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Hans Jorgen Pedersen: 
The Founder of Danebod

by Thorvald Hansen

He served as pastor in a number of congregations. He was president of three Folk Schools, two of which he founded. He was a good businessman and was able to finance some of his undertakings. Yet he seemed never to stay at any one thing for very long. He easily became discouraged and he seems to have been that type of person for whom the grass is always greener somewhere else. Nonetheless, in the thirty years of his activity in America, Hans Jorgen Pedersen made a significant contribution to the life of the Danish Lutheran Church among the immigrants.

On December 28th of 1851 Hans Jorgen Pedersen was born. He was the son of a poor family living at Ringe Parish on the island of Funen, in Denmark. He was baptized on January 11th of the new year. There were ten children in the family, but just where Hans Jorgen ranks in the line of siblings is not stated in any of my sources. Despite the fact that poverty was a constant in the family, the family never lacked having something to eat.

The parents belonged to a pious group which read a sermon every Sunday and sang some of Hans Adolf Brorson's hymns. Brorson's poetry reflected German piety and was replete with intimations of the hereafter. As soon as the children were able to read they were encouraged to sing along. The singing they rather enjoyed, but the sermons were often long. They were taught to pray every morning and every evening. If he missed a time, Pedersen later writes, "I was not at all happy -- then the Lord would be angry, I thought, and I was afraid of Him". He learned more about religion in the school, but even after confirmation his relationship to God remained the same. At times he felt Christianity was an illusion, but this only added to his feeling of guilt.

When, as a teenager, he went away from home to do farm work, he heard of the Grundtvigians, who always looked happy. He dismissed them as hypocrites. "I did not understand," he writes, "that the most serious Christian is the most happy one." It was with
such thoughts that he enrolled in the Folk School at Ryslinge, not far from his home. Here he began to understand and eventually was able to accept and embrace Grundtvigianism. At Ryslinge he began training for pastoral service in America and concluded his preparation in Copenhagen. He then took and passed the examination for a pastor in the new world.

He came to America accompanied by Jens Peter Lillesø, who was also a candidate for the ministry in America. Lillesø was ordained in 1875 to be pastor at Muskegon, Michigan. Pedersen was not ordained immediately because it was felt he was too young, the minimum age being 25, and he did not have a definite call to a congregation. Instead he was sent off to assist Pastor Rosenstand in Manistee. However, it quickly developed that Pedersen was a good preacher and was fully competent to be ordained. Further, he now had a call from the congregation at Gowen, Michigan. He was, therefore, ordained at Greenville, Michigan, by Pastor Adam Dan on October 20, 1875. In connection with Pedersen's ordination it should be noted that Adam Dan wrote a hymn for the occasion, a hymn which is expressive of the work Pedersen and other pastors contemplated. That hymn has been translated as "We Publish the Greatest of Tidings Abroad."³

Gowen, Michigan

Little information is available regarding Pedersen's work at Gowen. I do not even know how many congregations he served though I do know that there were a number of Danish congregations in the Gowen area of Montcalm County. Early in the twentieth century there were five. Some of these had been begun by a somewhat eccentric Norwegian bachelor pastor named Ole Amble. Among the sizeable number of letters addressed to Hans Jorgen Pedersen there is only one written by him and that is addressed to Ole Amble. Pedersen had received what he called "an angry letter" from Amble during the last days of September in 1877. I do not know the specific nature of his complaint. Pedersen replied he was not aware of having done anything that he would wish undone. Then he goes on, "In the future I shall strive to deal; with you, your congregation and your work, as one who is fully aware that he must make an
accounting in the final judgment.” If this reply should not be satisfactory, Pedersen writes, with Amble’s permission he is willing to submit the letter from Amble, as well as the detailed reply to *Kirkelig Samler* so that congregations may judge for themselves. A perusal of a number of subsequent issues of *Kirkelig Samler* indicates this was never done. Apparently Amble was mollified by Pedersen’s letter.

On the basis of a letter in *Kirkelig Samler*, sent by a woman who preferred to keep her identity secret and who was member of one of Pedersen’s congregations, I can only conclude the his work in the Gowen area was more than satisfactory. “It was with sorrow,” she writes, “that the congregation heard of Pastor Pedersen’s resignation as their pastor.” We face the days ahead, she says, “Not only with sighs and concerns about the future, but with gratitude for what the Lord, through his {Pedersen’s} mouth has let us hear.”

