

Dakota Images

Lars Stavig was a Norwegian immigrant to the Dakota Territory. The letters he exchanged with his brother in Norway are a priceless resource for understanding the immigrant experience on the nineteenth century Great Plains.

Lars Stavig was born in Norway in 1844, the only child of Andreas and Marit Stavig, though he had ten half-siblings including his brother Knut. Inheriting land upon Andreas's death but obligated to support his kin financially, Lars struggled to make ends meet. In 1876, he and his wife, Maren Hustad, along with their three sons, immigrated to the United States and settled in Minnesota. In 1884, the Stavigs, now with five children, established a homestead in Dakota Territory near Sisseton.

Though the two men never saw each other again, from 1881 to 1937 Lars exchanged more than 150 letters with Knut, offering a window into the lives of these two remarkable men. They also document critical shifts in agriculture, the rise of aviation, World War I, and the Great Depression, along with similar developments in Norway. After Maren's death in 1908, Lars's letters grew more introspective as his brother became his chief confidant. Lars wrote to Knut for the final time in December 1932, seven months before he died at the age of eighty-eight.

The Stavig letters, brought to public knowledge by their descendants, are now archived at the Center of Western Studies at Augustana University and at the Romsdal Museum in Molde, Norway. In 2018, the original copies were selected for the UNESCO Memory of the World Registry. They form the basis of "The Stavig Letters: The Story of a Norwegian Immigrant," a play dramatizing the brothers' lives by Dr. Wayne S. Knutson, Professor Emeritus at the University of South Dakota and a family friend of Lars's grandson, Harold Torness. South Dakota Public Broadcasting produced an Emmy-winning television documentary, "The Stavig Letters," based on Knutson's play, and in 2013 the South Dakota Historical Society Press published *Dear Unforgettable Brother: The Stavig Letters from Norway & America, 1881-1937*, putting these invaluable documents into print for the first time. In 1916, Lars's son Andrew built the Stavig House in Sisseton, which remained in the family for eighty years and is now a popular museum showcasing immigrant history and Scandinavian craftsmanship.



Lars Stavig

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On the cover: In 1919, citizens of Deadwood, South Dakota, paraded this effigy of Kaiser Wilhelm II, hanged it in front of the First National Bank on Main Street, and later shot it to pieces with shotguns.

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