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Carl Hansen

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The Way of Life on the Farm

By

Carl Hansen

(Translated by Lene Laughner)

When one in "the Old Days," that is 25 years ago, wanted to give the Danish immigrants advice, one would say, "Go to the Central States," and that was good advice.

At that time, a considerable number of Danes were already living in the state of Iowa. The rich, black soil in combination with the summer heat and the warm nights were the reasons for corn becoming the main crop in Iowa, and it was growing better there than in any other state of the Union. The Danes came from a land where they had learned that exhausting the soil was not a good idea; thus they did not cart their corn into town to sell but instead built cooperative dairy farms in the Danish manner. Consequently they became the pioneers in the area of dairy farming in America. They acquired milk cows bred for the ability to produce large amounts of milk, or they fattened up cattle and hogs. It is a well-known joke that "the Iowa farmer would buy more land, so he could plant more corn, in order to fatten up more livestock, in order to make more money to buy more land, in order to plant more corn, and so forth." The last census in 1910 showed the surprising statistic that during the previous ten years, Iowa's population had decreased, despite the fact that this was one of the richest states in the country. Last year the Iowa annual gross output was 635 million dollars. The reason was simple. Many Iowa farmers were sitting on farmland as large as that of the baronial estates where their parents had toiled in Denmark.

With Iowa as the center, the Danes spread out to the neighboring states; toward the East to Illinois, to the South to Kansas, to the West to Nebraska and the Dakotas, and to the North to Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota.

After the homesteading act was passed, the general rule of the prairie was that the young homesteader worked for wages for several years and then managed to find a wife. The young couple

then leased a farm, a life that was not a bed of roses for either the wife or the husband. On their own, without help, the two of them worked a piece of land larger than a big Danish estate. Help for hire was very expensive and difficult to come by when needed. From early March to the middle of December, every day was a workday with no days off, and the job craved both strength and energy. Only during the bitterly cold months was there any let-up in the work. Eventually the day arrived where the leased land was purchased, and a few homesteaders became wealthy. However, most of them were worn-out and became old before their time from all the drudgery.

If the homesteader was working in the forests in Wisconsin, Michigan, and the northern part of Minnesota, it was marginally easier to become independent. After the "Forest Barons" had plundered the forest of the most valuable trees, and only stumps, partly burned tree trunks, and dense underbrush remained, the acreage could be cheaply bought through long-term loans. The newcomer cleared a piece of ground large enough for a house and a garden; a couple of cows grazed in the forest during the summer, and hay could be gathered for winter feed. A pair of pigs and a few chickens could also be accommodated, and during the winter there was work in the forest. Year after year the open surroundings around the house increased as more ground was cleared, but the forest farmer never became as wealthy as his colleague on the prairie. However, the forester would be snug and comfortable indoors, and the forest would shield him against storms and crop failure. Yet, the fight against tree stumps and boulders put their mark on the forest farmer. His back was bent and his gait was slow.

Eventually the price of farmland increased, and colonization moved westward. A pair of large, Danish settlements formed in the middle of the 1890s in the Western part of North Dakota, where the main crops were wheat, barley, and oil crops such as flax or linseed. Eventually the Danes found their way into Eastern Montana, and in the last few years, Danes have moved farther north into Canada.

In Utah, the Land of the Mormons, many of our landmen gained farmland and practiced agriculture. It is questionable whether this would have happened, if the increased pressure from the Mormon

leaders hadn't tipped the scales in this state where the climate is fairly pleasant, but where the soil is considerably poorer than that of Iowa and the other Midwestern states.

In America's most northwesterly state, Washington, the religious communities had not had the opportunity to colonize; and there is only one large forest settlement where the populace is economically independent. Yet, widely spread over the state there are surprising numbers of Danes with small farms where they grow fruit trees, berries, and fresh vegetables. Chicken farming plays an important role in Washington since the migration to Alaska increased the price of eggs to unheard of heights. Naturally it cannot be denied that the prairie farmer from the middle states smiled derisively when he visited his colleague in the far west. "Fussing" with chickens, carrots, strawberries, cabbage, and apples cannot be compared to corn, wheat, cattle and hogs. But the westerner let him smile; he is satisfied with his five, or ten acres at the most, which was certainly no child's play to clear for agriculture. The work is not as terribly nerve racking and back breaking as the work on the prairie. There are vegetables in the spring, and berries, new potatoes, apples, and peaches in the summer. The winters are mild, and the summers cool. The scenery is breathtaking between the mountains and near the ocean. There is a peace and lust for life for the people; but none of them are terribly wealthy. Only in Eastern Washington does it appear that wheat farming might bring prosperity.

