

CASE STUDY

HOSTFEST AND THE BUSINESS OF CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Each October, the small city of Minot, North Dakota hosts the largest Scandinavian cultural festival in North America. The event has grown from the most humble of beginnings to an event that annually attracts upwards of 60,000 visitors. This is quite an achievement given that North Dakota itself lacks high visibility attractions and is the least visited of all US states. However, impressive and successful Hostfest has been, its sustainability and future success is in doubt.

Introduction

Hostfest Up Close And Personal

North Dakota is the land of wide-open spaces and North Dakotans like most Americans are not accustomed to crowds. For a native North Dakotan visiting the Norsk Hostfest the scene is unbelievable. All 250,000 square feet of exhibition space at the North Dakota State Fair grounds are crawling with people. These people are attracted from all over the US, Canada, and Scandinavia itself. The cosmopolitan nature of Hostfest is in itself unusual for a North Dakota gathering. While predominantly settled by Scandinavians, especially Norwegians, and Germans from Russia, the state's difficult economy has meant that few new comers from anywhere have settled in the state in recent years. By and large the population of the state is growing older and is declining. The fact that North Dakota is aging seems to be in perfect harmony

with the crowds at Hostfest. At Hostfest one looks out on a sea of grey hair. Where are the young people? Where are the young families? If younger generations are not traveling to Hostfest, won't the festival itself decline and its many benefits be lost? What can be done?

The Norsk Hostfest

Now over 25 years old the Norsk Hostfest is one of the world's largest cultural festivals devoted to the promotion and celebration of Scandinavian culture. Certainly, Hostfest is the largest Scandinavian festival held in North America and now attracts up to 60,000 visitors annually.

Today Hostfest features big name entertainment, Scandinavian foods, dance and musical entertainment, costume exhibitions, historical reinactors, and ample opportunities

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for shopping. Its indoor malls feature such items as books and magazines, jewelry, furniture, antiques, apparel, pewter, weapons, sculptures, glassware, tableware and linens, nicknacks, and other collectables.

The festival is held each October over four full days with four evenings shows. Each of the four evening shows feature entertainers such as Loretta Lynn, Tony Bennett, Tim Conway, and other crowd pleasers. During the four days and four evenings of the festival throngs swamp the enclosed exhibition halls of the North Dakota State Fair gorging themselves on foods like rommegrout (a cream and flour pudding), potato klub (a dumpling), lefse (a potato and flour tortilla), and lutefisk (codfish soaked in lye that is dehydrated then rehydrated and cooked), and visiting craft booths, free entertainment stages, and more.

The managing editor of the Great Falls Tribune, after visiting Hostfest in 1987 wrote, "It is almost unbelievable, offering a variety of entertainment, ethnic and otherwise, wrapped up in a well-organized package. The celebration...is the envy of neighboring cities, but also a model that would be difficult to duplicate."

The common goal that the Hostfest organizers and managers share is to preserve the Scandinavian culture and develop good relations with the Norsk Countries and North America. Hostfest is a practical effort to preserve good old traditions and to preserve common heritage.

The festival's venue is Minot, North Dakota. The fact that Minot hosts the festival is somewhat unusual. Minot is very small; its population is just 35,000. Moreover, Minot is isolated and far from major population centers. The closest metropolitan areas are Winnipeg, Manitoba a city of 600,000, 300 miles to the northeast and Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota with a population of 600,000,

500 miles to the southeast. In fact, Minot, North Dakota is considered to be one of the most remote locations in the continental United States. Perhaps because of the travel commitment involved to reach Minot and its Hostfest, The American Bus Association recognized Hostfest as one of its "Top 100 Events".

Hostfesters' Mindset

Norsk Hostfest celebrates the strong immigration ties North Dakota and North America has had to all of Scandinavia—Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and Finland—in a manageable dose. When surveyed many North Dakotans believe that a trip to the Norsk Hostfest is better than a trip to Scandinavia since traveling overseas means high costs, extended stays, and discomfort. At Hostfest the traditions of Scandinavia are delivered in English by friendly North Dakotans all in a budget-pleasing package.

Hostfest is more than a Scandinavian replica, according to Norsk Hostfest Association's Chester Reiten, "Hostfest is modeled after the great pleasures and memories of a small town on a Saturday night - a time when family values were strong and camaraderie and respect flowed between friends and neighbors." People return year after year to Hostfest because they like the family values, hospitality and friendliness of the festival. Reiten added, "They meet new friends and remain friends" (North Dakota Horizons, 1999).