Though Pedersen’s name was not added to the ministerial roll of the Danish Church until 1875, he rather quickly became a vital and recognizable part of the Synod. In paging through the 1880 issue of the church paper, *Kirkelig Samler*, one comes across Pedersen’s name quite often. He frequently contributed sermons and among these is his inaugural sermon at Elk Horn. He was also somewhat of a poet. He contributed an Easter song to the paper in April.

Because of his abilities and his known interest in Folk Schools, it was to Pedersen that the Church turned when there became a vacancy in the president’s position at the Elk Horn Folk School. That school had been founded in 1878, by a margin of one vote in the Synod as a proprietary institution with ownership resting in the president, Pastor O. L. Kirkeberg. Two years later Kirkeberg resigned his position because of ill health and turned the school over to the Church. The debt at the school, which was assumed by the Church, was $620.

**Elk Horn, Iowa**

Hans Jorgen Pedersen accepted the president’s position on the condition that Kristian Østergaard, who had ably assisted Kirkeberg, would remain. Østergaard, who was not yet ordained as a pastor, agreed to do so. Enok Mortensen writes of Pedersen: “He was an
able man, probably not as brilliant as Kirkeberg, but more practical and a better organizer." 

The attendance the first year was not great and the summer school for girls did not go very well, but by the next school year things looked much brighter. There were 30 men enrolled for that session and the school had just about all it could handle. A teacher named Peter Jensen aided Pedersen and Østergaard and by the summer of 1882 two more teachers were added. One was a Norwegian named Skinvig, and the other A. Skands Hansen, who later became a pastor and ultimately a physician in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

The instruction at Elk Horn followed the traditional Danish Folk School pattern, as to subjects and methods. The lecture method saw primary use in subjects such as history, biography, and religion. In the more practical subjects, such as grammar, mathematics, penmanship, and physics, other hands-on methods were used. There were classes in sewing for the girls. Knitting and embroidering were popular pursuits by them during lecture periods.

Despite the obvious success of the school, Pedersen was restless. He had long wanted to open his own school. He was a good businessman who knew something about earning money. Somehow he was able to purchase land and when the price of that land went up, he sold it at a profit. Thus he was able to pay off the debt of the school and have funds left for his own use. He determined to start a Folk School, somewhere in Michigan. The Synod president was informed of Pedersen's intention to move and a Chicago Pastor, Kristian Anker, was recruited to head the school at Elk Horn.

**Michigan Again**

Michigan was chosen as the site for the new school because of Pedersen's familiarity with the area. Many immigrants had come from Denmark and the men had found work in the sawmills and as lumberjacks. It was hoped that these would come to the school during such times as there was no work for them. It had first been thought that the school should be built at Big Rapids, but Peder Kjøjhede, who was then the pastor at Muskegon, convinced Pedersen that a better site would be east and north of Muskegon, near the little town of Grant. Here Pedersen was able to purchase forty acres at a price that fitted his resources. The area had been
heavily forested, but was now burned over. Not much remained but bushes, some dead trees and ashes. Pedersen therefore named the place Ashland and here he built his school.

The school building which Pedersen planned and had built at Ashland was a simple but practical structure. On the first floor there was an apartment for the president and his family plus a dining room for the students. The second floor would contain classrooms and the attic would be given over to a dormitory for the students. There was a small and separate house for Østergaard and his family. The people at Grant, where there was a small Danish Church, as well as those in the surrounding area, were enthused at having a Folk School in their midst. They did what they could to expedite the construction. The opening was planned for November 1, 1882. The school was dedicated on that occasion and it was a happy time for all who were present. In addition to a number of guests there were 21 students present, some of whom had come from Pedersen's former congregation at Gowen.

