

The Photographer Who Taught the King to Sail (Translated from Norwegian)

How did a fur trader from Jevnaker become King Harald's sailing instructor and one of Norway's most important war photographers?

By Fredrik Kalstveit

Journalist

When Norway was invaded in 1940, the Norwegian fur trader Campbell Norsgaard picked up a camera. With it, he documented important chapters of Norway's wartime history.

"Grandfather was captured by the Nazis during the war. They locked him inside a cabin and starved him for several days. When he was finally released, they beat him. The photos weren't well received by the Germans," says Heather Turner, Campbell Norsgaard's granddaughter.

The photographs Turner refers to were shown this summer in an exhibition at **St. Olaf College in Minnesota**. The exhibition included documentation of Nazi-occupied Norway, along with a collection of candid photographs of several well-known Norwegians living in exile during the Second World War.

Among the images displayed were photographs of **Sigrid Undset** fleeing through Russia and Japan, as well as **King Harald**, then Crown Prince Harald, visiting **Little Norway** in Canada with the rest of the royal family.

But how did the man from Jevnaker, with no formal education in photography or filmmaking, become one of the most important chroniclers of Norway's wartime history?

"My grandfather remains a mystery, even to me," says Turner.

A Difficult Childhood

Norsgaard's birth name was **Conrad Campbell Nørsgaard**.

According to his own account, he received the English-sounding middle name because his father was convinced that one day his son would emigrate to America.

His father turned out to be right.

Despite that prediction, however, the relationship between father and son was anything but close. According to his granddaughter, Norsgaard had a difficult upbringing.

"His father disappeared from the picture early. His mother..."

(The article continues onto the next page.)

Photo Caption

Crown Princess Märtha, Princesses Ragnhild and Astrid, and Prince Harald at Camp Little Norway in Toronto, Canada, circa 1943.

Photo: Campbell Norsgaard

WAR, ESCAPE, AND HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION

Photo caption:

During the 1930s, Norsgaard operated his own fur business on Akersgata in what was then Kristiania (Oslo).

Photo: Campbell Norsgaard

...had four children with four different men, and because of that, as I understand it, they moved around frequently. They also struggled financially, says Turner.

In addition to growing up in Jevnaker, Norsgaard spent part of his childhood in Kristiania (Oslo), where he became known as a promising ski jumper during his youth.

In the 1930s he embarked on a career in the fur trade. Norsgaard sold furs to breeders on behalf of the family business **Rieber & Co.**, before eventually opening his own fur store at **Akersgata 43** in the capital.

Fur was fashionable during the 1930s, likely inspired by skiing legend **Sonja Henie's** luxurious fur garments, and Norsgaard's business prospered.

He exported silver fox pelts to various parts of the world, particularly North America, where he also made an extended business trip in 1937.

The Outbreak of War and Escape

According to an interview Norsgaard gave to the newspaper **Dagbladet** in 1987, he had been in northern Sweden purchasing furs worth **16,000 dollars** when Germany invaded Norway in 1940.

The invasion transformed photography, which Norsgaard had pursued as a hobby since his youth, into much more than a pastime.

"Grandfather believed it was his duty to do what he could. Since he had a camera, he documented the German takeover."

— **Heather Turner, granddaughter of Campbell Norsgaard**

At the **Norwegian American Historical Association's** exhibition at **St. Olaf College** in Minnesota, one of the highlights was a photograph of a bombed-out farmhouse with a terrified family in the foreground.

The photograph was taken during the months after the occupation, and later interviews indicate that Norsgaard wanted to share his photographic documentation with the Allied forces.

Unfortunately, he was arrested by the Germans early, and most of his rolls of film therefore probably never made it across the border.

According to his granddaughter, Turner, the Germans also abused her grandfather.

"He told the story that he was starved and beaten several times. He never shared the details," she says.

"After that episode, he realized that it was probably best to flee Norway. It was painful, but necessary, that's how he explained it."

On the Run with Sigrid Undset

Escape proved to be the most difficult chapter.

According to an article in the expatriate newspaper **Nordiske Tidende**, he first traveled to **Sweden**, then via the **Baltic...**

(The article continues on the next page.)

Photo captions

Left photo:

*Nobel Prize-winning novelist **Sigrid Undset**, shown here during a stopover in **Kobe, Japan**, after fleeing Norway following the German invasion.*

Photo: Campbell Norsgaard

Top right photo:

Fenrik (Lieutenant) Norsgaard poses in front of German fighter aircraft that had attacked the Murmansk shipping route and were later used for spare parts at Bardufoss Air Station in Norway.

