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From the Farm to the Faculty: The Educational Odyssey of Paulus Falck

by Johan Windmüller

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, thousands of immigrants from Denmark settled in the American Midwest. Some of them brought with them educational concepts and religious convictions they hoped to pass on to future generations; to do so they created a variety of educational and religious institutions scattered across several Midwestern states. What follows is a study of Paulus Falck, who passed through several of these institutions.

Paulus Frederik Madsen Falck was born on September 4, 1892 in Madison, Wisconsin, the oldest of three children born to Christian and Karoline Madsen Falck. Following his immigration to the United States from Denmark in 1884, Paulus’ father had become an ordained pastor in the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church and thus Paulus grew up in Danish American communities speaking, reading and writing Danish and English. From his parents, Paulus learned to appreciate his both his Danish and Lutheran heritage, and he was confirmed on April 28, 1907.¹

Education appeared to have been of great importance to the Falck family, but the Reverend and Mrs. Falck believed in free will for their children. Paulus did not always seem enthused about his own education, but with a little early guidance, education became an important part of his adult life. Due in part to his heritage and religious background, Paulus completed a large part of his education within the confines of institutions which was popular with elements the Danish-American immigrant community at the time.

The Falck family moved to Jewell, Iowa in the summer of 1909 due to Rev. Falck’s appointment to serve as pastor of a United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church congregation there. Paulus was set to enter the eleventh grade in the fall and his parents had hoped he would attend a local Norwegian Lutheran college, but much to his father’s dismay, Paulus decided to attend public school. During the summer, Paulus secured work as a farm laborer and had thoughts of
making this his permanent occupation. A fellow farm hand persuaded Paulus to reconsider and return to his studies in the fall.

Shortly before the school year was set to begin, Rev. Falck received a letter from the president of Elk Horn College, a Danish school in Elk Horn, Iowa, originally based on the Danish Folk High School tradition. President L. A. Laursen suggested in his letter, apparently an early form of college recruitment, that Paulus attend Elk Horn College. Again, Paulus had to be convinced, this time by his father, to return to school. He enrolled at Elk Horn College in October 1909.²

Elk Horn College had grown out of what was the first Danish folk school in America. Founded in 1878, it initially followed closely the concepts articulated by the Danish plan of instruction, meaning mostly lectures offered in the afternoon and evening in order for the farmers in the area to attend. This plan did not emphasize much traditional book work and there were few if any examinations. Elk Horn was chosen as the location of the first Folk School primarily because it was near the center of the largest Danish settlement in the United States at the time.³

By the 1890s the school had moved away from its Folk School beginnings and had slowly taken on the attributes of an American college, albeit one of Danish heritage. The result was more class work and fewer lectures. The school was divided into four departments: the Folk High School; English Language for immigrants; a commercial department; and a “normal” department. The school offered classes in Danish and U.S. history, English and Danish language, civics and science. In 1894 a seminary was added. By 1899 the seminary and college departments had both been removed to Blair, Nebraska, and the school moved in the direction of its folk school roots.⁴

Danish Folk Schools in the United States were generally created for one of two reasons: to foster an interest in and to ensure the preservation of Danish culture to Americans of Danish heritage; and to provide education in rural areas for immigrant farmers. The school at Elk Horn seemed to have served both purposes at different times during its existence. Elk Horn College closed on March 1, 1917 after thirty-nine years in operation.⁵
When Paulus Falck arrived at Elk Horn College in the fall of 1909, he was met at the train station by the president of the college, Rev. Laursen, who had just taken over the leadership of the school that same year. This was a common practice at the time, and Rev. Laursen made many trips to the train depot throughout the school year to pick up arriving students; on some occasions, however, his trip was in vain due to prospective students changing their minds and not showing up after all. Upon setting foot on campus, Falck was told to go to the main building containing dormitories and classrooms and to pick out a room. During his search, Falck discovered that the dorm also served as a local boarding house, with the principal of the Elk Horn Public School being among the boarders.  