"Family values are the foundation upon which Hostfest is built", says Reiten. It is a gathering of generations, an opportunity for families to come together to celebrate their heritage. It is old-fashioned family fun, the kind of environment that fosters and strengthens family ties. It doesn't matter what age you are, Hostfest has something for everyone. Grandparents bring their children and

grandchildren, and families hold reunions at Hostfest.

North Dakota Tourism

Many Americans have a very poor grasp of North Dakota's geography and attractions. When asked about North Dakota typical responses are "Oh, that's where the Black Hills and Mount Rushmore are located" or nothing at all comes to mind. Given these reactions it is surprising that North Dakota's tourism-generated dollars in the year 2000 were reported to be \$1.12 billion, while for South Dakota, the home of Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills, tourism dollars were reported to be \$1.07 billion (Minot Daily News, 2000). Actually tourism is North Dakota's third largest industry and Minot's Hostfest is one of the state's prime attractions especially for travelers from other US states, Canada, and Scandinavia, especially Norway and Sweden.

The direct economic impact of Hostfest on the city of Minot is conservatively estimated at \$4.3 million annually (North Dakota Horizons, 1999). This is particularly noteworthy since Hostfest does not get a single cent of city sales tax money or other government aid.

Genesis And History of The Hostfest

In 1978, the first Hostfest made an inauspicious debut, on October 27th and 28th in Minot's Municipal Auditorium. The celebration was named the First Annual Norsk Hostefest Norwegian-American Fall Festival. As compared to recent Hostfests, the first Hostfest was rather small—the entire festival event at that time could be easily accommodated in just one of today's six Hostfest halls—and was a celebration exclusively of Norwegian heritage.

Honorary chairman of the 1978 event was Minot Mayor Chester Reiten. Reiten proclaimed

the festival was to celebrate, "the end of a bountiful harvest, joyful fellowship and thanksgiving." About 2,500 people attended, and they were offered a variety of Scandinavian foods, folk dances, music and heritage displays. By every measure the first Hostfest was considered a resounding success.

However, the enduring purpose and the spirit of the first Hostfest was decided only three weeks earlier when a Norwegian parliament member and United Nations delegate Odd Vattekar of Oslo came to Minot. Vattekar's purpose was wholly unofficial; he had come to visit his North Dakota relatives. Nonetheless, the acclaim and attention showered on Vattekar reminded Minot people of their strong roots to Norway. What was to be just a harvest festival became a celebration of cultural identity (2004).

In hindsight, Minot and North Dakota had the right stuff to power Hostfest from a town celebration to something larger. Of all the US states, North Dakota is the one with the highest proportion of inhabitants of Norwegian origin—about 30 percent. And with time, the heritage of all the Nordic countries has been incorporated.

Hostfest: Growth and Change

Not only has the number of tourists and features increased through the years, but also there has been a slight change in the festival's name. Earlier, the festival was known as "Hostefest." The organizers later discovered that "Hoste" is Norwegian for "cough" which implied that "Hostefest" was the "Coughing Festival." With this revelation, "Hoste" became "Host."

In its second year, the Hostfest organizers began booking entertainers and today Hostfest is known for the notable and famous performers and entertainers that have graced its stages. In 1979, a year after the first Hostfest took place, a number of popular Norwegian performers were

engaged including baritone soloist Naralf Garborg, pianist Kaare Omunh and hardanger violin player Anund Roheim. Also, the number of visitors increased to 3,500 as compared to 2,500 the year before.

The International Connection

Hostfest has been visited by people from far and wide. Nonetheless, it maintains a special link to Norway. In 1981, about 200 people from Norway attended, including dignitaries from Skien who came to celebrate its "sister city" ties with the Minot community. In 1982, Norway's premier violinist Egil Gundersen wrote a composition dedicated to the Hostfest, titled "Greetings from Skien to the Hostfest in Minot, 1982." Princess Astrid of Norway visited Hostfest in 1983.

The Hostfest and the relations with Norway spurred the creation of Minot's own Scandinavian Heritage Center built on one of the city's main street. The center includes a spacious tourist information building and a park-like area that borrows some inspiration from the open-air Norsk Folke Museum in Oslo. On the park grounds are found a miniature Danish windmill, a Norwegian peasant's hut, a *stabbur* (Norwegian granary and storehouse), a full-scale copy of a Norwegian stave church, and a Finnish sauna. Unlike Oslo's Norsk Folke Museum, Minot's Scandinavian Heritage Center features sculptures of prominent Viking-Norwegians and Norwegian-Americans, a manmade waterfall, a giant orange Swedish *dalla* horse and other evocative symbols of Scandinavian culture. It is intended that the Norsk architecture styles and themes of the heritage center give visiting tourists an introduction to Minot's Scandinavian background.

