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Young People's Schools and Højskoler in the United States*

by

J. Christian Bay

(Translated by Signe T. Nielsen Betsinger)

It can be said that an organized effort to preserve Danish language and culture has existed here in America since the beginning of the seventies. The immigrants considered it essential that they develop plans to strengthen and design general education for young adults. Among the immigrants who immediately joined the Church right from the beginning, there were few academics. However, because many knew about the højskole concept in Denmark, this concept became the foundation for their church-sheltered schools.

The first Danish school for adult youth opened November 1, 1878 in *Elk Horn, Iowa*. The location was well chosen. Here there was already a quite settled and spiritually awake Danish population, among which were men and women, who competently supported the spiritual side of the cause—both then and later—and who were also ready to make the necessary material sacrifices. The højskole in Elk Horn was founded by the Norwegian Pastor, *Olav Kirkeberg*, who in 1874 was sent from Denmark to serve as a minister here. Kirkeberg, who is still living, and in recent years has worked among his countrymen, is among the very first forces in the Danish Church. His unusual eloquent speech, serious disposition, devotion to the højskole cause, and strong will must have been engaged to a high degree when they started on bare ground in Elk Horn. At his side stood *Kristian Ostergaard*, who came from Askov in September of the same year, and who later has achieved recognition as a poet and spiritual interpreter of the way of life that the immigrants left behind in Denmark's culture and history.

*) Sources: *Danske i Amerika I*, Minneapolis 1908. The Schools' Programs. The Church communities' annual reports.

It was an enthusiastic and deeply moving time, these years in the seventies, when the school concept awakened. It has left a mark on its men and women. It has given them a great and ideal view of

folklife in school and Church. It called forth life values that still reflect their original glory. The children's school in the young congregations here and there took a sharp upturn, just as did the missionary work that was started in the states mostly around Lake Michigan and westward. In the meantime, already in 1880, Kirkeberg had to give up his work in Elk Horn where he was succeeded by Pastor *H. J. Pedersen*, a man with an extraordinary ability to generate creative activity. Pedersen was educated in Ryslinge and came here to this country in 1875. As no one else in our historical development, he has been able to use the resources and opportunities that were at hand—both poor and rich, in good times and in bad. Faithful to the Word, he was a prompt man of action. It is he that F. L. Grundtvig has declared to have accomplished the most of us all.

Østergaard and Pastor *P. Jensen* (who arrived in 1880) followed Pedersen to Elk Horn. But the time around 1880 was not just a period of optimism; it was also a period of unrest. H. J. Pedersen could work in peace in Elk Horn for only a couple years. Then he moved back to his original circle of friends in Michigan, where he founded Ashland Højskole in 1882.

A significantly important immigration area developed partly in towns along the lake, partly in the woods of the Michigan peninsula. There, some congregations were established, which for many years were faithful supporters of the Church and school cause. This was the natural location for a Danish højskole. Pastor H. J. Pedersen was the right man to draw together the forces needed to respond to this challenge. The school was built in that quiet little wooded area, in the middle of a congregation that had unusual strengths in its midst. *E.F. Madsen*, the later so well-known author of songs and stories about immigrant life, surrounded it with a garden which, still after many years and long after the closing of the school, remains as an oasis.

The desire for a højskole was temporarily satisfied. However, just as the mission was broadening, there were those who felt the need of a school for ministers. Until then, the ministers had been educated in Denmark, namely at Askov, where in choosing the Danish Mission in America, they prepared themselves for work here. One of these ministers, named *Nørgaard*, a student of Kr. Kold, had started a

højskole in the beautiful forested area in West Denmark, Wisconsin in 1884. When it became evident that this school, in contrast to the two schools already in existence, won little attraction, the Church, after drawn out negotiations about the matter, started a seminary there in 1887. It functioned until 1890, but in that short time educated 18 ministers. Most of them have done well. Of course, the school had the best teachers—over which the Church had authority—namely Pastor *Th. Helveg*, sent out by the Mission in 1881, and *P. S. Vig*, sent out as a pastor in 1885. Helveg was a significant personality, well equipped as a teacher and preacher. Vig, well grounded in history, was a scholar and researcher. His church-related histories and his biographical works are some of the most original contributions to the already not insignificant immigrant Danish-American literature.

