

# THE BALLAD OF OLEANA

THEODORE C. BLEGEN

AN interesting aspect of the Norwegian emigrant songs and ballads of the 19th century is the faithfulness with which they reflect special trends and episodes in the saga of emigration. They tell of the adventures of immigrants who sought fortunes in the gold mines of the West, the reactions of participants in Norway's labor movement of the 1850s, and the story of the paternalistic colony established by the world-renowned violinist, Ole Bull, in Pennsylvania.

The idealistic Ole Bull stunned his countrymen when in 1852 he bought, or thought he bought, 120,000 acres of land in Potter County, Pennsylvania; projected the colony of New Norway, centered about the town of Oleana; invited settlers; and busied himself with a dozen magnificent schemes.

There was a burst of songs and ballads in Norway about this marvelous development. Jubilant songs they were:

Come, hail the Music Master,  
Hurrah for Ole Bull!  
To cheats he's brought disaster,  
Their cup of woe is full.  
New Norway he is founding,  
A gift to every man,  
So come, your shouts resounding,  
With freedom in the van.

And they praised Ole Bull as a friend of the working man:

Good men of Norway, strong of arm,  
If fortune's barbs have torn you,

Behold a friend whose heart is warm,  
A man who will not scorn you.  
Better he than gold or fame!  
Ole Bull—yes, that's his name.  
He knows that here are grief and pain,  
Your burdens he would lighten.  
Freedom, bread—these you will gain,  
Your future he will brighten.  
Better he than gold or fame!  
You know him—Ole Bull's his name!

Alas, Oleana, as the colony was popularly called, failed. The violinist had fallen into the hands of land speculators. Cheats had brought disaster to him, not he to them. The colonists were disillusioned, and the grand scheme went to pieces.

Precisely at the climax, in 1853, the rollicking ballad of *Oleana* appeared—a satirical song sung for more than two generations on both sides of the Atlantic.

*Oleana* was written by Ditmar Meidell, the editor of the Norwegian comic journal *Krydseren*, and first appeared in that paper on March 5, 1853. (For a full account of the song, the original words, and a prose translation, see *Norwegian Emigrant Songs and Ballads* by Theodore C. Blegen and Martin B. Ruud, University of Minnesota Press, 1936, pages 187 to 198. Ed.)

It is a somewhat surprising fact that this ballad, one of the most interesting examples of its kind in the literature of American immigration, has not hitherto been translated into verse. I have tried here to turn the ballad into an English translation that can be sung. Though admittedly free,

## COMMON GROUND

it is, I think, faithful in spirit to the original, and it tries to recapture something of the exuberance with which Meidell delighted thousands of his countrymen.

### OLEANA

*I'm off to Oleana, I'm turning from my doorway,  
No chains for me, I'll say goodbye to slavery in Norway.*

*Ole—Ole—Ole—oh! Oleana!  
Ole—Ole—Ole—oh! Oleana!*

### II

*They give you land for nothing in jolly Oleana,  
And grain comes leaping from the ground in floods of golden manna.*

### III

*The grain it does the threshing, it pours into the sack, Sir,  
And so you take a quiet nap a-stretching on your back, Sir.*

### IV

*The crops they are gigantic, potatoes are immense, Sir,  
You make a quart of whiskey from each one without expense, Sir.*

### V

*And ale as strong and sweet as the best you've ever tasted,  
It's running in the foamy creek, where most of it is wasted.*

### VI

*The salmon they are playing, and leaping in the brook, Sir,  
They hop into your kettle, put the cover on, and cook, Sir.*

### VII

*And little roasted piggies, with manners quite demure, Sir,  
They ask you, "Will you have some ham?" And then you say, "Why, sure, Sir."*

### VIII

*The cows are most obliging, their milk they put in pails, Sir,  
They make your cheese and butter with a skill that never fails, Sir.*

### IX

*The bull he is the master, his calves he likes to boss, Sir,  
He beats them when they loaf about, he's never at a loss, Sir.*

# OLEANA

**Allegretto**

The musical score is written for a single melodic line and a bass line. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 2/4. The tempo is marked 'Allegretto'. The lyrics are in Norwegian and are written below the notes. The score consists of five systems of music.

