



2015

“We believe that God speaks Danish.” Assimilation vs Identity in Sanpete County, Utah

Claus Elholm Andersen

Elizabeth Peterson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge>



Part of the [European History Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Regional Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Andersen, Claus Elholm and Peterson, Elizabeth (2015) ““We believe that God speaks Danish.” Assimilation vs Identity in Sanpete County, Utah,” *The Bridge*: Vol. 38 : No. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol38/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Bridge by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

⊕

“We believe that God speaks Danish.” Assimilation vs Identity in Sanpete County, Utah¹

by Claus Elholm Andersen and Elizabeth Peterson

Most accounts hold that Danes in America assimilated rapidly and effectively into mainstream culture ... but was that always the case? This article focuses on a small community in Utah that was home to a large proportion of Danes and other Scandinavians. A close examination of this community reveals that the assimilation process was not always as straightforward a process as we often hear.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) (commonly referred to as the Mormons) was responsible not only for creating some of the first large-scale settlements of English speakers in the American West, but also for bringing to the West tens of thousands of immigrants from Scandinavia, with the largest portion coming from Denmark. These demographic phenomena have left a permanent fingerprint on the physical, social, ethnic, cultural and even linguistic background of Utah and the West—yet, curiously, this influence remains relatively unacknowledged in both the larger Scandinavian American community and American history.

The Mormon Church, which was founded in upstate New York in 1830, had settled and resettled its adherents throughout the Midwest, being constantly on the move due to persecution, largely caused by the Church’s foundations, which included its own *Book of Mormon*, the practice of polygamy, and a host of other complicating factors.² After the murder of the Mormon Church’s founding leader, Joseph Smith, in 1844, the Church prepared to move west into unclaimed terrain, to set up a self-contained nation-state that they referred to as “Zion” or “Deseret.” They arrived in the Great Salt Lake Valley in July 1847. Once there, the Church desperately needed to establish a population stronghold which it had not been able to achieve elsewhere.

At the same time, Denmark was experiencing a period of extreme social and political unrest, which provided additional motivation for disenfranchised Danes to leave Denmark. Changes to the Danish constitution eased religious practices, which made it legal for non-Lutheran churches to proselytize there. Denmark became the first

country outside of the United States, after England, where Mormon missionaries began recruiting members. In fact, the first translation of the *Book of Mormon* was into Danish, completed in 1851 by Peter Olsen Hansen, the third Dane to join the LDS church.

Recruitment from other Scandinavian countries was not quite as fruitful as in Denmark, but the numbers are still noteworthy: between 1851 and 1926, 25,850 newly-converted Scandinavians migrated to Utah (54% Danes, 33% Swedes, and 13% Norwegians).³ The majority of the settlers in Utah, it should be noted, were American and British.

For a brief period, then, until about 1860, it was in Utah, a new and uncertain territory, that the largest number of Danes and other Scandinavians congregated. In fact, the first mass migration of Danes began in 1852 as part of the Mormon gathering to Zion. In the following decades, Danes followed suit with other Scandinavians and settled mostly in the Midwest, the Great Lakes region, and California. By 1870, Wisconsin had the highest number of Danes, and in 1890, Iowa had the highest number.⁴

Immigrants to Utah during the nineteenth century could be said to have even higher expectations of acculturation than elsewhere in the United States – which were already quite high. In Utah, the Mormon Church “demanded” assimilation;⁵ it was seen as not only necessary for the survival of the immigrants, but also for the survival of the Mormon Church and the Utah Territory. Acculturation was not a problem for the Danes; it has been noted that, compared to other immigrant groups, Danes have been among the most adept assimilators to American life and to the use of English.⁶ As was true for Danish immigrants to the United States, in general the Danes in Utah appear to have quickly adapted to the Mormon and American lifestyles, as well as to the English language.

In some cases, however, the assimilation process was not as straightforward or as uniform as such accounts attest, which our research confirms. In particular, in settings such as Sanpete County, Utah, where Scandinavian and especially Danish settlers constituted the majority in many towns, it is clear that a sense of Danish(ness) persisted in some social circles well past the immigrant generation.