Photo: Campbell Norsgaard

Bottom right photo:

Without any formal photography training, Campbell Norsgaard became the photographer at the Norwegian Air Force's exile training camp during the Second World War.

Photo: Campbell Norsgaard

After traveling through **Russia** as far as **Moscow**, Norsgaard found himself with none other than **Sigrid Undset** as his traveling companion.

Undset was just as much a target as Norsgaard. For years she had been an outspoken critic of Hitler, and her books had been banned in Germany. When war broke out, it was only a matter of time before the Gestapo came looking for her if she remained in Norway.

"Grandfather became acquainted with Undset through her son. He later became friends with Sigrid Undset herself," says Turner. "At home in a shoebox there are several Christmas cards she sent to my grandfather after the war."

One of the photographs in Norsgaard's exhibition shows the Nobel Prize-winning author standing on a balcony in Japan, dressed in a black dress and holding a fan, gazing thoughtfully into the distance.

Undset's dramatic journey to freedom is documented alongside Norsgaard's in the English-language book **Return to the Future**, published in 1942.

Little Norway

In late summer 1940, after spending time in **Japan**, Norsgaard and Undset reached the **U.S. West Coast**. From there, Undset continued to **New York**, where she carried on her literary work while living in exile.

Norsgaard continued on to **Colorado**, where he helped organize relief efforts for war victims in Norway. He also wanted to enlist in the Norwegian ski troops.

The man from Jevnaker, now 31 years old, was informed that he was too old for military service. Instead, he traveled to **Canada**, where the Norwegian Air Force was training.

On the journey north he purchased a movie camera, which was immediately put to use.

Shortly after arriving at the training camp, Colonel **Ole Reistad** was so impressed by the photographic work the recruit had already produced that he appointed Norsgaard the **official photographer of Little Norway**.

There, Norsgaard documented the rebuilding of Norway's air force and how hundreds of Norwegian men lived, trained, and prepared themselves to fight for their occupied homeland.

Thor Heyerdahl's Tame Bear

One of the recruits at Little Norway was **Thor Heyerdahl**, who had settled there with his wife and child in a log cabin outside the camp.

Ontario's forests were rich in wildlife, and during a walk in the woods Heyerdahl found an abandoned bear cub.

The ever-adventurous explorer adopted the cub as a pet.

The Heyerdahl family brought it home, fed it desserts, and before long it was even sleeping in the couple's bed, to the frustration of Thor Heyerdahl's wife.

Before long the bear cub, **"Peik,"** also became a familiar face around Little Norway.

Norsgaard's photographs show recruits playing with the cub in the woods, and one of his photos depicts "Peik" riding on top of a tank.

The friendly Canadian bear also attracted the attention of visitors to the camp, including the Norwegian royal family.

During the summer of **1943**, **Crown Princess Märtha** and her three children, who, during the war years, lived at **Pooks Hill** outside Washington, D.C., but spent much of their summers at the royal residence **Little Skaugum**, visited the camp.

During the vacation in Canada, it didn't take long before "Peik" became the playmate of **Prince Harald** (later King Harald), then a young prince, along with his sisters **Astrid** and **Ragnhild**.

(The article continues on the next page.)

Photo captions

Left photo:

*The bear cub "**Peik**" behind the controls of a tank at Little Norway.*

Photo: Campbell Norsgaard

Right photo:

Prince Harald pets the bear cub Peik at Camp Norway in 1943 together with his mother.

Photo: Campbell Norsgaard

According to a newspaper article, after all the attention the royal family gave **Peik**, the bear developed a habit of sleeping through much of the day.

King Harald's Sailing Instructor

Prince Harald also spent time with Norsgaard. The collection includes photographs of the future monarch testing Norsgaard's camera equipment.

An indigenous canoe, fitted with a sail, made Norsgaard Prince Harald's first sailing instructor.

That sailing lesson is said to have been a milestone, as the royal sailing prince would later represent Norway in the Olympic Games and also become a world champion in sailing.

Altogether, Norsgaard spent four years at Little Norway, and his collection documenting official Norway-in-exile eventually came to include almost **five photo albums, 2,000 individual photographs, and 19 films**.

When the war ended, Norsgaard was given the honor of filming **King Haakon VII's** return home.

In the ten-minute color film, now preserved in the **Norwegian American Historical Association's digital archive**, viewers can see **HMS Norfolk** sailing into the Oslo Fjord while King Haakon VII comes ashore at **Honnørbrygga**.