The reason this school was closed is not to be discussed here. In the meantime, it reappeared in 1894 under more favorable auspices. Already in 1886, there was already another seminary in this country—*Trinitatis Seminarium* in Blair, Nebraska. This school was founded by some of the Danish ministers who had left the Norwegian Church and who had established a Danish Church community. This school, led by Pastors *A. M. Andersen* and *G. B. Christiansen*, later was expanded to include a teachers' college. With its academic approach, it has been an unquestionable success. Pastor *P.S. Vig* is the current principal. Through the eighties and nineties, the work of the two højskoler went well. The immigrant population increased—the one in Elk Horn overwhelmingly so. H. J. Pedersen's successor in Elk Horn was *Kr. Anker*, a man whose strong personality attracted many of the students. The school burned to the ground in 1887, but through donations, a new building that had room for 100 students was quickly established. In 1880, Anker took over the school as his personal home; in the following four years, 387 students visited.

In Ashland, H. J. Pedersen and his excellent fellow teachers had to struggle differently for spiritual and material results. There was *Kr. Østergaard*, who later became a minister and left the school, and there was *L. Henningsen*, a both Christian and artistic man, who, as Pedersen, was educated at Ryslinge. From the meager conditions in the beginning, Pedersen looked for new opportunities and found

them in Minnesota where a new colony was started in 1887 at *Tyler*. Here Pedersen took over in 1888. The rich prairie provided the rapidly growing population a good livelihood, and slowly, in the midst of rich opportunities, Danebod Højskole came into existence.

In the meantime, the wave of the Danish education efforts had glided westward. At almost the same time as the planning in Tyler (1887), the *Folkehøjskole in Nysted*, in Nebraska, surrounded by new Danish immigrants, was established by Pastor C. J. *Skovgaard*. Seldom has any højskole been started with fewer resources; however, just as in Tyler, the endeavor has won friends.

In Tyler, the højskole was started in a barn, in Nysted, it began in a store. It is possible that in the beginning there was some restlessness and uncertainty; however, the locations were well chosen in that each was surrounded by a large Danish population.

In the meantime, H.J. Pedersen's leadership at Ashland Højskole was placed in the hands of H.C. Strandkov. This man was born in Denmark, and had grown up in the Danish colony by Carlston, Minnesota. First through Pastor Kirkeberg, and later at Askov Højskole, where he was educated to be a minister, he developed a love for the højskole philosophy, and is perhaps the one among us who so far has most deeply understood its importance. He was in charge at Ashland from 1888 to 1891, and was succeeded by S. *Kjems*, who served as the minister for the local congregation and as the school's conscientious leader until his death in 1895.

The economic crisis, prevalent in America in the early 1890s, did not fail to affect both Church and school. They strove, they wrangled, they threatened, and they fought for one another. In Tyler, Danebod was completed and Pedersen sat there as a king or as a masterful and wise ruler who, in all his personal frugality, asked for much for the cause that was in his custody. In 1894, under bright circumstances, Danebod was taken over by *Ole J. Stevns* and his wife, Dorothea nee Rasmussen. Together, these young people maintained high standards in order to attract the interest and confidence of youth, but under the continuing Church decline, they gave up the fight and went to Denmark in 1899. There they have taken over Kvissel Højskole. The author, *Carl Hansen*, served under both Pedersen and Stevns when they were principals. Earlier, as a teacher at Danebod, he had been active in the founding of the Elk Horn

School. With his helpfulness toward the area's citizens during those first poverty-stricken years, with his work at the Højskole, and with his sketches and stories, he has contributed much to gather interest at Tyler as a focal point for the unfolding of a typical Danish-American life.

