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A Biographical Sketch of S. D. Rodholm

By Renee Showalter-Hanson

Miriam Showalter, S. D. Rodholm's youngest daughter, once wrote that "in a visual memory to most of his friends, S. D. Rodholm stands elegantly clad in what his wife laughingly called his grasshopper suit: black cutaway morning coat with grey striped trousers, red tie, pince-nez spectacles fastened to his coat, his hair a halo of silver curls." Søren Peter Damsgaard Rodholm was born in Morke [Mørke], Denmark in February 1877. He attended a private school, in spite of his parent's poverty, studied the classics, and was deeply influenced by the Grundtvigian movement. He remembered fondly the religious training he received there that enabled him to pass the entrance exams to attend the University of Copenhagen. Because there was no money to attend, he traveled to America at age fifteen and worked on a farm. He returned to Denmark in 1896 and "read" [studied] law with an attorney, but longed to return to the United States and did so in 1897. Within a year of his return, he enrolled at Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa as its first seminary student. He met Marie Kjølhede in a Latin class there, and the two were married in Newell, Iowa in 1901.

S. D., as he was known, began his ministry in a Fredsville church near Cedar Falls, Iowa and the first of his eleven children was born there. In 1906, the family moved to Copenhagen, Denmark, for a year so he could study theology, then returned to Boston, Massachusetts. The Rodholms came to serve parishes in Fredsville near Cedar Falls, Iowa; Askov, Minnesota; at the folk high school in Tyler, Minnesota; Luther Memorial Church in Des Moines, Iowa; as a chaplain at Camp Dodge in Des Moines during the early days of World War I; and as a commissioned officer in the United States Army. In 1910, S. D. was invited to become a professor at Grand View College and served as professor, president of the college, and dean of the seminary over a thirty-year period. Rodholm believed strongly in the mission of the college, as defined by its Grundtvigian heritage. In 1922, he was elected president of the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Throughout his life, Rodholm would engage in scholarly discussions about theology at church conventions and in the Danish publication *Dannevirke*. He would often describe himself "as a young radical who became an old radical." He loved festivity, friends, song and

good conversation. He also took great pleasure in translating Danish hymns and could often be heard by family members humming as he worked out difficult meters or rhyme. His interest in writing and translations grew as he neared retirement.

S. D. Rodholm died of a heart attack on April 11, 1951, three weeks after the death of his oldest son, Ansgar. His legacy includes his many writings, translations, poems, paintings, and the enduring influence he had on so many students, friends, and family. He is a beloved figure in the Danish Lutheran community and beyond.