At the entrance of the Scandinavian Heritage Center and at the North Dakota State Fairgrounds where Hostfest is now conducted the flags

of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and Finland, together with United States and Canada are displayed. This gesture symbolizes the unity and good relations among the countries.

The Heritage Trade

Although Scandinavians make up a small part of the world population, they have played a considerable role in migration on a world scale. Today few people leave the now prosperous Scandinavian countries. However, a century ago poverty and lack of opportunity pushed a large percentage Scandinavians to migrate to the United States and Canada. Between 1820 and 1920, 730,000 Norwegians and 1,000,000 Swedes immigrated to the United States. Today, for example, the number of United States citizens of Norwegian descent is about the same as the number of inhabitants currently living in Norway itself—about 4,000,000.

Hostfest is an outlet for people of Scandinavian origin in North America who have memories of Scandinavia and Scandinavian culture as told to them by their parents and grandparents. For these people, the reality of modern Scandinavia is of limited concern. Thus, for North Americans whose grandparents were immigrants, Hostfest keeps alive vivid associations of the old home country as told in family stories and practiced in family traditions.

Hostfest Today

So what started out to be a simple fall harvest celebration in 1978 has grown to become a multiethnic, multicultural, and multinational family event. According to Pam Alme Davy, Executive Director of Norsk Hostfest, the most recent Norsk Hostfest was one of the most interesting events in years. The reason behind this, according to Davy, "is the modern blend of crossover artists on the country and pop

charts that performed" (Personal Interview, 2002). Not only could you enjoy easy listening music, traditional Scandinavian music but also the live performances of the music and dances of cognate American cultures including Country and Western singers, Caribbean drummers, Native American flute players and Native American hoop dancers. Festivalgoers enjoyed a global market where Nordic craftsmen and chefs displayed and sold their crafts. In addition, Vikings in full battle dress, Pippi Longstocking, and a seven-foot tall troll happily mingled among the delighted crowds.

Although Hostfest's core purpose is the celebration of Scandinavian heritage, it has bloomed into a celebration of many other cultures and events. At its best Hostfest encourages modern cultural exchanges between North Americans, Scandinavians, and others. From this standpoint other valuable avenues of cooperation, business, and investment may develop.

Role Models: The Hall of Fame

Hostfest has spurred a certain level of awareness and examination of the contributions made by Scandinavian immigrants to the United States. The most visible manifestation is The Scandinavian American Hall of Fame Award. Begun in 1984, this award was designed to honor Scandinavian-Americans who have distinguished themselves in their respective fields of expertise and service. The hall of fame's roster is filled with outstanding personalities and dignitaries. Some of the people who have been inducted include former US Vice-President and Minnesotan Walter Mondale, Olympic ski captain and former Minot resident Casper Oimoen, Apollo astronaut Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin, and travel and hotel entrepreneur Curt Carlson.

Managerial Issues

Since Hostfest is such a large-scale undertaking attracting tens of thousands visitors over just four days and depending on the services of thousands of unpaid volunteers, the managerial complexity of the operation is mind-boggling. By all accounts, Hostfest runs in a smooth and efficient manner. What is the secret behind its orderly functioning and success?

The strategies applied to make Hostfest an attractive tourist destination are also a tradition on their own. Hostfest operates with a practiced format that has organically evolved over time. This evolution means that from one year to the next few apparent changes are made. The same volunteers and the same community organizations hold long institutional memories in general and very detailed recipes of how a particular component—their component of Hostfest—works. For community organizations, Hostfest provides a short intensive fund raising sprint for such services as coat check and food provision.

According to Chester Reiten, "The Hostfest couldn't survive without the volunteers." He added, "The people begin working in Minot churches and organizations far in advance of Hostfest, baking pies and rolling lefse and getting ready in hundreds of ways, even preparing their homes to open them to guests." About 7,000 Minot area residents volunteer their time during the festival (North Dakota Horizons, 1999).

Similarly, a core of vendors and entertainers of all sorts returns year after year. For example, favorite acts like Country and Western singer Charlie Pride, Myron Floren (Lawrence Welk's longtime right-hand man and accordionist) and the comedy teams of Williams and Ree (known as the Indian and the white guy) and Tina and Lena (two daft Scandinavian-American grandmothers) are engaged year after year. To the tried and true new acts, new vendors, and new ventures are added.

Continuity is very much apparent in Hostfest's leadership as well. Norsk Hostfest Assosiation's Chester Reiten has been involved since 1978, when the first Hostfest made its debut.

Today, Hostfest operates as a community nonprofit organization under the direction of a voluntary board of directors and an executive team (i.e., an executive director and three managers). Quite literally the board, the executive team, and a host of volunteers work year round to produce the next Hostfest.