In 1894-95, A. Bobjerg tried to revive the activity in the capable colony in West Denmark, Wisconsin by conducting a højskole in the old seminary rooms; but it did not succeed. Church strife had to calm down before the citizens could gather peacefully enough so that the Danish-American school for youth could proceed quietly. At the same time, the Elk Horn school was sold to a younger church community in whose custody it is conducted as an ordinary teachers' college.

In 1894 the Church-related and folk-related conditions were such that the older Danish communities could take up the question of the re-establishment of a college for ministers. Interest focused on Des Moines, Iowa, and here Grand View College was founded. In the legal documents of the college, the word "university" appeared for the first time in a Danish-American context. However, because of the limited strengths of the founders, only the following two departments were established: (1) the seminary and (2) the ordinary school for youth. Many hoped that Pastor *Th. Helveg* and *F. L. Grundtvig* would align themselves with this institution. However, this did not happen. Pastor *N.P. Gravengaard* became the school's first dean. Pastor *A. Bobjerg* and cand., later Magister *P.P. Hornsyld*, worked with him. In 1896, Gravengaard was succeeded by Pastor *R. R. Vestergaard*, who, together with Bobjerg and Hornsyld, created the school's foundation and culture. Vestergaard was an authoritative and sharp thinker, a discerning and wise man, an unusually gifted preacher. Pastor Bobjerg, in his outspokenness, was a good teacher of the mother tongue. Later here and in Denmark, he made good contributions to our history. Through his personality, Magister Hornsyld brought together the best elements of Danish and American sense of culture and understanding of the institution's purpose. It is certain that probably he is the one of all the teachers for the youth who will be remembered longest.

In the period from 1895 until now, the schools in Blair and Des Moines have accepted the best of the Danish American youth.

Although, in recent years, when the højskole conditions improved in Tyler and Nysted, there, too, they accepted a large contingent and equipped them well to help them carry the burdens of the day, where the old friends from the religious and folk awakening had to lay down their arms. In Blair, we find K. Anker as principal in the mid-nineties working together with men such as C. X. *Hansen* and Pastors *Harald Jensen* and *H. O. Frimodt-Møller*. In the younger Church community, C. X. *Hansen* has carried out a task that is similar to P.P. *Hornsyld's*; both have happily united the Danish and American cultural scene in their teaching and have understood how to reach these students so they would be able to respond satisfactorily to the demands of both their fatherland and the land of their birth.

These youth, with strong changing assumptions, met in schools. Some of the students came from congregations, some from other circles, many with, and many also without, ordinary Danish preparation. However, the majority came with education from the American children's school. Sheltered by the Church since the Church communities' very beginning, the Danish children's schools have been nurtured just as a plant is nurtured. In Clinton, Tyler, Chicago, and several other places there have been Danish ordinary schools in session for long periods of time. It should be noted that the names *Marie Hoogaard*, *R. Martensen*, *Johanne Møller*, and *Solveig Thomsen* must be remembered with honor. In this connection, it should also be noted that the ministers who most often have held Danish children's schools in their districts and many older and younger people who have made good contributions in the congregations have not been recorded in history. In fairness, they must be recognized when questions arise about the youth who have sought schools for adults. Also, in this way, *Sivert* and *Kristine Sivertson* in Big Flats, Wisconsin deserve to be recognized. For almost a lifetime, they have conducted a Danish school for children in their area—just one example of that spirit that has guided the work for the Danish folk cause in America. They, who for many years have gathered memories about the destiny of this cause and about the women and men who faithfully devoted themselves to it, feel deeply moved by the certainty of both the righteousness of the

cause and the preservation of what is Danish as a cultural power over here.

In Blair, C.X. *Hansen* succeeded Kr. Anker, and in Des Moines, *Benedict Nordentoft* followed *Vestergaard*. Just as *Vestergaard*, he received his theological education in Denmark. However, after only a few years at work, he had to relinquish the position after a strong feeling developed in the Church community, which wanted to change the essential character of the school. In 1909, together with Magister *Hornsyld*, he stepped back, and the Church community called theologian Kandidat *E. Wagner* and cand. mag. *E. Appel*. They, together with Pastor *S. D. Rodholm*, who has received his education in the same school, have held positions together at Grand View College until the summer of 1912 when *Wagner* and *Appel* returned to Denmark, and the school's faculty again dissolved.