In studies of history, literature, sociology, and other fields, there is a current interest in bringing the points of view and experiences of politically and socially disenfranchised groups to the forefront. This description certainly fits the majority of the Danish immigrants to

Utah, whom historian Albert Antrei has described as members of the “deprived and abused peasantry.”⁷ These are people who contributed enormously to the physical and social structuring of this part of the United States, but they remain a group we know little about, despite their numbers and influence. As is often true of disenfranchised groups, their history is not to be found in the “official” accounts kept by the dominant society.

For this reason, we have approached Sanpete County at the grass roots level—entreating local people to share their stories, written and physical artifacts, and personal histories—thus enabling us to try to piece together what the life of a Scandinavian immigrant was like in the area, and which elements of their cultural and linguistic past remained with them and were shared with subsequent generations. The intent is not to counter the existing accounts of the language and cultural shift processes in Utah or elsewhere, but rather to offer a complementary account, one that incorporates the points of view of individual immigrants and their families, and thus offers a bottom-up, rather than a top-down perspective. Given the amount of time that has elapsed since the immigrant generation, not to mention that acts of Danish(ness) were carried out and sustained to a large extent in private realms, certain elements remain elusive. For example, not all local residents we have approached are able or willing to share information about their family history, or details have simply been lost with time. Other families, however, have gone to great effort to preserve their family artifacts, histories, and even cultural and linguistic features.

Sanpete County, Utah

Sanpete County, with a current population of 30,000, lies in the geographical center of Utah. In an effort to establish new communities, Brigham Young, the Mormon Church president responsible for leading the Mormons to Utah, sent a group of settlers to Sanpete County in 1849. Thus, the community had already been established as an English-speaking Mormon settlement by the time the first Scandinavians started arriving there in about 1853. By about 1870, however, 80 percent of the population of Sanpete County was of Scandinavian descent;⁸ the town of Ephraim, which today hosts the

county's annual Scandinavian Festival, was 94 percent Scandinavian during this period.

While the area surrounding Salt Lake City made up Utah's population base, and therefore had the highest number of Scandinavian settlers— census records show 4,327 in total in 1890—the county with the next highest population of Scandinavians was Sanpete, with 2,963 Scandinavian-born immigrants in 1890, comprising 22.54 percent of the county's population.⁹ In other words, this means that by 1890, out of a total of about 13,000 Sanpete County citizens, every fifth person had been born in Scandinavia.¹⁰

This early language mix in Sanpete County and the rest of Utah offers a fascinating example not only of contact between English and Scandinavian varieties, but also of contact between the Scandinavian varieties themselves. More than 150 years later, one can only surmise what kind of leveling or accommodation may have occurred between, say, dialects from northern Jutland (where the majority of the Danish immigrants came from) and Swedish and Norwegian, or even the other dialects of Danish.

There are numerous written records of the Scandinavian presence in Utah during this time. The most comprehensive single work to date on the Scandinavian migration was published in 1957 by historian William R. Mulder. Of the many details offered in his landmark book, here is a particularly revealing quotation:

One may hear the various changes in Danish from North Jutland to Copenhagen, and listen to Norwegian as spoken in Christiania, Trondhjem, and in the mixed-German Bergen, also to the worst Skåne or southern Swedish, and to the best as spoken in Göteborg and Stockholm, or hear the different varieties of Swedish from Uppsala to Ystad, and yet not hear anything quite like the mixture which is called Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish in Utah.¹¹

