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The Danish Brotherhood in America

by

L. L. Ries.

(Translated by Ralf & Inga Hoifeldt)

The Danish Brotherhood originally branched off from the "Danish Brothers in Arms," which was established in Omaha in 1881. Already a few years before, some local groups of "Brothers in Arms" had been established here and there, by men who had participated in the wars of 1848 and 1864. What especially tied the members together was the desire for social get-togethers and to refresh memories from the war years and to give mutual assistance in case of illness.

In 1881 a merger of several of these societies was initiated, and at the first annual meeting in 1882 (also in Omaha) there were five local lodges in the association under the collective name of "The Danish Brothers in Arms."

Meanwhile it had become clear to several of the leading men that the society would need to seek members on a broader basis and also to create a stronger tie between the individual lodges.

At the annual meeting (or convention as it is commonly called) in 1882 it was agreed, after much discussion, to change the name to "The Danish Brotherhood in America" and that any honest and respectable man born to Danish parents could be accepted in the society. The purpose of the society was to support each other in case of illness and furthermore assist each other to the best of their ability with guidance. All members were obligated to participate in the life insurance plan offered by the society. A new board of directors was elected with William Wind as president, J. P. Paulsen as secretary, and Niels Nielsen as treasurer. The society started its operation under the new name, and with the 5 lodges in Omaha, Neenah, Davenport, Racine and Moline, with a total of 169 members.

The effort to strengthen and expand the society did not go very smoothly, however, since there was considerable resistance both from the old board of directors and from other sides, a resistance which was gradually overcome.

At the society's fourth convention in Chicago in 1885 it was agreed that new members should have the option to choose whether they wanted the life insurance, and that withdrawal from the common insurance should be permitted. This decision turned out to have such unfortunate consequences that mandatory insurance was reinstated again at the convention in 1887, but with the provision that the amount of insurance could be either \$500 or \$1,000, while the earlier amount had been \$1,000 for all members.

In 1889 the society had 22 lodges with 949 members. During the next 2 years 9 new lodges were established; but since others were dissolved and some of the older lodges lost membership, the overall membership did not increase significantly.

From the beginning of the nineties, however, there was a brisk increase. The resistance decreased and the increased immigration from Denmark gave the society wind in its sails and brought many new members. Already in 1893 there were 51 lodges with 2,526 members, and by the time of the convention in Des Moines (1898) these numbers more than doubled since there now were 104 lodges with 5,432 members. The teachers at the Danish High School (Grand View College) in Des Moines were present at the opening of the convention and spoke about unity among the Danes in this country, and the members of the National Board and delegates visited the school. On this occasion a good and strong feeling of solidarity was evident. At this convention a minimum amount of \$250 of insurance was established, and it was also agreed that there would be a convention every four years.

The next meeting was held in Racine in 1902, and the society now had 145 lodges with 8,347 members; four years later there were 237 lodges with 15,465 members. The Tabular Overview contains a register of the individual lodges.

The latest convention was held in Fresno in October 1910. The first proposal brought up for debate was the establishment of a society newsletter to be published once a month, which would enable the members to follow the progress and development of the society. It was rejected, however. Another important question brought up concerned dividing the society into districts; this was also rejected, and so was a third proposal to abolish the conventions

and instead have referendum-balloting. The last proposal did not even make it through committee. There is no doubt, however, that these proposals will be taken up again either in the same or an amended form; but the majority of the membership must by now realize that the amount of almost \$30,000, which was the cost of this last convention, can be spent for something better.

A small step forward at this convention was the agreement on the motion that five lodges can send out a common circular to all lodges regarding the referendum-balloting of election of members of the National Board of Directors, and on proposals to amendments to the laws, and that in 1912 there will be referendum-balloting regarding the division into districts.

In its present shape The Danish Brotherhood is an impressive organization of ca. 20,000 men of Danish birth or descent. There are lodges in many of the states, mostly the central states, where the movement had its origin.

The age limit for active members is between 18 and 45 years. Active members are obligated to participate in the life insurance plan, which is common to all lodges. Men above the age of 45 years can join as passive members when they fulfill the requirements set by the individual lodges. The society as such does not have any financial obligations to passive members.

The individual lodges have their own laws regarding assistance during illness, dues, etc., but these laws must be approved by the society. Each lodge has the right to administer its own funds, the society does not have any claim on the buildings, furniture, libraries or other property of the individual lodges.

The individual lodges are subordinate to the National office, which is the combination of legally elected delegates from all of the lodges in the society. It is headed by a national board of directors, consisting of 8 men who are elected at the national conventions. Five of the national board members form an executive committee, which takes care of the interests of the society and between the conventions is the highest authority within the society.

While the individual lodges have the authority over their own property they must all contribute to the treasury of the society according to certain established regulations. This income, which thus

accrues in the society, is divided among various funds. The general fund is a result of the national board assessing an annual amount per member, which is not to exceed \$1.10 per active member. In addition to this the general fund receives \$1.00 for each new member joining the society. All administrative expenses, funeral assistance to members at the death of their wives as well as per diem and mileage expenses of the individual lodges' representatives at the conventions are paid from the general fund. From this fund the individual lodges can receive extra help for members who are ill and members, who have accidentally become unable to support themselves. The balance in the treasury was \$15,624.45 on January 1, 1912.

The insurance fund is maintained by collecting death-contributions from all active members. The amounts of these contributions are a function of the age of the individual when he joins and the amount of insurance coverage. Each lodge is required to keep available a death-contribution for each member ready to be paid to the national treasurer. This amount is kept separate from the general treasury of the lodge. Life insurance is paid from the insurance fund, and 25% of its earnings is kept in a Guaranteed Fund, which cannot be touched before 12 death-contributions have been charged in a single year. The balance in the assurance fund on January 1, 1912 was \$68.96, in the Guaranteed Fund on the same date was \$157,662.94.

From its establishment and until January 1, 1912 the Danish Brotherhood has paid out the following amounts:

Life Insurance	\$1,006,891.10
Sickness Assistance.....	463,842.45
Extra Assistance	90,251.89
At Death of Members' Wives	<u>39,800.00</u>
TOTAL:	\$1,600,785.44

The society has shown its interest in Danish-American schools and children's homes by giving its support to them. At present work is being done by lodges in the eastern states to build an old people's home. A new project, which would consist of the construction of a Denmark-Building for the World's Fair in San Francisco in 1915, has

through the national secretary been recommended for support by the members.

It is my hope that this short description of the establishment and development of the Danish Brotherhood will make countrymen near and far understand the purpose of the society, partly by what it has accomplished and that they may get interested enough that they will join it. There is room in it for all good Danish men; the more members it gets, the more good can be done by the Danish Brotherhood in America.