Concerning funding, corporate sponsors play a large role in the festival's financial stability (North Dakota Horizons, 1999). According to Davy (2002), Hostfest has partnerships with about 125 businesses. Moreover, ticket sales and vendor's fees add significant revenues that allow the show to go on year after year.

The Hostfest Experience

The Hostfest experience begins at the automobile parking lots and temporary recreational vehicle parks on the outskirts of the North Dakota State Fairgrounds. From these outlying lots yellow school busses deliver the Hostfesters to the front door of the fair pavilion. Inside the pavilion ticket booths and coat check are available. (After all, this is an October event in North Dakota and the weather can be frightfully cold.) Daily tickets are available for admission to all the connected exhibition buildings and free stages; separate tickets provide admission to the evening shows. Once inside the visitors navigate six interconnected exhibition halls housing a wide variety of food stalls, events, sales booths, and activities provided by North American and Scandinavian entertainers and exhibitors.

The following is an example of just one year's Hostfest entertainment offerings. Main performers included Trisha Yearwood, Kenny

Rogers, Anne Murray, O.J. Hanssen, Neil Sedaka, the Statler Brothers, Myron Floren, Bjoro Halland, Charley Pride, and Williams & Ree. Other musical entertainment included the Berlevag Male Choir, Chmielewski Funtime Band, CHS Cooperatives Accordion Band, Daniel Patterson, Hanne Krogh, Scandinavian Accordion Club of New York, Skalmusik, and the Swedish Culture Band.

The following are examples of other Hostfest entertainment options. These include the Daily Cash Giveaway, the Danish Print Auction, Hostfest Indoor Mall, Miss Hostfest Contest, food booths, the Nordic Kitchen (staffed by Scandinavian master chefs), nightly dances, Sons of Norway activities, the Young People Showcase, the Heart of Hostfest musical entertainment, and a variety of artists, crafts people, and historic reinactors.

Food, Food, Glorious Food

Food, an important component of any culture, plays a dominant role at Hostfest. During the Hostfest, the Dining Hall of the Nordic Chefs features fine cuisine from all five Scandinavian countries. Each Nordic kitchen is under the direction of a master chef and menus include unusual course entrees such as Arctic reindeer and Icelandic codfish. "The Nordic Kitchens provide menus and choices that can only be found in some of America's finest restaurants," says Davy. "Where else would you find so many master chefs, all from different Scandinavian countries and all under one roof, preparing their countries' finest dishes?" Apart from the haute cuisine of the Nordic Chefs, more traditional food choices are widely available. These include lutefisk (lye treated codfish) and Swedish meatball dinners provided by a local community organization and numerous food booth offering everything Scandinavian from fattigmann (fried dough), Swedish rice pudding, potato klub (dumpling), Norwegian fish soup, fishcakes, rommergrot (sweet flour

pudding), lefse (a flat bread), Danish fjord shrimp sandwiches, liver pate sandwiches, and pickled beets, to frikadeller (Danish meatballs) with marinated cucumber salad.

The popularity and variety of traditional foods is another remnant of the immigrant experience. People in Scandinavia are wealthy and traditional peasant foods are the foods of the past. In today's Scandinavia such foods have little commercial market or appeal.

Concluding Remarks

It is widely acclaimed that Hostfest contributes greatly to the economy of North Dakota and the region. The celebration also provides an insight into the cultures of various lands, generates visitors, promotes government level contacts, and has the potential to generate business contacts as well.

While lacking many high profile tourist attractions, tourism is a big money spinner for the North Dakota economy. North Dakota tourism earnings exceed those of South Dakota and tourism has become North Dakota's third largest industry. Certainly Hostfest has played a role in these developments. Certainly at the local level, businesses of various kinds such as hotels, restaurants and shops thrive during Hostfest. However, has North Dakota and the organizers of Hostfest considered the full potential of Hostfest. How might Hostfest's draw and impact be sustained and magnified?

Discussion Agenda

1. Hostfest does not have a large following among the younger generations. Is this market necessary to pursue? If it is, how might Hostfest develop this market?
2. How can the Hostfest event be used to promote the development agenda of the State of North Dakota?

3. How can Hostfest be used to promote a cross-cultural, cosmopolitan image of the Minot community?
4. Discuss appropriate promotional strategies for attracting tourists from North America and Scandinavia to visit Minot and North Dakota.
5. Is there any potential for collaboration of universities/colleges in the Hostfest event? Will the universities/colleges be a recipient or provider of benefits?
6. How might Hostfest be used to generate meaningful exports from North Dakota and foreign direct investment for the state?
7. How might other communities use the Hostfest model to promote tourism and development?

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