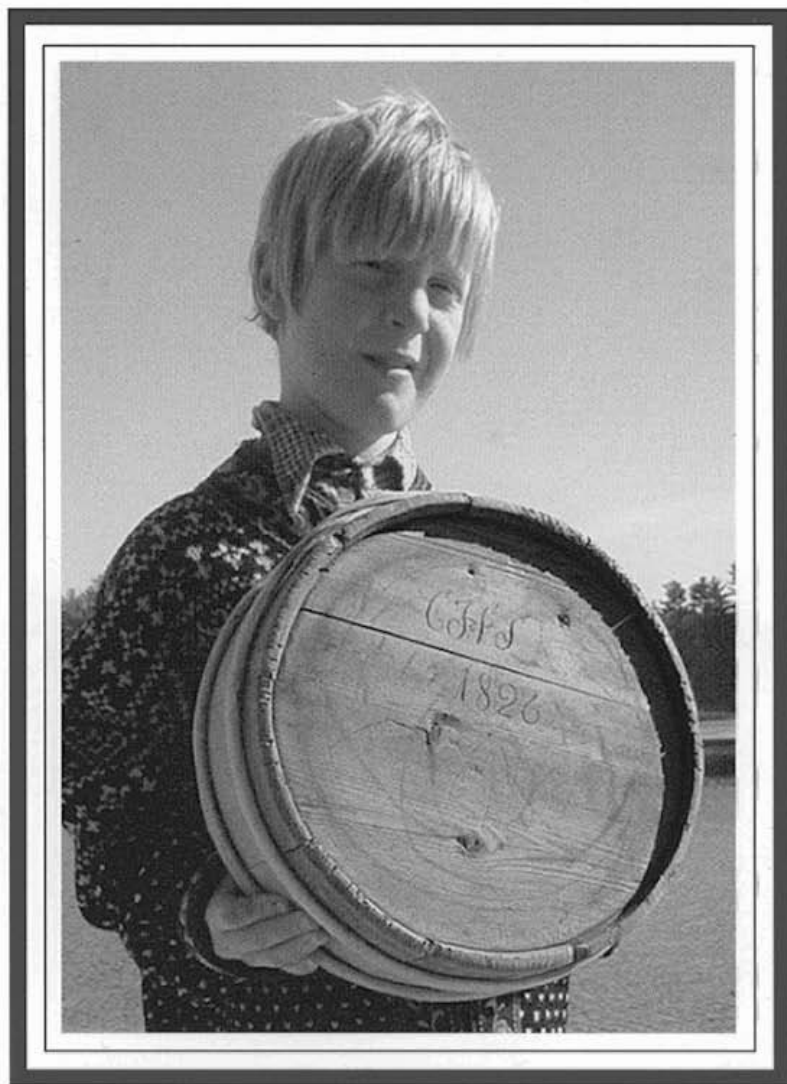


Budstikken

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Christopher Helge Ellingboe with His
Great-Great-Great-Grandfather's Mjølkespann

Christopher Helgesen Ellingboe's Letter from America

By James Ellingboe

In 1966, when I was living in Stockholm, my visiting Swedish-American uncle introduced me to Ole Halse, a retired Norwegian paper chemist. While we enjoyed lunch together at Soliden, he told me about a hotel in the mountains of Valdres, where he stayed every summer. He thought that the proprietor, Marit Ellingbø, might be a relative. By the time my fiancée Karin and I drove into Grindaheim (Vang i Valdres) the following summer, I had already been to the State Archives in Oslo and had found some information about the Ellingbø farms and families, but I had yet to meet a single Norwegian relative and had only a sketchy idea about our family history.

When we first set foot in the H.T. Ellingbø country store, Marit Ellingbø (see *Budstikken*, Vol. 20, No. 2, p. 22, 1989), and her sister-in-law Gina Ellingbø Ødegaard, welcomed us with open arms. No more than a few minutes were needed to establish the family connection. It was the first visit from a descendant of Christopher Helgesen Ellingbø, who had emigrated in 1852. Marit knew of Christopher because of an old letter from Wisconsin that she kept in the hotel safe. The letter was written on every available space of a 9¾ by 15½- inch sheet of stationery, which was folded,