In addition to Østergaard, Pedersen added Emil Ferdinand Madsen to the faculty. Madsen, who was a layman, is perhaps best
known as the one who was instrumental in the founding of the Dagmar colony in Montana in 1906. That winter the school went well enough, but the number of students who attended did not meet expectations. A school for girls was conducted during the summer, but likewise, there were not as many as had been hoped for. The young men who worked in the woods and the sawmills did not flock to the school as Pedersen had assumed they would. Then, too, there were constant financial problems. While the school at Elk Horn was now owned by the Synod and could expect some help from that quarter, Pedersen had nowhere to turn except to the goodwill of nearby friends whose help could only be very limited. One fund raising effort launched by Pedersen, the selling of a photograph of the school and its students, was a complete failure.

In terms of enrollment, the second year went no better. There were still only 21 students. The school was not growing as planned and Pedersen was becoming discouraged. Half way into the third year Østergaard resigned and returned to Denmark as he had long wanted to do. Here on the Jutland peninsula, not far from Aalborg, he established a Folk School at the town of Støvring. This proved to be a disaster because of the political situation in Denmark at that time. Østergaard and his teachers were too liberal for the conservative administration and the school received no support from the state. Then, early in 1892, Østergaard’s wife died. It was in the midst of this situation that Østergaard wrote the much beloved song, “That Cause Can Never Be Lost,” (Den Sag Er Aldrige I Verden Tabt). That year he returned to America, enrolled in the theological seminary at West Denmark and was ordained as a pastor in 1893. He served in several pastorates and wrote a number of books, songs and poems and died at Tyler, Minnesota in 1931.

Meanwhile, Pedersen had written to Østergaard of his concern for the school at Ashland and, as his concern became common knowledge, friends came to his support. They wanted to retain the school. In no uncertain terms Pedersen let them know what was needed. A Folk School Association had been formed and, under the leadership of Pastor H. C. Strandskov, who was now at Muskegon, the group assumed the responsibility for an annual contribution of $200.
Things seemed to go a bit better now. Winter school, for the boys, increased ever so slightly in some years. The summer school attendance for the girls was not very good. One factor in the slight increase was the addition of Lorentz Henningsen to the faculty. Henningsen had studied art in Denmark. He had come to America in 1882 and had spent some time in Racine. His background made it possible for him to attract some students to the school. Henningsen later became a pastor in the Danish Church. He died at Solvang, California in 1927.

Two others who later became noted in the church were Jes Smidt and Christian Hansen. The former was a student who later became the noted wood carver living at West Denmark. The latter, who told stories to Pedersen’s children, later moved to Tyler, where he earned an enviable reputation for story telling (Æventyrmanden).  

His school at Ashland was now limping along and it appeared that it would be able to hang on. However, Pedersen was not satisfied. He began to look about for greener pastures.

He was called to serve the congregation at Fredsville, Iowa, not far from Cedar Falls. That congregation was hopeful he would come and begin a school there. There was a large number of Danes in that area. He declined that call, however, and a school was never built at Fredsville. Pedersen gave some thought to establishing a Folk School at Carlston, near Albert Lea, Minnesota but nothing came of this. He followed with interest, however, the founding of a new congregation at Tyler, Minnesota.

Tyler, Minnesota

At the annual meeting of the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church at Clinton, Iowa in 1884 a land committee had been named with the purpose of starting a new colony for the church. Within a short time this committee had negotiated an agreement with the Winona and St. Peter Railroad Company to purchase 35,000 acres of land in southwestern Minnesota. It was further agreed that for the first three years this land was to be sold only to Danish people. When 12,000 acres had been sold, 240 acres were to be donated for schools and churches.

Late in June, on a hot summer day, a large number of settlers set out from Lake Benton, Minnesota to tour the area and the select farm
sites. The tour ended in Tyler, Minnesota, by which time 3,000 acres of land had been sold. The next day being a Sunday, a picnic was held on an island in Lake Benton. There were several pastors present and the sermon was delivered by A. S. Nielsen. In the afternoon there was singing, lectures and talks. Most then left for their homes in the communities from which they had come. A few settlers came during the summer of 1885, but the bulk of those who had bought land did not arrive for a permanent stay until the spring of 1886.

Hans Jorgen Pedersen was not among those who assembled at Lake Benton and Tyler in 1885, but he was well aware of what was going on and followed those developments with a great deal of interest.

