

# Consummate Integration: Solveig Tweet Zempel '69

By Carolyn Nitz '69 PHOTOGRAPHED BY BILL KELLEY

A BOOK-LINED OFFICE IN OLD MAIN is a fitting place to find Professor of Norwegian Solveig Zempel. Granddaughter of early St. Olaf Norwegian professor O.E. Rølvaag (the great Norwegian-American author of *Giants in the Earth*), Zempel's ties to the college are historic, personal and professional.

Throughout her life, Zempel has lived her heritage and pursued her profession in a uniquely intertwined fashion. A respected academic, Zempel's career has most recently been recognized by the Norwegian government, which this year named her an Officer of the Royal Norwegian Order of Merit. The official statement from the Consulate General in Minneapolis notes, "Through her engagement, she has taken an interest in contemporary Norway, nurtured Norway-U.S. relations and taught new generations of students to appreciate their Norwegian heritage."

This engagement began early. Zempel grew up in the northwestern Minnesota town of Roseau, near the Red River Valley and *Giants in the Earth* country, a place of humbling intensity and ever-changing light. Her longtime friend and colleague, Professor of Norwegian Margaret Hayford O'Leary says, "Having grown up in the flat lands, Solveig loves the prairie. When the rest of us were bored by the landscape, she was moved by its beauty."

When it was time to consider college, St. Olaf was the obvious choice. As a girl, Zempel and her siblings, Torild and Ole, made frequent trips to Northfield to visit their grandmother, Jennie Berdahl Rølvaag, and the St. Olaf campus was always part of the adventure. Likewise, selecting a major presented no dilemma. "I always wanted to study Norwegian," says Zempel, who graduated in 1969 with an undergraduate career that included terms at the Oslo International Summer School and the University of Oslo. In 1971 she received her master's degree in Scandinavian languages and literature with a minor in history from the University of Minnesota, and she received her doctorate from the same institution in 1980.

Zempel has been a member of the St. Olaf Norwegian faculty since 1976 and teaches a broad range of classes including beginning, intermediate and advanced Norwegian, Norwegian literature, the art and science of translation, Norwegian women writers, Norwegian folklore, and the plays of Henrik Ibsen, a course that was also taught by Ole Rølvaag. She has translated a number of Rølvaag's stories — including a translation of *The Third Life of Per Smevik* that she published with her mother — bringing to her work not only her expertise as a Norwegian translator, but also her personal understanding of Rølvaag as a writer and as a man.

Zempel's personal legacy at St. Olaf rivals her professional status. In addition to her grandparents' connection to the college (Ole Rølvaag was a 1905

graduate of St. Olaf), she is the daughter of alumni (Torliff Tweet '34 and Ella Valborg Tweet '32), sister of alumni (Torild Tweet Homstad '71 and Ole Tweet '68) and mother of alumni (Liv '94, Synneva '97 and Torfinn '01). She met her husband, Elden Zempel '67 at St. Olaf, and her uncle, former Minnesota Governor Karl Rølvaag '41 and his son Paul Rølvaag '69, are alumni.

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With her rich family heritage, Zempel has a unique understanding of St. Olaf's dedication to the ideals established 134 years ago by the college's founders.

"St. Olaf was founded by Norwegian immigrants to educate immigrants and the children of immigrants," she explains. "A lot of the early classes were taught in Norwegian and the curriculum included Norwegian history and culture. The idea was to help students maintain their heritage while becoming American citizens."

The importance of heritage and the immigrant experience was something Ole Rølvaag could relate to. A century ago, Rølvaag drew on his own experience when writing his novels, describing feelings of utter helplessness, of being lost in a vast alien land and an alien culture, feelings that continue to resonate with immigrants today.

Just as she has taught countless St. Olaf students to appreciate historical and contemporary Norwegian culture, Zempel is committed to her grandfather's ideals of helping today's immigrant students maintain their own unique heritage.

"We're serving a new immigrant population that is much more diverse," says Zempel, "and the St. Olaf legacy is helping a new generation assimilate into American life." 🦁

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**Solveig Zempel lives her heritage and pursues her profession in a uniquely intertwined fashion. It is this consummate integration of her life and work that makes her a deserving Officer of the Royal Order of Merit.**