The day before classes began, Rev. Laursen met with Falck to discuss his course schedule. Falck signed up for algebra, physics, pedagogy, American literature and geography. The school day ran as follows: 6:30 A.M. wake up, 7:00 A.M. breakfast, 8:00 A.M. chapel and beginning of the school day, 12:00 lunch, and 6:00 P.M. dinner. Between 7:00 and 10:00 P.M. was study time, after which students were expected to go to bed. By the end of the first week at Elk Horn, Falck had become accustomed to the routine of the school but began to express some disappointment. He enjoyed his subjects and teachers but was unhappy with the fact that he was the only male student and felt as if he had been enrolled in a girl’s school. Later in the semester another male student did arrive and as luck would have it, Falck already knew him.  

Towards the end of October 1909, Falck was introduced to teaching and basketball. A male student in his late twenties arrived at the college and this individual was a recent immigrant from Denmark. Due to his ability to speak both Danish and English, Falck was able to tutor the student, and thus get his first taste of teaching. Falck began to learn about the game of basketball and soon engaged in practices and games with another student and some local boys. Later, with the arrival of the winter term, more male students were enrolled at the school and a newly arrived teacher organized a team. The team later played games against other area teams and had to resort to borrowing torches from locals in order to illuminate their
gym for an evening game. The teacher, who coached the team, appointed himself a starter and played in the games.\textsuperscript{8}

During the fall session, Rev. Laursen had a conversation with Falck regarding his future. Laursen asked what profession Falck might be considering. Falck admitted to not having given this much thought but said that he might want to become a farmer. Laursen suggested that Falck consider teaching as a career, and further recommended Falck complete another year at Elk Horn. This would enable him to sit for the country school teacher examinations. Laursen explained that Falck could farm in the summer and teach during the school year. By doing this for a year, he could save enough money to attend college if he so desired. Falck informed Laursen that he did not have much interest in teaching.

In January 1910, Falck was present when a fire destroyed most of the college. In the days following the fire, some students decided to leave the school, while the ones who remained were put up with local families and arrangements were made for classroom space off campus. The school year continued but was called to an end in early spring. Falck returned home and began work for a farmer. He was unsure whether he would return to Elk Horn in the fall.\textsuperscript{9}

In fall 1910 Freda Falck, Paulus' younger sister went to college at Elk Horn. Paulus stayed employed as an agricultural laborer but towards the end of November decided to return to Elk Horn shortly before the winter session began. Upon returning to campus, Falck found a new, larger building in place of the two that had been destroyed in the fire. Basketball continued to interest to Falck but the school placed much more emphasis on gymnastics. Basketball was “tolerated rather than practiced” by the leadership of the school. During this school year Laursen again approached Falck, questioning him about his plans to which Falck responded that he intended to become a farmer.

Falck returned home after the completion of the winter term and started work digging ditches as soon as the weather permitted. Falck spent the year doing different manual labor jobs and did not return to school. However, by late fall 1912, he began considering returning to Elk Horn for the winter session. Upon prompting from a farm family for whom he was working, Falck did attend that winter.\textsuperscript{10}
A noteworthy event during Falck's time at Elk Horn College in 1912-13 was that, due to the lack of interest from the faculty, Falck himself organized a first and second team basketball squad. The interest in gymnastics had disappeared so facilities and time were available for regular practices. The team played several games, including two against Dana College from Blair, Nebraska. One game was played at Elk Horn and the other in Blair. Falck arranged for a game against Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa, but without faculty permission. The team members all skipped classed the entire day of the game, made the trip to Des Moines and were promptly defeated. Upon returning to Elk Horn, they were met by members of the second team, who informed them that they had all been suspended from playing in the next game due to their unexcused absence.

Falck again got a taste of teaching when he helped another recent Danish immigrant with his homework. Falck informed the student that he would help him anytime and this resulted in several others coming to him for assistance. Falck expressed how this offered him self satisfaction and how he really enjoyed helping these students due to their eagerness to learn.

As a member of the college’s literary society, Falck also participated in a theater production of *Jæppe på Bjerget* (*Jæppe on the Mountain*) by the Danish author and playwright, Ludvig Holberg. The play was a comedy about an alcoholic and initially got the students much praise. However, there were mixed emotions from some people in the community and a second show was cancelled. Activities such as the theater, dancing, drinking and card playing were still frowned upon.

Falck left after the winter term with the intention of returning for the next full academic year to finish high school. That spring (1913), his sister Freda had graduated as part of the first ever high school class at Elk Horn College.

