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The Danish Folk Society

by

J. S. Faaborg

(Translated by Ralf Hoifeldt)

“We defend the treasure, we Danes have dear,
We will try by speech and song
To awaken each other at these meetings,
That will surely bear fruit some day.”

The “Danish Folk Society” was established in the spring of 1887. On April 18 of that year a public invitation was issued for the establishment of the society, and from April 18 till April 21 this year the society celebrated its 25th anniversary here in Clinton, Iowa. The celebration took place at the location where the idea got its start and where the plans were laid.

The man who conceived the idea and who in the first years of D.F.S.’s history was its heart and soul was the late Pastor F. L. Grundtvig, pastor in Clinton from 1883 till 1900.

In the official invitation, which I shall not repeat in its entirety, it said:

“Here in America there is already a large number of Danish associations with various purposes, but we believe from experience that there is a need for a society that can unite all of those who agree to preserve the Danish traditions here in America and work for or support a serious effort to absorb and increase the ancestral spiritual heritage and make it advantageous not only for ourselves and our old country of origin, but for the country to which we are now strongly attached.”—“It is our belief that the small Danish population possesses a spiritual inheritance, which is not without significance to the human race, and it is our hope that we Danes here in America will be able to contribute to this heritage and become a benefit to others.”—“It is our firm conviction that we will become the best American citizens if we continue being Danish.”—We will preserve our old language, but by this we will not forget, as fully as possible, to master the language through which we interact with other people.”

“We do not demand a creed of those who will join our society, but we can only wish for supporters who have a friendly disposition toward our ancestral church, which has characterized our people’s entire development.”

“These are some of the tasks we have considered for the society:

- 1) Gathering of Danes at a few locations in order to guarantee the conditions for a strong Danish spiritual life.
- 2) Establishment and support of Danish schools, including an expanded folk high school.
- 3) Arrange for popular meetings.
- 4) Establishment of Danish libraries.
- 5) Establish homes for young people in the cities.”

With this program in mind the Danish Folk Society was thus established in 1887. Its laws and regulations were adopted and for its first board of directors the following were elected: Pastor F. L. Grundtvig, president, M. Holst, Cedar Falls, vice president and M. Lauritsen, Des Moines, treasurer. But already at the election in October 1888 J. S. Faaborg was elected to the board as treasurer, a position he is still holding today.

Both vocally and in writing Pastor Grundtvig made a great effort for this, a cause he really worked for, and the society won considerable support and recognition. Already by July 1887 there were members in 29 locations in this country, and the society had 370 members.

Danish Folk Society’s Branch in Denmark.

Through correspondence with leading men, especially within the church, Pastor Grundtvig sought to awaken the interest for this cause in Denmark, and it succeeded well enough so that already in Nov. 1887 a branch of D. F. S. was started in Denmark, headed by director L. Schroder at Askov, and by the spring of 1888 the membership had reached 200. In 1889 the branch decided to publish its own magazine “Cross and Star” (Kors og Stjerne) as a link between the branch at home and D. F. S. over here. Pastor Jacob Holm became its first editor. This magazine has continued till this day, and is now the publication for both D. F. S. and the Danish Evangelical-Lutheran Mission in America.

During the year 1889 Pastor Grundtvig traveled to Denmark, and at lectures throughout Jutland and the islands he promoted the society's and his countrymen's cause over here so well that the membership in the Danish branch increased to 4,000.

The Attitude toward The Danish Evangelical-Lutheran Church Over Here.

At the time D. F. S. was being established the Danish-Lutheran Church in America was going in two different directions, namely "the Ecclesiastical, or Grundtvigian" and the "Inner Mission" direction. In the beginning the society appeared to be getting support from both sides, but it was not long before difficulties began to appear. The beginning of these was when Pastor S holm, at that time pastor in Waupaca, Wis., at the meeting in Racine, Wis., made the complaint that there had been a meeting held at which a decision had been made to establish a district of D. F. S. in Waupaca without asking for his advice about it.

This annual meeting had been so engaged by this matter that two days had been spent attempting to try to do away with D. F. S., but without success. But the result of it was that most of the people with tendencies toward the Inner Mission withdrew from the society. Any hope of uniting both church directions into one common folk society thus failed. D. F. S. hoped, however, to be allowed to do its work in peace and quiet. This hope was also not to be fulfilled. On May 25, 1888 and the following days D. F. S. held a meeting in Clinton, to which the districts sent delegates. Several provisions were passed concerning compliance with the demands made by the Danish Church to the society. At this meeting the colony matter was also debated, and the first agricultural committee was elected - but more about this later. By the end of 1888 there were 22 districts with 560 members.

When Grundtvig was in Denmark in 1889 the opponents of D. F. S. used the opportunity for bitter attacks both on him and the society, which was responded to by friends of the society both here and in Denmark. We could now see that nothing short of the dissolution of the society would satisfy the opponents. Finally came the last major attack. This was at the church's annual meeting in Waupaca, Wis., 1892.

