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Comment on the Translation of the Max Henius
book “Den Danskfødte Amerikaner”
(The Danish-Born American).

by
Jim Iversen

The idea for the Rebild National Park Society began with a meeting of Ivar Kirkegaard of Racine, Wisconsin and some of his friends in the year 1905, but it was Max Henius of Chicago who brought the idea to fruition. The first celebration in Denmark of the American 4th of July took place at a meeting of Danish Americans in the city of Aarhus in 1909, but the first event to take place in the Rebild Hills didn't occur until the year 1912, thus the year 2012 is the hundredth anniversary of that event as well as the beginning of the Rebild National Park Society. Henius' book came to be published (in June, 1912) primarily because of that event, the first Rebild celebration, which was to take place later that year.

The book was edited by Max Henius, and he wrote the introductory chapter, two later chapters, and was the compiler of the two appendices at the end of the book. The book is not about the Rebild Society per se, however, but consists of a compilation of chapters, written by seventeen different people, including Henius. The various chapters cover the locations in America where the Danish immigrants settled, how they managed in the cities and on the farms, the folk schools and the church colleges, the question of assimilation into American society, and rules and regulations for immigration and citizenship. In addition, the history of the various organizations such as the Danish Brotherhood & Sisterhood, the two Danish American Lutheran Synods, and many other organizations are covered in individual chapters. Thus the book represents an interesting “snapshot” of the Danish American community of 100 years ago. There are 15 people around the United States who have translated the book, and the translation of the book, 100 years later, provides people who read this translation with an interesting perspective of life in the Danish community at that time.

The last two parts of the book consist of two lists. The first is a directory of all the Danish American organizations in the country, which Henius and his compatriots could find in a few months. The second list is a bibliography of books written in the Danish language by and about Danish immigrants. The first list is most interesting because it tells us where the Danes settled in large enough numbers to establish organizations, and from the various chapters we can see what kinds of organizations these were (sectarian or secular, and for what purpose). The first list contains a total of 883 organizations. The list is not quite complete. A few organizations were missed, and the 75 Danish Baptist churches, which had been formed by 1912, were not included at all, nor were the few Methodist or Adventist churches. Adding the Baptist congregations to the list makes a total of 958 organizations, 594 more or less secular in nature, and 364 Lutheran and Baptist congregations.

The 883 organizations on the Henius list were located in 34 of the now 50 states. A few years ago, this writer attempted to build a current similar list of Danish American organizations. At that time (ten years ago, in 2002), the number of organizations amounted to a total of 269. This total does not include any churches except the two, which are strictly Danish today (one in Brooklyn, NY, and the other in Yorba Linda, CA), so that the number 269 should be compared with the 594 secular organizations which existed in 1912. Not only are there only about 45% as many Danish American organizations existing today as in 1912, but their locations have shifted westward. In 1912, the rank in population of Danish-born people per state was as follows: Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, California, Nebraska, and New York. California led, however, in the number of secular organizations with 77. The six states following California were Iowa (69), Nebraska (67), Michigan (53), Minnesota (46), New York (38) and Wisconsin (38). In the year 2002, the rank of the states in population (Danish descent) was California, Utah, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington, Iowa, and Illinois. The numbers of secular organizations in the top states in 2002 were California (80), Illinois (21), Iowa (17), Michigan (15), Washington (15), Nebraska (12) and Wisconsin (12). It is interesting to note that, while the number of secular organizations in all but one of these states is considerably smaller now than in 1912, the state of California actually had three

more in 2002 than 90 years previous, probably reflecting the fact that a large percentage of the most recent Danish immigrants have settled in California, and that many descendants of the early settlers have moved to California from the Midwestern states. In Nebraska, for example, not only are the organizations gone, but in many cases the "towns" in which they were located no longer exist or are extremely small. Of the 64 Nebraska communities listed in Henius' table, only about 50 of them are still on the map, and many that still exist are quite small, reflecting the fact that the number of farmers per unit area of farmland is much smaller today than 100 years ago.