I O - le - a - na der er det godt at  
væ - re, i Nor - ge vil jeg in - te Sla - ve -  
laen - ken bæ - re. O - le O - le -  
a - na, O - le O - le - a - na, O - le O - le  
O - le O - le O - le O - le - a - na.

From Norwegian Emigrant Songs and Ballads by Theodore C. Blegen and Martin B. Ruud, University of Minnesota Press, 1936. Reproduced by permission of the publishers.

## COMMON GROUND

### X

*The calves are very helpful, themselves they skin and kill, Sir,  
They turn into a tasty roast before you drink your fill, Sir.*

### XI

*The hens lay eggs colossal, so big and round and fine, Sir,  
The roosters act like eight-day clocks, they always tell the time, Sir.*

### XII

*And cakes come raining down, Sir, with chocolate frosting coated,  
They're nice and rich and sweet, good Lord, you eat them till you're bloated.*

### XIII

*And all night long the sun shines, it always keeps a-glowing,  
It gives you eyes just like a cat's to see where you are going.*

### XIV

*The moon is also beaming, it's always full, I vow, Sir,  
A bottle for a telescope, I'm looking at it now, Sir.*

### XV

*Two dollars for carousing they give each day, and more, Sir,  
For if you're good and lazy, they will even give you four, Sir.*

### XVI

*Support your wife and kids? Why the county pays for that, Sir,  
You'd slap officials down and out if they should leave you flat, Sir.*

### XVII

*And if you've any bastards, you're freed of their support, Sir,  
As you can guess since I am spinning verses for your sport, Sir.*

### XVIII

*You walk about in velvet, with silver buttons bright, Sir,  
You puff away at meerschaum pipes, your women pack them right, Sir.*

### XIX

*The dear old ladies struggle, and sweat for us, and labor,  
And if they're cross, they spank themselves, they do it as a favor.*

### XX

*And so we play the fiddle, and all of us are glad, Sir,  
We dance a merry polka, boys, and that is not so bad, Sir.*

## WHY WE CAME TO AMERICA: THE FINNS

### XXI

*I'm off to Oleana, to lead a life of pleasure,  
A beggar here, a count out there, with riches in full measure.*

### XXII

*I'm coming, Oleana, I've left my native doorway,  
I've made my choice, I've said goodbye to slavery in Norway.*

*Ole—Ole—Ole—oh! Oleana!  
Ole—Ole—Ole—oh! Oleana!*

Dean of the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota and author of *Norwegian Migration to America* and many other volumes, Theodore C. Blegen is now Director of the Historical Service Board in Washington, D.C., preparing discussion materials for G. I. Roundtables in the Army. This translation of *Oleana* is also being published by the Norwegian American Historical Association in its *Studies and Records*, volume 14.

## WHY WE CAME TO AMERICA: THE FINNS

JOHN I. KOLEHMAINEN

A SHORT yet meaningful entry was recorded by the secretary of the Cleveland *Rauhan Aatte* (Spirit of Peace) Temperance Society on the evening of March 24, 1907. It read: "The topic of our discourse was 'Why did we emigrate to America?' A lively discussion followed."

How, one irresistibly asks, was this pertinent and perennial question answered by the Finnish immigrants? Were they able to discover the forces compelling them to leave their archipelago-like fatherland of lakes and streams, forests of unyielding green and granite ridges? What, indeed, were the results of this earnest, if unsophisticated, inquiry into the motives of emigration?

The reply came a week later. It took the form of a painstakingly inscribed re-

port of a committee chosen to summarize the varied points of view expressed: "The reasons for emigration from Finland are fundamentally economic. The chief cause is the deplorable condition of the working classes, especially the hired help, who are forced to sell for a mere pittance their labor for a year at a time and who have to toil as long frequently as fifteen hours a day at hard work. So it is not surprising that there is a desire to seek one's fortune in a strange land.

"But there are also those who emigrate only to be 'with the others,' and some come to America to develop their political theories under the protection of a 'free country.'"

This summary embedded in musty manuscript undoubtedly fails to do justice