In a now-famous quotation, LDS Church President Brigham Young commanded immigrants to learn English, "the language of God, the language of the *Book of Mormon*, the language of these Latter Days."¹² This duty was second only to learning how to "live" in Utah. The learning of English by immigrants to Utah has been referred to as "the third enemy," after hostile American Indians and the rough desert terrain itself.¹³ Scandinavian immigrants enjoyed certain concessions,

including special native-language church services, hymnbooks, theater groups, and newspapers. These accommodations, which were meant to aid non-English mother-tongue immigrants in their acculturation to Utah, have been chronicled by previous scholars,¹⁴ who note that the three-generation shift pattern, common in other locations in the United States, seems to have prevailed among the Danes in Utah as well. These scholars also conclude that the language shift process in Utah likely took even less than three generations.¹⁵ The one exception in Utah, they note, could be “heavily Scandinavian-populated Sanpete County in Utah,” although “church and economic factors” would have meant that even in Sanpete County, “the Danes there were never really isolated” enough to create a Danish enclave.¹⁶

Our research in Sanpete County, however, indicates that the assimilation process was not quite so straightforward or generalizable. With our goal of investigating the reality and day-to-day experiences of common, everyday, non-socially dominant Danish immigrants—especially women—several features come to light which support the notion that Danish(ness) survived in at least some form into later generations. We have made a concerted effort in our work to tell the story of the women in the community, who, in fact, made up the majority of the Scandinavian influx to Utah. This factor distinguished Utah and Sanpete County Danes from Danish settlements in other regions of the United States, where there was a dearth of immigrant women, and therefore of Scandinavian children in ethnically homogenous households. Especially among Scandinavian Mormons (as opposed to English converts to Mormonism), the women outnumbered the men: 46.5 percent of the converts were male, and 53.4 percent were female. Further, after conversion, it was a nearly foregone conclusion that migration to the United States, with Utah as the destination, was to follow, in an effort known as the gathering of the saints to Zion.¹⁷

The set of demographics detailed here, along with social and geographical isolation, led to a set of circumstances that allowed Scandinavian settlers—and in particular the Danes, who made up the majority of the Scandinavian population in Utah—an early and probably rare opportunity (or, one might argue, a perceived necessity) to practice in-group marriage, speak Danish as a home language, and continue to enjoy other Danish customs such as beer brewing and coffee drinking, which, while they were not outright banned in the nineteenth-century Mormon Church, were actively discouraged

(though many early Mormons of all ethnicities disregarded these guidelines).

In terms of geographical isolation, it is noteworthy that Sanpete County lies about 100 miles south of Salt Lake City, Utah's capital, and the headquarters of the Mormon Church. This meant that the residents of Sanpete County were physically removed from the presence of the Mormon Church leaders. In fact, there is documentation that shows a necessarily resigned attitude among Mormon Church leaders, including Brigham Young, about managing the day-to-day activities of the residents of Sanpete County, for example allowing the men who constructed the Mormon Temple in Manti to drink beer and coffee while they were working.¹⁸

In terms of social isolation, evidence shows that there was a *de facto* practice of segregation in many Sanpete County towns. In the town of Manti, for example, one of the areas was called "Danish Field," and local residents even today point out that this area, as opposed to the clearly higher socio-economic English-language parts of town, was populated by Scandinavian immigrants. The role of segregation is clearly evidenced in this extract from a letter written in 1856 by a Danish settler to the area:

We have to learn the English language now, which is a bit difficult for the elders [...] We can just as readily learn Indian, because we come into conversation with them more often than we have opportunity to talk with Americans.¹⁹

The quotation here, if indeed an accurate depiction, clearly points toward the socially disadvantaged groups coming into contact with one another.

Linguistic and Cultural Artifacts in Sanpete County

At this point, we get to the crux of our own contribution, which is to offer a point of view about the Danish and other Scandinavian settlers to this area that has not previously been presented. In doing so, we argue that the process of language and cultural shift in Sanpete County was not a straightforward process, and that there remained networks and communities of practice that had at their center a goal of retaining Danish(ness) in some form.

Four main arguments support our view. First, there was a sense of a distinct, Danish identity for members of the community, and this

distinctiveness helped them achieve and maintain, for a certain length of time, a cultural and linguistic island.