Falck returned to work during the spring and summer and began drifting towards his old plans of not completing school and working all year. When Freda decided to return to school, this time at Dana College, Falck again longed for academics. He sent his transcript with his sister to be evaluated and soon received a letter informing him that, based on his completed school work, he would be able to
complete his secondary education at Dana College in one year. The following day Falck left his job and headed for Blair.\textsuperscript{12}

Dana College had its roots in Trinity Seminary which was founded in Blair, Nebraska in 1884. The first two years, classes were conducted in the president’s home, but in 1886 a brand new building was completed on a site known as \textit{Skolebakken} (School Hill). In 1899 the “college department” of Elk Horn College merged with Trinity and the school operated as a dual institution. When the first catalog was printed, the college was listed as Blair College but in 1903 it officially became known as Dana College.\textsuperscript{13}

When Falck arrived at Dana College in the fall of 1913, the school was operating eight different departments. Falck enrolled in the Academic School which carried the following description in the 1913-1914 catalog: “This course is outlined in accordance with the requirements for admission to the freshman class of the State University of Nebraska.” It was further described as: “Besides preparing the student for admission to the university and other colleges, it aims to give the student who cannot pursue their studies further a good elementary education.”\textsuperscript{14}

A College Department also existed and it provided two years of college level work for students “who wish to continue their studies.” What was called the Normal Department offered elementary school teacher’s certifications. The school also had a pre-seminary department, a commercial department, a music department and a traditional Folk High School. Trinity Seminary was listed as \textit{Den teologiske Afdeling} (The Theological Department) and classes were offered mostly in Danish. Total cost for the 1913-14 school year, including tuition, room and board was $157.50.\textsuperscript{15}

Classes had already begun at the time Falck set foot on campus. He soon had his class schedule and it included advanced algebra, geometry, chemistry, Latin and Bible study. Falck was offered the opportunity to take a test in order to receive credit for German. He also planned to be a member of the basketball team. Falck was soon set up with a room and went on a tour of the facilities. To his delight he discovered that the gym had both electric lighting and heat.

The daily schedule was similar to that of Elk Horn College and each class period lasted forty minutes, with five minutes in between.
Chapel was required five days per week; students who did not understand Danish were excused.

Among the events Falck recalls from his first year at Dana was a visit and lecture by John G. Neihardt and the basketball season. Falck was on the team which played several local area town teams, other high schools and colleges such as Grand View, Wayne State and Bellevue. In a letter written in 1934, Falck recalled a particularly difficult game with Wayne State: "We were considerably handicapped as the gym in the basement of one of their buildings had a low ceiling supported by two pillars in the center of the floor and Wayne boys had a knack of ducking behind those pesky pillars when they had the ball so that we were obliged to look out for pillars and players." 16

In the spring Falck was among twenty-six graduates, and one of only two from the Academic Department. Before leaving school, Falck had a conversation with the college president, C.X. Hansen, regarding Falck's college plans. There seemed to be no doubt that Falck would continue on but he was unsure which college to attend. He was considering either St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, or the University of Nebraska. Hansen suggested Falck come back to Dana for at least one more year and promised him that he could teach a beginning English class the following year.17

Falck returned to Dana for his freshman year of college and his class schedule contained Greek, Latin, Danish history, Danish literature and trigonometry. According to Falck he had been "toying with the idea" of teaching Latin and German and requested permission from the German instructor and college president to participate in the German courses as well. Falck was elected president of the Hesperian literary society, which was one of two such groups on campus. One conducted its business in Danish and the other in English. The Hesperian society was the English speaking organization.

This year saw a big change in Falck's priorities when he decided against playing basketball due to his large class load and promise to teach a class during the winter term. The basketball coach approached Falck regarding this decision and explained that the team would be made up entirely of students and that he had counted on Falck's assistance. Falck still insisted on not playing that
year, but did teach an English reading class for Danish immigrants during the winter session.

At the conclusion of the school year Falck returned home to help his parents move. Rev. Falck had been appointed the pastor of St. Peter's Church near Potter, Nebraska. While preparing for the move, Falck was offered work by a local farmer near Jewell, Iowa, for whom he had worked before. Falck declined the offer and informed the farmer that he felt he would "hang up the spade for good." A completed college education was now the goal for Falck and he decided he would return to Dana in the fall for a second year of college work.18

When the 1915-16 school year began at Dana, all three Falck children were enrolled. Paulus as a college sophomore, Freda to obtain a higher level teaching certificate and the youngest, John, enrolled in the Academic Department to work on his high school courses. The college was under new leadership and the president was none other than Rev. Laursen, the same individual who had been the president and an instructor at Elk Horn College during Falck's time there.

