



2012

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### Recommended Citation

Appel, Erik (2012) "Dansk Sammensluttet Ungdom—D. S. U. The Association of Danish Youth," *The Bridge*: Vol. 35 : No. 1 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol35/iss1/19>

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# Dansk Sammensluttet Ungdom—D. S. U. The Association of Danish Youth

by

Erik Appel

(Translated by Anne-Marie Douglas)

## Introduction

This year, it has been exactly 10 years since the Association of Danish Youth clubs was initiated within the Danish Church. There most likely were Danish youth groups before 1902, but they had little or no connection with each other. They were missing the spur that unity can give and the strength to be found in solidarity.

O. C. Olsen, realtor and insurance agent in Omaha, realized this, and at his urging the youth club "*Vaegteren*" (*The Watchman*) issued an invitation to a joint meeting for October 18-20, 1902 in Omaha. At this meeting O. C. Olsen presented his thoughts about cooperation among the groups, and won unanimous approval from the participants. On December 28 of that same year, seven young men representing 5 youth groups, i.e. groups in Cordova, Marquette, Nysted, and Omaha in Nebraska plus Kimballton in Iowa, met in Omaha.

This meeting led to the formation of *The United Danish Youth Clubs of the Midwest*, which at the annual meeting, September 27-29, 1907 in Looking Glass, Nebraska took the name *Association of Danish Youth District number 1*.

When the seven young men had finished their work, they said to each other, "There are not many of us, but it could be a good beginning." The truth of that statement is now obvious. Those five clubs had a total membership of about 200. Today there are 49 clubs with about 2,230 members, and they have their own publication. After the beginning in Omaha, that example was followed over the entire country, the union has expanded and new clubs have been formed.

The list is as follows:

DSU District I was organized in Omaha, Nebr. 28 December, 1902.

DSU District II was organized in Hartford, Conn. 16 July, 1904.

DSU District III was organized in Ringsted, Iowa, 12 August, 1906.

DSU District IV was organized in Racine, Wisc., 12 August, 1907.

DSU District V was organized in Newell, Iowa, August, 1910.

In addition, we should note that there will be a gathering in Tacoma, Wash., the 23rd of June, this year, with the objective of forming a new district in the western states. It should be noted that District V was not formed from a new area, but was formed from parts of the existing Districts I and III.

### **Life in the Youth Clubs**

As a rule, the youth gather twice a month in the village hall, the schoolhouse or the church basement. Rural youth often meet at a farmer's home during the summer. The meetings offer lectures, readings, discussions, gymnastics, and singing games. Whenever musical talents are available, they often participate. All meetings include singing Danish and Danish-American songs. Almost all the clubs present an annual amateur comedy on stage.

The clubs are usually led by the youth themselves with gracious and willing support from the local pastor. The following notices appeared in the newsletter "*Ungdom*" (*Youth*). "The Prairie Rose" from Nysted, Nebraska, writes:

"The youth clubs continue to grow in membership... During the winter we held our meetings in the gymnasium every other Sunday evening, with varied entertainment such as lectures, readings, discussions, singing, and music, alternately by the members, the pastor, and the teachers from the folk school.

The youth meetings should be the gathering place for every youth club where we get together for healthy and good entertainment, and where we help each other to promote good causes, such as the church, the folk school, the newsletter "Youth," the library, gymnastics, singing, and the like, and I imagine that if we learn to take an interest in these things, there is no longer a need to write or talk about dancing and drinking all the time, they will die out on their own.

"*Skovrosen*" (*the wood rose*) from Askov, Minnesota, writes:

"We have heard lectures by Bobjerg, Marie Hougaard, Hakon Jørgensen, Th. Knudsen, and Jørgensen. We have decided we will

take turns entertaining at the meetings when no guests are present. We do gymnastics as well, though it has been rather difficult to keep going during the summer; but I'm sure it will pick up this winter.

We sing whenever we get together which happens quite often, though rarely more than seven times a week. We don't have nearly enough girls for the games but they still work out all right when a few of the guys tie a handkerchief around their sleeve."

## Gymnastics

Gymnastics provide a crucial component to keep the youth active. *Ashland* folk school in Michigan became the center for Ling gymnastics. As early as the school year 1889-90 it was introduced here by *Niels Brus*, and that same winter he taught the first course to four students. One of these was *J. L. Jensen* who later would play an active role in the further development of gymnastics. In 1893 he visited Denmark and attended a course there. After having worked as a gymnastics teacher in Chicago, Jensen went to Des Moines to help build the West wing of *Grand View College*, and he stayed in that city. One year later with his help, the college built its first gymnasium. *J. L. Jensen* became the teacher and taught there until 1906 except for one year, 1904-05 when he taught a course for prospective gym teachers.

These were the first years of glory for the youth movement, and soon the wish for a new and more up-to-date gymnasium became evident among the youth at *Grand View College*. This desire reached a peak in the year 1904-05. The middle building was constructed and inaugurated during the fall of 1904. During the big gymnastics festival in the spring of 1905, \$400 was pledged for a new gymnasium and a plan for making this vision a reality was developed.