Several local folk stories from Sanpete County are presented in written form in a volume published in the 1970s by Grace Johnson. The first example has to do with language, and is called, revealingly, “The Battle of the Languages.” In this story, Johnson tells of Mormon Church President Brigham Young’s fury when Danes from Sanpete County sent him a letter stating that they would continue to hold church services in Danish, “clearly the superior language,” spoken by the “majority” of the population in the area.²⁰

In fact, there are several accounts indicating that Mormon Church authorities were not pleased that Scandinavians continued to hold church meetings in their heritage language longer than was deemed necessary. Furthermore, there was discord as to which of the Scandinavian languages would be spoken in church services.²¹ In the same volume of stories, Johnson tells that the Danes, who were entreated to hold their church meetings in English, mostly so that the other Scandinavians could understand, reported to Brigham Young, “We believe that God understands Danish.”

Another type of example dealing with the issue of Danish identity—still to be found even among the youth from the area—is exemplified by this statement from a third generation resident:

As my ancestors, both paternal and maternal, came from Denmark, I’m a full-blooded Dane as well as an American... I never remember Grandma Mickelson calling me Martha, it was always “Bitta Laura.”²²

An additional argument, related to the first, has to do with family structure in early Sanpete County. As mentioned previously, the settlements in Utah were set apart from other Scandinavian settlements in that entire families migrated together, and the women slightly outnumbered the men. This meant that it was possible to marry within the group, which, at least for the first few generations, seemed to be the custom, as confirmed by a fourth-generation resident of the area, who reports, “Mom’s parents were really mad at her for marrying [my father], because he wasn’t a Dane” (Speaker 1-48, age 64). Other residents discussed family gatherings where Danish was spoken, even up until about the World War II era.

Another woman, who remembered hearing and speaking Danish as a home language in the 1920s and '30s, recalled that the women in her family routinely gathered to do handicrafts and mending, and the language they spoke was Danish. The same woman, a fourth-generation resident, made the following observations: "My mother and her brother spoke Danish together" (i.e., third-generation residents) and "My great-grandmother never did learn to speak English. She didn't need to" (Speaker 1-28, age 84).

Going hand in hand with the opportunity to marry within the group and maintain a distinct identity are the persistence of cultural and social norms, of which we see clear evidence in Sanpete County. As noted earlier, the Danes in Sanpete County considered themselves exempt from the Mormon taboo against drinking coffee. In fact, another common folk story was that "When God said we shouldn't drink coffee, he didn't mean the Danes." Even today, local residents know what is meant by the term "flying coffee pots," which describes the hasty removal of coffee-making paraphernalia when a non-coffee drinker approaches a home.²³

In addition to considering coffee a birthright of the Danes, apparently taboo words and terms were also deemed too ingrained to be uttered in English. Words such as *skidt* (shit) and *forbandet* (damn it) were among the few Danish words (aside from terms for traditional foods) that the current-day residents of Sanpete County seemed to recognize as Danish – and, oddly, they did not actually know what they meant, only that they are "bad words." Another example of a taboo word is *skrook*, a noun which is used in the local dialect as a negative designation for a woman, something akin to "bitch" or "nag."²⁴ Two of the participants interviewed for this study discussed this term in particular, remarking on how surprised they were when they found out that *skrook* actually derives from Danish—that it is not, in fact, a vocabulary item in mainstream English vocabulary. A final example is the discourse or agreement marker *ja*, which is the way of saying "yes" in Sanpete County. This particular feature can safely be said to be part of the local dialect, even among younger generations.

The final supporting point takes the form of various culturally specific manifestations. As is typical for immigrant settings, the elements that survive in Sanpete County seem to be those that have to do with childhood and the home front, such as poems, stories, and songs, as well as food and household items. Several of the residents

who have participated in interviews so far are able to recite poems or sing songs, although they have only a limited understanding of the meaning of the words.

Final comments

During the initial settlement period in Utah, the expectation seems to have been that allowances for the heritage languages would merely aid in transition, with the goal of English becoming the common language of communication in all domains within a reasonable time period. It is unclear what this time period would have been, but probably this meant within the first U.S.-born generation. As noted by other scholars, the language and cultural shift process in Utah appears to have been within three or fewer generations. However, there is evidence that in certain communities, the process was complicated or prolonged due to factors having to do with geographical and social isolation, a strong cultural identity, in-group marriage, and the preservation of Danish and Danish cultural norms. With this project, which has taken us to Utah and Sanpete County for fieldwork spanning two summers, we aim to give voice to this group, and to demonstrate the non-hegemonic and non-generalizable elements of their contributions to both the history and modern-day life in the American West.