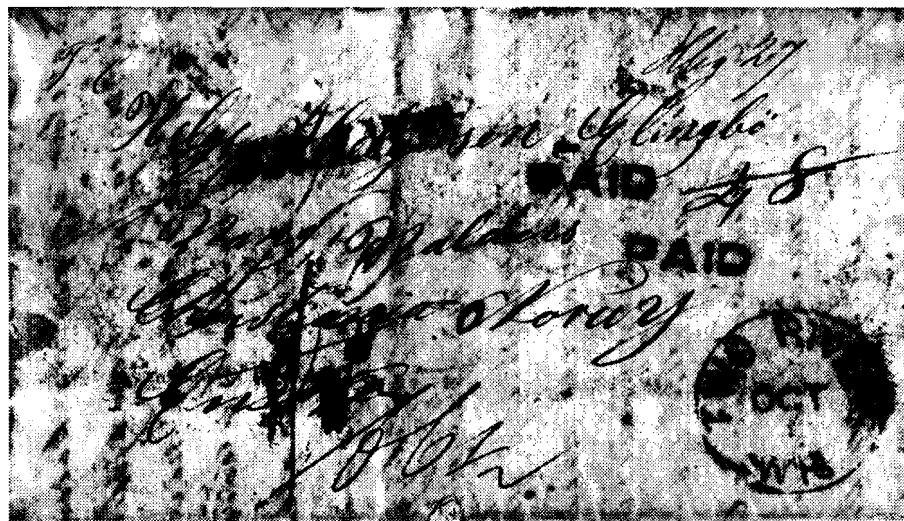
without an envelope, and addressed to Christopher's brother, Helge Helgesen Ellingbø [sic], a great-grandfather of Marit's deceased husband, who was also named Helge. Among parts of the letter is a note to Helge from Tosten Trondsen and a message to Tosten Trondsen from G. Gulbransen Berge.

After our visit, Marit Ellingbø sent Christopher's letter to the most well-known historian of Norwegian-American emigration, Ingrid Semmingsen (Norway's first female professor). Her transcription, done in 1968, was published by Riksarkivet, in *Fra Amerika til Norge, i Norske Utvandrerbrev 1838-1857*, Vol. 1, #102, pp. 335-337, 1992.

Here is my translation of Christopher's *Amerika brev*:

Two Rivers, the 2nd of October, 1854

Unforgettable dear brother and friends and relatives in Norway. Your welcome letter of the 13th of April was received by me on the 6th of August. It made me very happy to hear that you are all healthy and are living well, and the same you shall hear from us. My family and I are, God be thanked, all healthy and well contented with our condition and position. I cannot thank God enough for the change I made with regard to my voyage to America. I must first tell you about my year's crop. I got 20 bushels of potatoes and some corn and beans. For livestock I have two cows. A cow costs 30 to 40 dollars and a barrel of flour 10 dollars. When we came here we bought a barrel of flour for 4 dollars, but how expensive times are becoming due to the European War! Several million barrels a year



*Christopher's America Brev 1854
Photo Courtesy of Jim Ellingboe*

are sent out, so it is no wonder that it is so expensive here.

I see in your letter that Randi Helges Datter and Randi Ols Datter want to come over here next summer, and I think that they will not regret it when they come. As far as the clothing they should bring, they should not make clothes, but bring material so that they can make them in the style that is worn here. And if Helge Olsen and Tolev Helgesen would like to come here too, they can see for themselves by the wages here that they can receive more for a month than they can for a year over there. When they come, they should land in Two Rivers. They should write to me from New York or Quebec, wherever they land, so I will know when I can expect them, and they should address the letter to Two Rivers P.O. Manitowoc C.O. Wisconsin. I must not forget to thank you for the dollars you sent me. You say that it must have been a misunderstanding of mine or forgetfulness that I paid the servant girl those dollars in wages, but it was not so; I gave the money to her brother Gulik when he was there with tar, and I shall willingly swear by the same. But, in case there is so much remaining after me, I ask you to settle it for me.

Now I must close my humble and short letter with many greetings from me to all of you, first to you my dear brother and your wife and children; and then may I wish you Helge, my brother's son, happiness with your new wife; and then to all relatives in the family, it would be too long to list them all; you Endre, my father's brother, may you be first and last to receive greetings from me and my family.

I should tell you that my daughters are working 13 miles from here at Norke [?]. Christofor Helgesen

[to:] Helge Helgesen

I Tosten Trondsen wish to send greetings to my parents-in-law and to say that I and my wife and children are healthy and are living well and have bought ourselves 80 acres of land which should be paid for over 5 years. We moved in on it in the spring and in the autumn harvested 4 barrels of potatoes and some oats and some beets. We have bought ourselves a cow and a calf, for which we paid 32 dollars, and we have 15 hens and we have built a cabin and a barn and a storage house and we have cleared 6 acres which I will sow in the spring. My son Trond has begun to read and the other two sons grow and thrive, and if you Even have the thought to come, it is best to do it at this time, for the chance will never come again. I should tell you that my month's rent is 25 dollars and I support expenses that you could not over there. The friendliest greetings from me and wife and children.