At the same time that *Nordentoft* left, *C. P. Hojbjerg*, an effective theology teacher, also left his position and took over *Nysted Højskole*. Both had a large circle of friends in the Church and both found rich arenas for their strengths elsewhere. Both are, each in his own way, capable men with great combined ability. At *Nysted Højskole*, *Hojbjerg* has brought forth an extremely promising development, and *Nordentoft*, jointly with *Hornsyld* and Pastor *J. M. Gregersen*, opened a young people's school in *Los Olivos, California* in 1910. This is a natural focal point for a Danish colony. It is reminiscent of *Danebod Højskole* in *Tyler*, and, without a doubt, has a bright future.

Yet another word about the two *Højskoler*, *Nysted* and *Danebod*. As we have heard, the former was taken over by Pastor *H. C. Strandkov*, who, in 1891, came to Nebraska from *Ashland Højskole* in Michigan. He moved the building to a larger lot. The work went slowly but steadily forward until in 1898 when this resolute principal, in deference to his wife's health, had to step back as a minister. He was succeeded by *Thorvald Knudsen*, a man who has taken the Danish movement a big step forward among the Danish-American youth. As the work gradually expanded, other good help arrived at the school, including the theology candidates, *A.Th. Dorf*, and *H. Chr. Rordam*, whose respective wives came to mean much to many of the students. However, this capable and unusual group of teachers was dissolved in 1903 when *Th. Knudsen* took over

Danebod. Then Dorf became the principal at Nysted, but gave up his work there already in 1906, although not before the school building had been expanded significantly. In 1909, it was taken over by C. P. *Højbjerg*, under whose leadership the building has been expanded and the endeavor there has received the resources it deserves.

Also the later development of Danebod Højskole shows a happy upturn. Already in 1890-1902, *when A. Bobjerg* served as the principal, the difficult times caused many obstacles to come in the way for even this man's sincere and conscientious work. However, when *Th. Knudsen* took over the school in 1903, it was as if everything cleared up: the building was expanded significantly—with room for approximately 100 students annually—and students arrived in such large numbers so that in the following year they could count on that they had a firm foundation for a historic future.

One would think that the countless interruptions in the schools' work and the frequent principal and teacher changes would have a hampering effect on the historic element in the school's progress. However, here it is to be remembered, that taken as a whole, even though the personnel and the teachers' strengths, even more than the principals' strengths, changed, the schools' spirit has not suffered from the shifts. And, this spirit has at the same been active in the congregations where a large number of resolute persons have always stood ready to bear their part of the schools' burdens and to support the school's good message. If we have schools, then we also have a group of højskole persons supporting the schools, and who, to no less degree than home in Denmark, understand the challenge, join hands, and stand fast. We won a clear vision of our people's challenge here in America when *F. L. Grundtvig* in a happy time discovered this land as *the land to which people would come from all corners of the earth with the best of their heritage and give it as a contribution to a new folk fellowship, based on work, upheld with continued use of the heritage from their fathers: the language and the typical spiritual life.*

Our schools, and the youth movement that supports them, are greatly challenged. Many significant efforts have already been made toward this challenge. Ministers, teachers, and laypersons, who, wanting to maintain their places as good supporters for general education, have unselfishly devoted themselves to the matter. Times

have changed, but none of their work has been in vain. And the one, who—just as Chr. Balling—will take a reflective trip through the Danish colonies in America, will find blessings everywhere.

Note: The translator has made every effort to keep the spirit of J. Christian Bay's writing style, hence names and titles have been presented as he wrote them; for the most part, the shifts in tense have been retained. The words "højskole and højskoler" have been left in Danish so that the reader will not interpret them as "high school and high schools" in the American sense.