Notes

¹ The authors wish to thank Marc Pierce, University of Texas at Austin, for offering helpful comments on a draft version of this article. We especially wish to thank the residents of Sanpete County who have shared their stories and memories with us.

² Details of the circumstances in the Midwest are chronicled elsewhere, for example Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Westwater Press, 1964 and 1981); William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion: The Mormon Migration from Scandinavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957).

³ Lynn Henrichsen and George Bailey, "'No More Strangers and Foreigners': The Dual Focus of the LDS Church Language Program for Scandinavian Immigrants, 1850–1935." *Mormon Historical Studies*, 11, no. 2 (September 2010): 23-53.

⁴ George R. Nielsen, *The Danish Americans* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981).

⁵ Albert C. Antrei and Allen D. Roberts, *A History of Sanpete County* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Utah State Historical Society, 1999).

⁶ Karoline Kühl, "How Danish Americans speak an older, yet newer, Danish," *University Post*, June 3, 2014, <http://universitypost.dk/article/how-danish-americans-speak-older-yet-newer-danish>; Nielsen, 1981.

⁷ *The Other Forty-Niners: A Topical History of Sanpete County, Utah, 1849-1983*, ed. Albert C. Antrei and Ruth D. Scow (Salt Lake City, Utah: Western Epics, 1982).

⁸ Antrei and Roberts, *History of Sanpete County*.

⁹ David Bowie, "Early Trends in a Newly Developing Variety of English," *Dialectologia* 8 (2012): 27-47; Lynn Henrichsen, George Bailey, Timothy Wright, John Brumbaugh, Jacob Huckaby, and Ray Lebaron, "Building Community by Respecting Linguistic Diversity: Scandinavian Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, (December 10, 2009): 4-20.

¹⁰ Antrei and Scow, *Other Forty-Niners*, 76.

¹¹ Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*.

¹² *Ibid.*, 181; also cited in Henrichsen, et al., "Building Community."

¹³ Henrichsen, et al., "Building Community."

¹⁴ Lynn Henrichsen, George Bailey, and Jacob Huckaby, "English-Language Learning and Native-Language Maintenance Among Danish Immigrants to Utah, 1850-1930," in *Danish Culture, Past and Present: The Last Two Hundred Years*, ed. Birgit F. Larsen and Linda M. Chimenti (Decorah, Iowa: Anundsen Publishing, 2006), 62-91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

¹⁷ Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 108-9.

¹⁸ Kistie Simmons, "Belief and Behavior: Exploring the Loss of Ethnic Identity Among Nineteenth-Century Scandinavian Mormon Converts in Sanpete County, Utah" (master's thesis, Prescott College in Humanities, 2008), 76.

¹⁹ Cited in Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 346; apparently translated from the Danish by Mulder.

²⁰ Grace Johnson, *Brodders and Sisters*, 4th ed. (Manti, Utah: Messenger-Enterprise, Inc., 1973). While Johnson's work is best described as historical fiction, it is important to note that her accounts of Sanpete County sensibilities and events appear to be revered and upheld by local residents, as several of the people we interviewed made specific mention of her work. The story of the "Flying Coffee Pots" is reprinted in Antrei and Scow, *Other Forty-Niners*.

²¹ Antrei and Scow, *Other Forty-Niners*.

²² Personal history of Martha Laura Mickelson Miller, n.d.

²³ Johnson, *Brodders and Sisters*; also from speakers in our own fieldwork.

²⁴ In Danish, the word *skruk* means a brooding hen, or, in contemporary usage, a woman who is eager to have children, *Den Danske Ordbog*, s.v. "skruk," accessed September 18, 2014, <http://ordnet.dk/ddo/ordbog?query=skruk&search=S%C3%B8g>.