T. Trondsen

[to:] Tosten Evensen

Everyone is sent word in friendliness from G. Gulbransen Berge and his son that his wife passed away in death the 14th of September after 8 days of illness and he bade me ask if you would tell A. Vang that he shouldn't be impatient because he did not answer his 3 letters for funds he didn't receive from the exchange note whereas he should have received 40 shillings [?] which were sent through H. Heland in Bergen, but the exchange note may have disappeared; he said that in

case he did not get some result, then he should write to him.

Paid to Christiania in case this letter costs more than 8 [?] you should take a postal receipt and send it to me so that I can get the postal charges back.

Christofer Helgesen Ellinbóe

In his letter, Christopher encouraged his nieces, Randi Helgesdatter and Randi Olsdatter, and his nephews, Helge Olsen and Tolev Helgesen, to emigrate. Although Randi Helgesdatter and Randi Olsdatter had expressed an interest in coming to Wisconsin the next summer, both stayed in Vang. Randi Olsdatter, whose father died the same year she was born, had a difficult life and became known as "Bakste" Randi because she went from farm to farm selling baked bread for a living. She had five daughters with five different partners. Illegitimate children were not unusual in Vang in those days. One of her daughters emigrated, married and raised eleven children in Minnesota. Tolev (Torleiv) Helgesen, who fathered Randi Olsdatter's oldest daughter in 1859, emigrated to Chicago as a bachelor, then married and settled in Iowa, where he raised a family of at least five children. Helge Olsen, remained in Vang, despite a plea in an 1866 *Amerika brev* (published in *Samhold*, 10 May 1975) from his mother and step-father, who had also emigrated to Iowa.

When Christopher was born in Vang parish on the first of March

1801, Norway was a province of the Kingdom of Denmark, as it had been since 1536. Europe was engulfed in the Napoleonic wars and Denmark was allied with France. A month after Christopher's birth, Admiral Lord Nelson defeated the Danish fleet at Copenhagen, forcing Denmark and Norway into neutrality. Christopher was the fifth of six children born to Helge Helgesen Ellingbøe (1754-1823) and Rangdi Gudbrandsdatter Nørsvin (1768-1829) on the Ellingbøe farm known as Nordigarden. He was christened by the parish priest, Jens Holmboe, March 12, 1801 in the ancient Vang stave church, which had been built around 1175. Norway had become part of Sweden when the next parish priest, Friderich

Müller, confirmed Christopher on August 25, 1816.

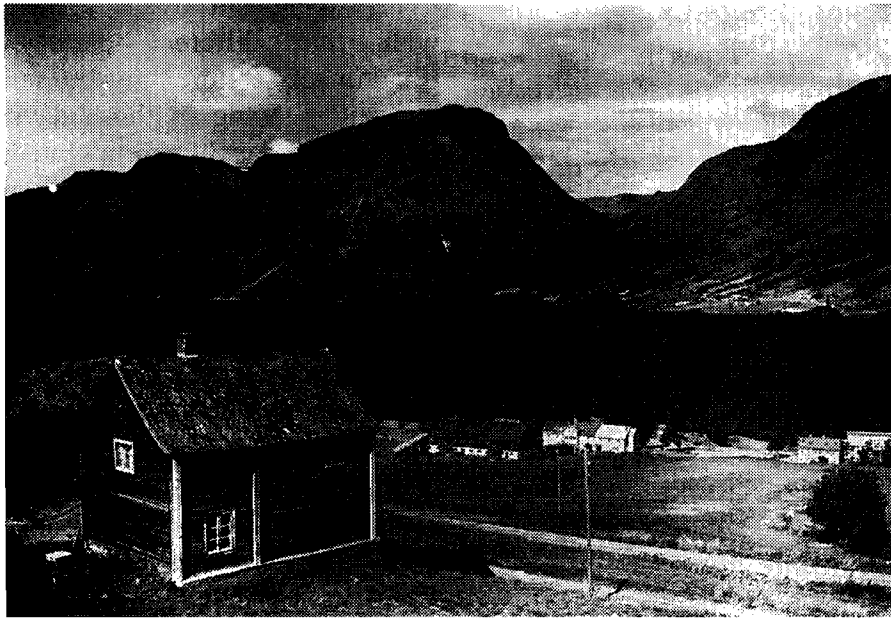
Christopher's eldest brother Helge bore the given name that five generations of eldest sons in this family had held before him. Helge was to inherit the farm, but he had obligations to his siblings. On the February 27, 1823, a month after their father's death, Christopher and Helge entered into a contract wherein Christopher was given the right to farm a parcel of land, grazing privileges, and the right to erect a house while sharing half of the farm with his widowed mother. In exchange, he was to work for his brother Helge three days in the spring or fall and one day in the summer. It is not known whether he built a house, or where he lived on the Nordigarden Ellingbø farm.

