in anything relating to Telemark, such as people (past and present), places of interest, stories about our members and what they are doing, obituaries of our members and well known Telers and any artistic or literary endeavors of *Telemarkingar*. The possibilities are endless. We'd also like to hear about any good books that you've found relating to Telemark culture, art, history, etc. ... We want to use the old *Telesogas* as our model and try to publish and thereby preserve for future generations, more in depth and historically oriented articles that deal specifically with Telemark, its history, its culture, and its people, both here and in Norway."

The format established by Shelley and Jim is still used. "Greetings from the President" and the "Genealogy Corner," appear in every issue. Alice Kirn, the present editor, felt a little bit like Torkel when she traveled to Onamia, Minnesota, albeit not by foot or by horse-drawn carriage, to call on Thordis Langerud, a 94-year-old emigrant from Skien. The story of Thordis' parents and uncles appeared in the May 2006 issue. In the November 2006 issue Thordis wrote about her childhood, among other things being driven to school by a horse-drawn bus. The publications have continued

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biannually, and the appeal for articles remains the same.

– Alice Stangeland Kirn