He is greeted as the nation's revered monarch and welcomed home by his own son, **Crown Prince Olav**.

The ceremony unfolds with great pomp and ceremony. The rain-soaked capital is packed with people, and soldiers must link arms to hold back the crowds as the monarch passes through the streets.

Oslo's mayor, and later Prime Minister **Einar Gerhardsen**, also delivers a speech.

"It's strange to think that he went from selling fur to becoming a conservationist."

— **Heather Turner, granddaughter of Campbell Norsgaard**

To the Land of the Midnight Sun

When Norsgaard returned to his homeland, he brought along his wife, **Grace May Holman**, who was a relatively well-known American artist at the time.

"He wanted to show Grandma his homeland, so they traveled from north to south," says granddaughter Turner, who has several reels of film from their trip around Norway.

One of Norsgaard's trademarks was taking selfies, and several photographs show him and his wife standing before snow-covered mountain peaks reflected in still water.

Sources disagree as to whether the couple ever intended to settle in Norway, but they ultimately returned to the United States after visiting.

In his suitcase, Norsgaard also carried the raw footage that would become **To the Land of the Midnight Sun**.

The documentary showcases rebuilt military bases and monuments erected after the war, while sweeping aerial shots filmed from aircraft glide over fjords and mountains.

The film also focuses on everyday Norwegian life, logging, sawmills, festive gatherings featuring traditional folk dancing.

For many Norwegian-Americans, who had not visited Norway for years, or had never seen it from the air, the film was unique.

A 1947 article in **Nordisk Tidende** reports that Norsgaard screened the film for **1,000 Norwegian-Americans** at **Bay Ridge High School** in Brooklyn, while hundreds of others had to be turned away.

The newspaper also praised the film for its beauty and photographic quality.

Nature's Hidden World

After the war, Norsgaard worked in the fur trade in **New York**, but after his wife died of **multiple sclerosis** when he was only **47 years old**, he eventually returned to photography...

(The article continues on the next page.)

Photo captions

Top photo:

Campbell Norsgaard was an active athlete in his younger years and eventually became an accomplished sailor.

Photo: Campbell Norsgaard

Bottom photo:

Prince Harald with Campbell Norsgaard, summer 1943.

Photo: Campbell Norsgaard

...with new lenses and a new focus.

"He remarried, to **Ernestine Jaediker**, who was an environmental advocate, and together they became involved in several conservation projects. Before long, Grandfather's rolls of film were filled with flowers, bees, and butterflies," says Turner.

Norsgaard's growing fascination with nature's small and vulnerable creatures culminated in the NBC documentary **Nature's Hidden World**, which was filmed primarily in his own backyard.

The documentary aired in **1966** to millions of American viewers, and Norsgaard went on to produce several similar films.

Together with his second wife, he also published **three books about nature**, and he played a key role in establishing the **Flat Rock Brook Nature Center**, a nature preserve and educational center in **Englewood, New Jersey**.

"It's strange to think that he went from selling fur to becoming a conservationist. In many ways, I feel he was two different people before and after my grandmother's death. But his interest in photography stayed with him throughout his life," says Turner.

Turner herself has many fond memories of the photography trips they took in the woods around the family's home in **Lakeville, Connecticut**.

"He was incredibly patient and dedicated. I also remember him catching insects and keeping them in the refrigerator. He regretted treating them that way, so after photographing them as well as he could, he released them again."

Before Norsgaard died in **1990**, he also filmed **Meryl Streep** and attended photo shoots with mountaineer **Sir Edmund Hillary**, before documenting the lives of **Alaska's last Norwegian gold miners**. *(correction by Heather Turner, Meryl Streep narrated a nature documentary with my grandfather's films)*

Anniversary Exhibition

During last year's anniversary exhibition at **St. Olaf College**, however, it was the work from **Little Norway** and the Second World War that drew the greatest attention from Norsgaard's remarkable career.

"I was struck by how natural his photographs are," says **Kristina Warner**, archivist at the **Norwegian American Historical Association** and curator of the exhibition.

"He captures everyday life in a very lifelike way. The people in the photographs hardly seem to notice he's there. He also liked to experiment with self-portraits and selfies. In that respect, he was ahead of his time."

According to Warner, the royal family also visited St. Olaf and viewed the Norsgaard collection.

"There were photographs of King Harald that he himself had never seen before. That was very exciting. We now have an ongoing dialogue with the Royal Palace about exchanging photographs," says Warner.