D. F. S.'s opponents, especially the pastors of the Inner Mission, maintained that it was especially D. F. S. that was obstructing the way for good cooperation within the church synod, and Dean I. A. Heiberg, member of the Ecclesiastical Support Committee in Denmark, who was visiting over here that summer and was elected chairman of the annual meeting, supported the attack, probably with best intentions since his special task here was to settle the dispute within the church society. It soon turned out, however - as many had already been aware - that the heart of the strife was much deeper, and the split within the synod happened a little over a year later. Pastor Grundtvig with the warm feeling for the cause of both the church as well as for D. F. S., decided, however to sacrifice his beloved D. F. S. on the altar of peace, and gave his promise to the annual meeting that he would propose the dissolution of D. F. S. - a promise that he honorably kept. The leaders of the society at the time were F. L. Grundtvig, president; L. Henningsen, vice president and J. S. Faaborg, treasurer. The membership was 1036, the highest number attained.

Grundtvig's proposal to dissolve was voted down with 245 votes for and 542 votes against the proposal. At the next election of board members Grundtvig refused to run for reelection, and with the dissolution proposal his work for the D. F. S. had ended. He felt obligated to keep his promise. It was a sad day when his own district in Clinton voted down his dissolution proposal - I shall never forget that day.

Although D. F. S. thus survived the storm, both this and other attempts at dissolution could only add severe wounds to the society. The membership declined, and many of its objectives had to wait for better times. A small group remained faithful to the society and has continued the work till this day, and it seems to be recuperating and can look forward to a brighter future.

When now asked what D. F. S. has accomplished I will first mention:

- 1) The formation of settlements. As mentioned earlier, already in 1888 a settlement committee had been established in 1888 for the purpose of finding suitable locations for new communities. Several locations were investigated without any results. Finally in 1894 the settlement committee and Pastor Grundtvig and Pastor Henningsen

went to the southern part of Texas to look into the conditions there and they agreed to recommend to the society to accept an offer on a stretch of land near El Campo, and there they started D. F. S.'s first settlement "Danevang." J. C. Evers, Clinton, who was the president of the agricultural committee, agreed to head up the acquisition of the land, and it is mainly this man's faithful and energetic work and unselfishness that we can thank for the great acquisition. The first year over 8,000 acres were sold.

This settlement has had a strong growth, and most of the settlers are doing well financially. In 1895 D. F. S. built a meeting house to serve as church and school, and the residents donated an additional 40 acres of land. The commission the society earned on the land was donated as a contribution to the pastor's salary. A few years ago a beautiful church was built in the settlement.

In 1905 D. F. S. initiated its second settlement undertaking, this time in Pine County, Minn. The sale of the land was passed by the board of directors to K. H. Duus and L. C. Pedersen, both from Tyler, Minn., and the success of the undertaking is mainly due to these two men's interest in the matter. Danish Folk Society donated 35 cents from each acre sold to the church- and schoolwork in the settlement. This enabled the settlers to build a parsonage, establish a cemetery and pay salary for a pastor. H. C. Strandkov became the first pastor in the settlement.

The town of Partridge, which was purchased by D. F. S., and whose name has been changed to "Askov," has already become an actual little town with stores, hotel, blacksmith, sawmill and a school with two teachers, and this summer the society has donated \$2,000 to the settlers to help pay for the construction of a new church, to which the residents themselves have pledged \$3,000.

2) The society has not yet reached the goal of building their own school, but \$100 was donated to the "Danebod" folk school, and Nysted folk school was given an interest-free loan in the amount of \$300, and 25 copies of "The Songbook" were donated to each of the schools.

3) The districts are holding folk meetings and lectures and singing, usually twice a month. The society has had excellent lecturers coming over from Denmark, as an example, Pastor Fr. Bruun from Levring came during the summer of 1911.

4) In 1889 the society agreed to establish a shared library to which Pastor Grundtvig donated 500 volumes. Valuable gifts to the collection were also received from Denmark, so that by 1892 it had reached 4,000 volumes. It turned out, however, that the borrowing of books among such scattered circles was both expensive and difficult. The larger districts started their own libraries, and in 1896 Grundtvig suggested donating the book collection, especially the scientific and historical part of it, to the synod's college in Des Moines. This proposal was accepted, and the college in Des Moines received 3,000 volumes and the bookcases, while the rest of it, especially collections of stories, novels and the like were divided among the circles that had their own libraries.

Publication of the Songbook.

The first edition of "Songbook for the Danish People in America" (Sangbog for det danske folk i Amerika), assembled by F. L. Grundtvig, was taken over by D. F. S., and the 2nd edition, consisting of 4,000 copies, was published in 1891, and finally a couple of years ago came the 3rd and considerably expanded edition. F. L. Grundtvig collected 1,100 songs for the songbook, which he donated to D. F. S. At the time of the publication of the 3rd edition of the songbook the society agreed to issue a complete edition with music for organ and piano. This collection is now finished at the printing-house in Denmark and is expected to arrive here next month. It is said to be the most significant work of its kind accomplished in Denmark.

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We have described some of the most significant projects done by D. F. S. for the Danish people in this country. The settlements, the songbook and the collection of the music make up a trio, which will preserve the name of this small society in Danish-American history.

Pastor L. Henningsen, the man who for the last eight years has been president of D. F. S., deserves a big thank you from the Danes over here for a faithful job done on behalf of the society, for endurance under stress and resistance, and he and his co-workers on

the board have attained the goal, originally set by F. L. Grundtvig. Although the work at times was slow, blessings have accompanied the effort so the society can hope for an even brighter future.

“Come and join the procession, each woman and man,
Who dare to fight for Danishness.
Who with loyalty to our people’s hospitable land,
Still love their land of origin.”