Christopher was respected as a wise and honest man.

At Ellevstølan, the stream running down from the melting snow on Jørungil mountain is called Christopher's brook, after him. For many years, an old wooden *mjølkespann* (milk bucket) was used by Marit Ellingbø to feed lambs. She turned it over one day and realized that it had been made by Christopher, who had inscribed his initials, CHS, and the date 1826, on the bottom.

At age 38, Christopher married Berith Andersdatter Nordland. Together they had five children – Helge (1840-1913), Anne (1842-1915), Randi (1843-1916), Anders (1845-1899) and Gulbrand (1847-1916), their surnames being dictated by Norwegian naming practices. With a growing family, in 1844, Christopher made a new contract with his brother Helge, who was at that time his only surviving sibling. Christopher received a strip of mostly uncultivated land, a meadow on Bratsete, some land at Ellevstøl, a little hay field at Helevøndale, two small wood lots, free grazing land, firewood rights, and the right to set up a hut at Ellevstøl. He was to pay two dollars a year, do one week of haying, and forge shoes and nails for Helge's horses.

By the middle of the 1800s, emigration from Norway had increased dramatically, a major factor being rapid population growth. From 1801 to 1855, the



*Norigarden Ellingbo farm
Photo Courtesy of Jim Ellingboe*



Berit and Christopher Ellingboe
Photo Courtesy of Jim Ellingboe

population of Vang had increased 40% – from 2,065 to 2,955. Economic opportunity was the primary reason for emigration, most specifically the quest for farm land, which had been so subdivided with each subsequent generation that it became difficult to earn a livelihood by farming in Norway.

At age 51, Christopher was looking for new opportunities in America. On March 8, 1852, the family was listed in the parish book among others who sought to emigrate. They left home on

April 14, 1852 for the trip over the mountains to Bergen. In a letter from Bergen dated May 10, 1852, Christopher wrote to thank his brother Helge for sending him the money that was needed for the passage to America. The Ellingbøe family embarked from Bergen May 12th on the Norwegian bark Juno and

arrived at the Port of New York on July 12th. Their long voyage continued by way of the Erie Canal to Lake Erie, then by ship through the Great Lakes to Manitowoc, Wisconsin. According to family tradition, Christopher brought with him an iron plough.

Soon after their arrival in Wisconsin, Christopher purchased land for a farm in Gibson. Their eldest son Helge served in the Civil War (see *Budstikken*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 22-23, 2006) and returned to manage the family farm. Helge and his wife (from Øystre Slidre) had 13 children. Christopher and Berit's daughters, Anne and Randi, married brothers from Germany. Anne and her husband moved to farm in Nebraska; they had 13 children. Randi's husband drowned in Lake Erie at Cleveland and she returned home with her three young children. Fifteen years later she married a widowed German farmer and helped to raise his seven children. Christopher and Berit's son Anders (Andrew) moved to Milwaukee where he wed a German wife; they had five children. Their son Gulbrand (Gilbert) married a first cousin of Helge's wife, then moved to Tennessee in the early 1890s; they had six children. Christopher died at the age of 78 on February 13, 1879. Seventeen years later, Berit followed him in death on October 16, 1896. They are buried in the

family plot at the Jambo Creek Cemetery in Gibson, Wisconsin.

A hundred years after Christopher's letter was written, Marit's husband Helge wrote a letter to the postmaster of Two Rivers, hoping to contact his American relatives. Edward Ellingboe, a grandson of Christopher who lived in Two Rivers, replied, but both Helge and Edward were elderly, in ill health, and there was apparently no follow-up. It was not until our arrival in Grindaheim in 1967 that the Norwegian and American lines of the family became reunited. Thus began more than forty years of family history research, many return visits, and close friendships between several generations of Ellingbøe descendants in Norway and America.

Note: The original of Christopher's letter was given to me by Leif Solemsli, Jr. and will be donated to the Norwegian-American Historical Association. A copy of the original, with Ingrid Semmingsen's transcription, can be seen among documents on my website <<http://ellingboe.us>>. For details about other persons named in the letter and for other inquiries, contact the author by email: jim@ellingboe.us.