The project had many warm supporters among the older people; among these, prominence must be given to *Pastor P. Kjølhede* and *Pastor J. Jørgensen*. To this day they are strong advocates for gymnastics, and without their help gymnastics would not have advanced as far as it has to date.

When *Nysted* folk school, Nebr., and *Danebod* folk school, Minn., were established during the 80s, Ling gymnastics became a fixture of

the curriculum there, as it had been at Ashland, and as it has always been at the folk schools in Denmark. And it can truthfully be said that its continued existence thereby was assured. It was adopted by the services of the Danish church society as a means to develop a healthy, Danish, Christian youth. Both Nysted and Danebod folk schools sponsored several short courses for prospective gymnastics instructors, and work continues to make these teachers available to the youth clubs who, through the influence of the folk schools, have learned the importance of good physical training.

The vision of a new gymnasium at Grand View College was still alive, though for several years it was put on the backburner. Many of the older generation considered it a folly to devote more resources to the cause than had already been done. And the annual meetings of the Church Synod were often disheartening. Finally at the annual meeting in 1909 in Fredsville, Iowa, the youth got permission to "build a new gymnasium and convey it as a gift to the Society." And now plans took off. By the fall of 1910, the building was finished, thanks to J. L. Jensen. The cost was \$4,500, and the equipment was bought from manufacturer Larsen, Copenhagen, at a cost of app. \$600, most of it donated by the Danish Foreign Ministry. That such a wonderful and well-equipped gymnasium could be built already in 1910 was essentially due to the efforts of teacher *Fr. Hasseriis*, who has been associated with the college since the fall of 1908.

With the hiring of teacher Hasseriis, the college had initiated a gymnastics course, the so-called "*extended course*," and this continued in the new space in the very best conditions. The course consisted of the following subjects during the 3-1/2 months training: actual exercises 8 hours, command practice 3 hours, physiology 4 hours, theory 3 hours, children's exercises 2 hours, folk dancing 1 hour, and physics 2 hours (all per week). At the end of the course a test is given and the successful candidates are issued diplomas.

Subsequently in the fall, a refresher course of 2-3 weeks is offered, and participation continues to grow year by year.

It continues to be difficult to communicate with Americans about this matter; they are drawn more towards the rougher sports – and towards acrobatics. Finally, an invitation was issued by the State

Teacher's College in Cedar Falls, Iowa to come and present our exercises there. On February 17, 1912 a proud group of 35 students went to advocate for what we held dear. Never before had a group of young people such as these left the Danish college in Des Moines: backs straight, bodies well developed, purposeful – and it is no wonder that the audience of almost 2,000 went wild with enthusiasm. Miss *A. M. Lind*, the gym teacher at the college, opened the performance with her girls' team, and then came the guys' team, and finally folk dancing.

This mission soon got results. About a month later, Grand View College was asked to provide a male teacher to teach gymnastics at the town's high school. Unfortunately, the college was not able to fulfill the request. However, our hope is that eventually this can happen when more resources become available.

Similarly, the school authorities in Des Moines are looking to begin the Danish-oriented Ling gymnastics, and the time will soon come when we shall see our Danish exercises performed in American schools, just as we now see children in nursery schools in Des Moines perform the folk dances "the sailor's dance" , "Per the Fiddler," and others.

Thus it is our hope that the Danish folk school, with its own unique subjects and teaching methods will gain acceptance in the American educational system, and it appears that gymnastics may provide the means as the most direct way of introducing Danish culture into American culture.

### **"Ungdom" ("Youth")**

The Association publishes its own newsletter "*Ungdom*." It is a good newsletter both in contents and appearance, and whoever would like to know more about Danish-American youth need look no further but should subscribe to "*Ungdom*." The young people contribute many articles.

Pastor *Valdemar S. Jensen* has told me the following about the newsletter, which I retell in condensed form:

After the Association was established in 1902, there were talks about publishing their own newsletter. In the beginning we had our own section in "*Dagen*" (*The Day*) which was published in

Minneapolis, and when that ceased publication, in "*Dannevirke*," under the direction of M. Holst. However, this did not really work out well; sometimes our section was included, and not at other times. So at the annual meeting in Omaha in 1906 it was decided to publish a newsletter for youth. O. C. Olsen and I were chosen to get it off the ground.

But it was slow going. We could not identify an editor. Finally O. C. Olsen wrote me, saying, "Let us do it ourselves," and I answered, "Yes, but on the condition that you become the editor and I will take care of business." I was not a businessman, but I would have made an even worse editor. In actual fact O. C. Olsen became the leader of the whole business. Thus it was he who sent me on a speaking tour to sell the newsletter. It was a stroke of genius. We did not have 5 cents to start with, but a speaker gets his travels paid for, and people will listen to him rather than to an agent. And we were not selling a finished product but asking people to be part of starting the newsletter.