South of Washington—in the state of Oregon—only during the past ten years have two large Danish settlements appeared in the "Willamette Valley." They consist for the most part of small orchards growing fruit trees and running dairies. These settlements sprang up primarily because of the rich soil and the pleasant climate, and they have increased considerably in population over a few years.

In northern California, in the nationally known Humboldt County a significant number of Danish settlers have pioneered in dairy farming and this is where one of America's largest dairies was founded. Alfalfa is a major crop. There are few places in the country where the price per acre is as high as in Humboldt County, California.

That the Northern states became the primary home for the Scandinavian immigrants was natural. The rice and cotton plantations of the South were perplexing and the crops unfamiliar and the Scandinavians were afraid of the hot climate. Strong propaganda finally was able to bring a few robust settlements to Texas where cotton was grown. Finding someone to go to Florida was not possible, and in most Southern states, the Danes are few and far between. Only in Central and Southern California do we find large Danish communities; a few large wheat ranches, others growing turnips, a couple of areas cultivate grapes, which are dried into raisins, and in still another area are the chicken farmers. The cultivated areas in California are highly priced, and the heat, except for along the west coast, is at times oppressive. The youngest Danish settlements are in California.

Far to the East in the Atlantic states there are no large Danish communities, but it has recently been debated that right now is not the best time for Danish settlements in the East. Several hundred small as well as larger farms are at this time desolate and deserted. Weeds are spreading over the acreages, and the farmhouses are falling apart. The reason for this strange phenomenon is primarily that during the panic of the 1890s, the big cities of the East with their huge factories lured workers away from the farms. The sons and daughters on the farms found easy jobs that were better paying than what they earned for their drudgery on the farms. The youths took off for the cities, and the old ones carried on as best they could. They finally died or lived out their last days with their children in the cities, leaving their empty farms in wait for new immigrants from the old world. Another reason for the abandoned farms in the Eastern states is that the factories are considered influential, and ranching there is not the domineering factor as in the middle states. The word "farmer" in the minds of the citizens of the large eastern cities connotes "sharecropper" the way it did a generation ago in the minds of the flippant Copenhageners. A third possible reason could be that the steady stream of people who, for many years migrated West toward the big unknown, lured numerous settlers from the security of the East to the tempting lottery of the West.

A few Danes have settled in Virginia during the last few years, but no large settlements are known. The government in New York has hired a Dane for the sole reason to give new immigrants information about farming in the East.

The soil in the Eastern states is poorer and harder to work than in the Midwestern states and often covered with rocks and boulders. The climate is harsher than farther West. Still, there are opportunities for independence for farmers with initiative and the will to work hard.

Were we to give advice to the Danish farmer who plans to immigrate to America, which is perhaps something we shouldn't do, would be to say this: "The hardworking, unmarried man who has no relatives or personal friends should go to the Central states where the sons of the farmers there prefer work in the city. Hence the immigrant could first labor on a large farm, a job that is well paid year round. This could eventually lead to the young man leasing a farm, and through energy and strict economy he can save enough to buy a homestead in one of the Northern states or by the coasts. The married farmer who comes with his family needs to investigate what life is about in the Eastern states. If he does not find what he is looking for, despite the expense of railway tickets, he needs to travel all through the country to the West Coast where the climate is mild and labor humane. The price of cleared forest land is very steep, but there a family can easily live happily and without too much hardship on ten acres of land."

It possibly should be appropriate to mention that this is being written in the spring of 1912, and this writer cannot be responsible for what development the future holds. America, with its constantly shifting politics, is always in flux and constantly changing.