Falck met with Laursen to register for classes and also to ask for the opportunity to teach beginners English again. Falck ended up with courses in economics, psychology, English literature, rhetoric, German and Danish grammar and composition. He would teach English during the winter term and was offered the chance to teach a spelling class lasting the entire year. Falck again became active with basketball and was involved in the production of what might have been the first play staged at Dana College. This time it was met with open arms, not controversy.19

The following two years were spent at the University of Nebraska as a college junior and senior. Several former Dana students attended during the same period and Falck's roommate for three of the four semesters was a former Dana classmate. Falck graduated in the spring of 1918 with an A.B. (Bachelors of Arts) degree from the College of Arts and Sciences. While at the University, Falck joined the University of Nebraska Army Base Hospital #49 as an enlisted man and served in France with the American Expeditionary Force for fourteen months after graduation.
Falck did not devote much space in his manuscripts to his World War I service but did recount an incident where he met another soldier and upon engaging in conversation, determined that they had both been involved in the same basketball game between Dana College and Bellevue College in 1914. According to his daughter, Falck suffered what has been described as a "nervous breakdown" during the war but he never mentioned this in his writings.\textsuperscript{20}

Upon his return from France in 1919, Falck spent time with his parents in Potter, Nebraska. He worked several odd jobs but one day in late summer he got an unexpected visit from C.X. Hansen who asked him to return to Dana as a full time faculty member. Falck accepted right away but in his excitement forgot to ask what subjects he would teach or what his salary would be.

A few days prior to the start of the semester, Falck arrived back in Blair to assume his duties as a college instructor. Just like his student days, he had free pick of a dorm room in Old Main and arrangements were made for him to eat at the college. Falck met with C.X. Hansen, who was once again the president of Dana, to discuss his teaching responsibilities and salary. When he asked what subjects he was to teach, Hansen responded by asking what subjects could he teach. Falck stated that his main subjects were history and languages, mainly Latin and German. These courses had already been filled with an instructor so Falck was given the job of teaching economics for college freshmen, grammar and syntax for the normal department students, botany for the academic department and business math. Hansen asked that Falck be put in charge of athletics. Falck's salary was $1,000 per year, plus room and board. According to Falck, he would have taken half of that, for he was so happy to be back at Dana.

The athletic programs at Dana in 1919 consisted of basketball, tennis and horseshoes. An attempt was made at volleyball but it quickly fell by the wayside. Falck was approached by members of the basketball team requesting that he play on the team. Falck informed them that regardless of what had been done in the past, the team would be made entirely of students as long as he was the coach.\textsuperscript{21}
As a second year instructor, Falck took over the U.S. history class and continued teaching economics and botany. He continued developing the athletic program and for a brief period worked with a girls' basketball team. The 1920-21 school year saw an addition to the academic programs at Dana with a junior and senior year being offered in the college department. The following year, Dana awarded its first ever Bachelors degree to Ms. Esther Bonnesen.

Falck remained at Dana for two more years but towards the end of year three he attempted to resign, citing "health problems" as the reason. C.X. Hansen urged him to reconsider and after a summer of rest and outdoor activities, which Falck called "outdoor medicine," he decided to return to Dana for one more year. In Falck's own words, he was at the "end of [his] rope" by the end of the first semester of his last year (1922-23) and this time resigned, stating that he had had enough of teaching and wanted a different line of work.22
According to an article written by an anonymous alumnus in 1923, Falck was “leaving for Wyoming where he has a homestead which needs his attention.” In the 1924 edition of an alumni listing, Falck was listed as being a farmer in Montana but in a letter to the Dana student newspaper, *Hermes* in 1924, Falck was writing from Wyoming and expressed that he still had “a warm spot in his heart” for Dana. In his manuscript, Falck indicated that pay was not a factor for his departure but he did not specify a reason beyond a “health problem.”

The breakdown Falck had suffered in France during World War I was the reason he left Dana and the teaching profession. It was believed that moving to Wyoming to run a farm would aid in his recovery. In 1925, Falck was back in Nebraska teaching in the Cordova Public School system and he married Laura Johnson on May 9, 1926. Falck remained in teaching for one or two more years and then went to work for the city of Cordova. He later became the postmaster of Cordova, a position he held until his retirement.