The Danebod congregation was formally organized at Tyler on July 11, 1886. A letter of call was sent to Pastor F. L. Grundtvig at Clinton, Iowa. Grundtvig was interested and would have accepted had it not been that a paragraph excluding members of secret societies had been adopted and then deleted from the constitution. Since he was strongly opposed to secret societies, Grundtvig declined the call. For almost two years the congregation existed without a resident pastor. Services were held in various homes and sometimes in a nearby church. Either a sermon was read or a visiting pastor was present. Finally, after Hans Jorgen Pedersen let it be known that he was available and would not only accept the call but would build a Folk School, he was called and arrived with his family in April of 1888.

The Synodical Land Committee had indicated a willingness to accept an offer of four acres on the edge of Tyler on which to build a church. Pedersen was not satisfied with that choice. Instead he looked around and finally settled on 160 acres south of town. When he had determined it was for sale, he bought it for $1,000. Here he planned to build the church and his Folk School.

He then made an appeal to the settlers for funds with which to build the school. When the funds received proved insufficient, he appealed to the Synod and thus he was able to raise enough. The school he called Danebod. Over a thousand years ago Danebod was the name given by the Danish king, Gorm, to his wife, Thyra, for her
work in saving the Danes from invaders. Danebod, therefore, means literally the one who mends or saves the Danes.

Folk School
Danebod Folk School was officially opened on December 1, 1888. This was the fifth Folk School founded by the Danes in the new world. Elk Horn, the oldest, was begun in 1878 and Ashland opened in 1882. A school at West Denmark was opened in 1884 and closed within the year. A school had been begun at Nysted, near Dannebrog, Nebraska the year before Danebod. Pedersen, who now headed the Tyler school, had headed both Elk Horn and Ashland, but had not stayed long at either place.

At the opening of the school that fall there were 19 students enrolled and, including Pedersen, there were three teachers. Carl Hansen, who had attended a state agricultural school and who had some knowledge of veterinary medicine as well as literature, was one of the three. Another was Christian Hansen, who had told stories for Pedersen's children at Ashland and who was knowledgeable in Danish history and English. Pedersen himself, lectured on the history of Israel and early church history.

Stone Hall
During the next summer it became evident that a larger facility was needed in which to hold worship services. The lecture hall at the Folk School was no longer large enough for the growing community. It was not possible to finance the building of a church at that time. Gymnastics were a vital part of the community and the Folk School and so a hall for gym was also needed. Pedersen came forward with a suggestion for filling both needs. A building to satisfy both needs could be erected if the men would find and haul in large rocks. This was agreed to, though not without some objection. Kristian Klink, who was a professional stone mason, aided by two others took on the project. By the fall of 1889, the Stone Hall, a building large enough and suitable for the needs of the community, was completed.

Unfortunately, the first funeral service held in the Stone Hall was that of its builder, Kristian Klink. He had been ill with tuberculosis for some months and had known that it was a life threatening
illness, but he was determined to complete the building before he died. It was Pedersen who took it upon himself to arrange for Klink’s burial and the marking of his grave with a suitable stone. Two letters were received by Pedersen from Vallekilde, in Denmark. Both letters were written by J. P. Klink on behalf of his siblings. The first letter was to thank Pedersen for his kindness toward their brother and the second letter was to express thanks for the photographs of the grave site.11

Danebod Congregation

While the Danebod congregation was appreciative of Pedersen’s work on behalf of the local church and its people and found his sermons good, there was nevertheless an undercurrent of criticism of him. He had withdrawn from both the Synod and the Danish People’s Society in 1891. He felt there was continual strife within the Synod regarding the theological position of the Danish Church. Some felt its concern should be only with life after death. Others felt that though this was important, there should also be an emphasis on this life and that the cultural background of the church should be emphasized. Strangely enough, Pedersen himself had contributed to this strife by his words and deeds. He had been a dedicated member of the Danish People’s Society (Dansk Folkesamfund) and that
organization was a major bone of contention within the church. Not only so, but he was quite vocal in defense of the Society. At the annual meeting of the Church at Racine, Wisconsin, in 1887, Pedersen, in an exchange with Pastor P. S. Vig, replied that Vig’s criticism was “Nonsense that was just as old as the Danish Church.” 12 In a similar exchange with Pastor Theodore Lyngby, he replied to Lyngby’s comment by saying, “It is sad to see partisanship take the upper hand in such a manner when there is something [the Danish People’s Society] that it wants to destroy.” 13 Criticism, perhaps born of envy, was also aroused by Pedersen’s ability to profit financially by his land transactions. There were those who felt that this kind of activity should not be indulged in by a preacher.