I traveled through Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Michigan and signed up about 800 subscribers. So we started and the first issue of "*Ungdom*" was published on April 15, 1907. Initially, it was printed in Omaha and later and currently in Cedar Falls on the printing press of "*Dannevirke*." Finances were tight. We started without 5 cents and with 800 subscribers and were able to publish only 8 pages twice a month.

The fact that it worked is entirely due to the abilities of O. C. Olsen, both as editor and as businessman. He himself wrote for the newsletter and requested copy from people he thought could deliver valuable written articles. "You will get paid the same as I get," he wrote.

There were critics. One of them wrote: "It is with a mixture of laughter and wrath that I read the first issue of "*Ungdom*." We have finally reached the point that we can publish a newsletter for youth, and then the attempt fails because the men in charge do not know Danish. I advise you, for the sake of the cause, to immediately entrust editorship to a man who masters Danish." But better days were ahead. Youth clubs started to employ writers, and each district appointed a man to sit on the board. O. C. Olsen worked from

sunrise to sundown, and the fruits of his labor are showing. The newsletter now has 1,510 subscribers and each issue has 16 pages.

### **Youth Homes**

There are currently two youth homes within the Association, one in the District 1 in Omaha and one in the District 5 in Des Moines, and they are working on establishing one in District 3 in Minneapolis. The mission of the homes is to provide a home for those who have no actual home, and to provide a gathering place for young people, and to be a guesthouse for members of the Association and their friends.

### **Annual Meeting**

Every district holds an annual meeting where each club elects delegates who negotiate and decide common concerns of the clubs.

Below is a copy of the program for the annual meeting in 1909 in Kimballton.

*Friday:* Welcome. Opening address. Setting the agenda. Reports by the president and by the treasurer.

Address by Principal C. P. Højbjerg. Announcements from the clubs by the delegates. Report from "Ungdom." Business. Discussions. Proposals.

Addresses by principal B. Nordentoft and pastor J. M. Gregersen.

*Saturday:* Discussion introduced by principal Th. Knudsen: "For whose benefit do we attempt to preserve Danish culture in America?"

Address by Aage Moeller and pastor H. Joergensen. Elections to the board of directors. Unfinished business.

Games, etc.

*Sunday:* Church service. Scripture reading by Pastor J. Joergensen. Homily by Pastor V. S. Jensen.

Gymnastics.

Address by candidate E. Appel. Closing ceremonies."

The program speaks to the spirit of the meeting. Following is the account of a short prelude to the meeting.



I arrived by train to Atlantic and transferred to a branch line to get to the Danish colony of Kimballton, where the annual meeting of District I would take place. Three cars with a small locomotive were waiting, labeled D. S. U. Special (*Danish Youth Association Special*). I entered and found a corner seat. Soon the cars filled up with young people. They spoke mostly English, and I felt like a stranger among them. Was this really Danish youth in America?

The D. S. U. Special rolled along, it was dusk and there was not much light in the cars. This made me feel even lonelier. But suddenly some familiar sounds reached my ears; somebody had started singing, soon others joined in, and finally the wave of singing reached my corner and everybody was singing together (For example "Fattig Per Eriksen" 'Poor Per Eriksen'). At once this poor soul's spirits perked up, now he connected with the many other travelers. And when the singing ended, something had been released that would open the way to our native language. From then on all conversation was in Danish, and during the whole meeting I heard only a few off-hand comments in English

For three days we had a wonderful time together. Speeches, singing, discussions, gymnastics, and games alternated, and nobody got tired. On Sunday there was a church service; the annual meetings always include a Sunday. And in this way we joined together and felt quite Danish.

### **Joint Convention**

The annual meetings of the districts bring the young people together and may be considered the strongest unifying tie within the district. However, in order to extend the connections farther, a joint convention of all the districts was held in 1908. The first joint convention was held at Danebod folk school and was a great success.

The next convention took place at Grand View College in 1911, and the third will take place in 1913 or 14, possibly at Nysted folk school. The conventions are convened by the presidents of the five districts and can be considered an excellent means of staying connected.

## Exchanges with Denmark

Exchanges among the young people in this country are crucial, but it is also very important to maintain connections with the mother country. It is a fact that such exchanges are becoming more frequent. This is mainly due to the following:

- 1) Immigration
- 2) Visits to the mother country. These are becoming more frequent as the economy is improving.
- 3) Visits here by men and women involved in the youth movement in Denmark. Thus the Danish Youth Association has invited folk school principals *Bredsdorff* and *Begtrup*, both of whom have promised to visit.

Last year, greetings were exchanged between the youth convention at Skamlingsbanken and D. S. U. in America.

“Brotherly greetings from D. S. U. in America!” – “8,000 participants, gathered at the youth convention at Skamlingsbanken on July 2, express grateful thanks for the friendly brotherly greeting from D. S. U. in America, and return the greeting. We desire faithful solidarity in our work and honor to the people and to Denmark, our beloved mother country.”