Upon his retirement, Falck moved to Lincoln, Nebraska where he began writing down his memories of his time at Elk Horn and Dana. Paulus Falck died in June 1985 in Lincoln at the age of ninety-two.

In his short tenure as a faculty member at Dana College, Falck did leave his mark, mostly as a coach. Falck was credited with bringing new sports to campus, including track and field, and with making athletics an important part of school life. Falck showed that he was a very flexible and competent instructor by being able to teach classes as diverse as mathematics, economics, history, science and English. Although Falck may not have left any lasting legacy in the world of education, his story does offer some insights into two small religious educational institutions and the Danish immigrant community of the early twentieth century.

On a more personal note, one could conclude that Falck returned to Dana in order to seek refuge from his “health problem,” but despite being surrounded by, and submerged in Danish culture, the Lutheran religion and the other things with which he felt comfortable, the familiar surroundings failed to improve his condition.
Social Security Administration Death Index <http://ssdi.genealogy.rootsweb.com/> (visited November 18, 2004); Interview with Carolyn Larsen, November 19, 2004, Lincoln, Nebraska; David L. Hendee, 1886: A Danish-American Family Saga (Fremont, Nebraska: Prairie Wind, 1986), 124; Paulus F. Falck, “My Days at E.H.C. 1910-1911,” typed manuscript, Paulus Falck collection box 1, manuscript 2, Danish Immigrant Archive, Dana College, Blair, Nebraska, 10; and a Bible belonging to Paulus Falck, confirmation date written inside the front cover, April 28, 1907, Falck collection, box 2, Danish Immigrant Archive, Dana College. The Falck collection consists of two boxes. The first includes three typed and five hand written manuscripts. The manuscripts are mostly Falck’s memoirs, but cover only his time at Elk Horn College and Dana College. One manuscript is an early history of St. Peter’s Lutheran Church near Potter, Nebraska. Because the manuscripts are undated, it is not known when they were written and/or typed. The first box also contains several photographs of Falck while the second has a small collection of books owned by Falck.

Falck, “My Days at Elk Horn and Dana Colleges,” typed manuscript, box 1, Falck collection, 1-2.


Camery, 83; Falck, “My Days at Elk Horn and Dana Colleges,” 12.


Falck, “My Days at Elk Horn and Dana Colleges,” 6-7, 9, 17, 26.

Ibid., 1-18.

Ibid., 21-22, 31, 36-37.

Ibid., 28, 37-44.


Ibid., 3-5, 8-9, 11.

Ibid., 12-17.

William E. Christensen, Saga of the Tower: A History of Dana College and Trinity Seminary (Blair, Nebraska: Lutheran Publishing House, 1959), pp. 6-7, 13, 18; Peter L. Petersen, A Place Called Dana: The Centennial History of Trinity Seminary and Dana College (Omaha, Nebraska: Acme Printing Company, 1984), pp. 17, 36, 42.
14 Catalogue of Dana College and Trinity Theological Seminary 1913-1914 (Blair, Nebraska: Danish Lutheran Publishing House, 1913), 8.
15 Ibid., 9-10, 12-14, 17, 19, 20-21.
16 Petersen, A Place Called Dana, pp. 59-60.
18 Falck, “My Second Year at Dana as a College Freshman, 1914-15,” 3-4, 8-9, 23, 28, 31.
19 Falck, “My Second Year of College at Dana,” 1-3, 9, 12-17.
21 Falck, “My Second Year of College at Dana,” 23-25; Falck, “My Days at Dana as a Member of the Faculty,” 1, 5-6, 8, 29-30, 33.
22 Falck, “My Days at Dana as a Member of the Faculty,” 41, 50-52, 65, 82, 85-86, 88-89; Catalogue of Dana College and Trinity Seminary 1921-22 (Blair, Nebraska: Danish Lutheran Publishing House, 1921), 5; Catalogue of Dana College and Trinity Seminary 1922-23, 5, 44.
23 Alumni (Blair, Nebraska: Dana College, 1924), 20; Hermes, January 1924; Falck, “My Days at Dana as a Member of the Faculty,” 84; Larsen interview; Alumni, 1925, 20; Social Security Death Index http://ssdi.genealogy.rootsweb.com/ (Visited November 18, 2004).