The number of families in the settlement had increased and the number of elementary grade children was growing larger. Many of these families were averse to sending their children to public, or common school, and there was growing interest in a parochial school. This was really not the first such school at Tyler. Since 1888 many children had met at the Folk School in what was the Pedersen apartment. Later, a school attended by some 15 boys was conducted in a home east of the Folk School. By 1892 many parents felt that now was the time to build so that the school might have facilities of its own. Once again Pedersen came to the fore and offered to donate land for the school; an offer which was gratefully accepted. The school was to lie west of the Stone Hall and east of the site chosen for a church. A school was therefore built on this site during the summer of 1892. The first floor was to be a classroom with facilities for 20-30 pupils. The second floor was to be an apartment for the teacher.

The usual elementary subjects were taught with the addition of such things as Danish History and literature. Through the years many children were to attend this school and they remember it fondly. One such wrote in 2002, “It was a unique and wonderful school with lessons in both English and Danish; an early bilingual school.” 14

In the summer of 1893 a severe wind and hailstorm swept through the community. Many lost their crops and it was a harsh blow to the settlement. The following Sunday Pedersen called for the building of a church. He said, “We are all poor now, and we need a church
more than ever. Now we can lift together; now is the time to build." They began almost at once; a place was cleared for the new building and many loads of stone were hauled for the foundation. By winter a foundation was ready for the superstructure.

Then, in October of that same year, in the midst of the building project, Pedersen resigned. The work with the Folk School and with what was now becoming a large congregation had taken its toll. Not only so, but he served as pastor in two other places. Diamond Lake, near Lake Benton, was served by Pedersen until 1892 and Ruthton, founded by him in 1888, which he continued to serve. The work was beginning to be too much for him and he rejected the idea of reconsidering his action. However, after some unsuccessful attempts by the congregation to call a new pastor, Pedersen did reconsider and agreed to serve on a temporary basis.

Meanwhile, by a vote of the congregation in the spring of 1894, it was agreed to continue the project. During the summer and through the following winter the work continued. Finally, the building stood complete and was dedicated on June 16, 1895. It quickly became known as the "Cross Church at Danebod," apparently because it was built in the shape of a cross.

The Folk School was far from an overwhelming success. The number of students Pedersen had hoped for did not materialize. As president, Pedersen received a small salary, but there was not enough to pay the other teachers. A couple of them, therefore, made their living by farming and one was the postmaster and for a time ran a pharmacy. Thoroughly discouraged, Pedersen resigned his position as president in 1894. Since he could no longer occupy the president's quarters at the school, he built a house for himself and his family across from the church. He could now give more attention to his ever-growing congregation.

The ownership of the Folk School building rested in the hands of the Danebod Folk School Society (Danebod Højskolesamfund) which had been formed somewhat earlier. From this society Ole Stevns and Dorothea Rasmussen, who were later married, rented the school and continued. From time to time Pedersen did lecture at the school but he was no longer closely associated with it.

The Danebod congregation was host to the annual meeting of the Synod in 1896. At this meeting there was much discussion of the
new college and seminary in Des Moines and there was also some fund raising for that institution. Hans Jorgen Pedersen gave $100 to the cause at that time. That year also, Pedersen came back into the Synod and was elected secretary of the Danish Church at that convention.

Ruthton, Minnesota—Illness & Death

At the end of the year 1901 Pedersen announced his resignation to the Danebod congregation. He had, he wrote, "For some time suffered under the feeling that he no longer filled his place so that the congregation or he himself could be satisfied." The resignation was to be effective as of October 1, 1902. At that time he moved out of the house in Tyler, sold it to the Danebod congregation, and moved nearby to Ruthton where he served that congregation. A church had been built in Ruthton in 1899. His service at Ruthton did not last long. He became ill in 1904 and by the beginning of 1905 it was evident that his illness was terminal. His suffering lingered until he died on July 20, 1905 at the age of 53.

His funeral was held the next day. Services were held at both Ruthton and Danebod. The funeral cortege was very long and he was buried in the Danebod cemetery where a large memorial stone marks his grave today. The Danebod congregation had already honored him as "the founder of Danebod" with a memorial stone placed between the Folk School and the Stone Hall.

During his years in America Pedersen sent countless sermons to Kirkelig Samler and from time to time he sent articles to the Danish paper Dannevirk. Aside from this, however, he left no written record except for a collection of sermons that was edited by Pastor Anders Bobjerg and published posthumously in 1906. It bore the title Lyse Tanker. This 245 page hardcover book was later translated and published by a granddaughter, Allegra E. P. Stehr as a paperback in 1988. The title under which it was published is Illuminated Thoughts from a Living Faith.
Letters to Pedersen

There remains but to say something about the letters that have been preserved and which may be found in the archives at Grand View College. These letters, addressed to Hans Jorgen Pedersen, cover the period of his life and work in America. Since a reply to these does not exist, or if it does it is unavailable, one can only cite the letters and draw some inferences from them.

In most cases there are single letters, but there is a collection of 12 letters from Frederik Lange Grundtvig, indicating that he and Pedersen had an active exchange of letters. In one letter he writes of how nice it would be if he could come to Diamond Lake as pastor, but he writes that conditions are such in Clinton that he cannot now leave that congregation. In another he asks about the colony at Kingsbury, South Dakota, and inquires about the availability of land and the price for such. Another has to do with Pedersen’s resignation from Tyler and the possible successors. He says that he has taken himself out of the running. In that same letter he states that he does not believe that the idea of building a theological seminary in Des Moines will amount to anything. Then, he says, Thorvald Helveg could come to Tyler and head a seminary there. With Pedersen at the Folk School, this would be a grand arrangement. Some of the letters deal with theological and Biblical problems and one final letter is a farewell from Grundtvig who is leaving for Denmark.

One interesting letter is from Martin Holst, who at that time was a second year student at the Askov Folk School in Denmark. He would like to come to America and lead a school for children, but he seeks a way to become acclimated first. He, therefore, asks Pedersen if he knows of a family needing a farm hand. In a later letter, written from Cedar Falls, Iowa, Holst seeks to borrow a small sum with which to expand the weekly, Dannevirke.

A letter from Peder Jensen, written from Denmark seeks information on coming to America. Jensen did come and eventually was ordained as a pastor in the Danish Lutheran Church where he served until 1921.

Emil Ferdinand Madsen is the author of a puzzling letter asking Pedersen to come and speak at a celebration to be held for F. L. Grundtvig. No date or place for the celebration is given. The letter
is puzzling because no reference can be found to any such celebration.²⁵

A large number of letters were written to Pedersen by pastors and other friends in early 1905 on the occasion of his illness and ultimate death.

For Hans Jorgen Pedersen life was short. Nonetheless, he accomplished a great deal in those few years. In addition to being known as the founder of Danebod, he made his influence felt in the Danish Lutheran Church in many ways and in various states. As pastor, Folk School president and a shrewd businessman he left his mark in many places.

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¹ Hans Jorgen Pedersen, Vita, *Kirkelig Samler* 1876, p. 66.
² Ibid.
³ *Hymnal for Church and Home*, #412, *Sangbog for the det Danske Folk I America*, #120.
⁴ Hans Jorgen Pedersen, letter to Ole Amble, Oct. 1, 1877.
⁷ Ibid., p. 113.
¹⁰ Christian Hansen became widely known as “Æventyrmanden” — the storytelling man.
¹¹ J. P. Klink, two letters, fall of 1889.
¹³ Ibid., p. 9.
¹⁵ Enok Mortensen, *75 Years at Danebod*, 1961, p. 29.
¹⁶ Ibid., p. 35.
¹⁸ F. L. Grundtvig, letter September 1888.
¹⁹ Ibid., fall 1891.
²⁰ Ibid., Dec. 8, 1893.
²¹ Ibid., May 5, 1900.
²² Martin Holst, letter Dec. 11, 1880.
²³ Martin Holst, letter Dec. 24, 1888.
²⁴ Peder Jensen, letter Mar. 31, 1880.
²⁵ E. F. Madsen, letter Sept, 13, 1895.