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For the Want of Ten Dollars
The Development of the Terra Cotta Industry in New Jersey

by Thorvald Hansen

When the Mathiasens, Karl and his father, left Thisted, on Denmark’s northeast Jutland peninsula, for America in 1872, the intention of the elder Mathiasen was to go to Michigan where he had a sister living. When they arrived in New York the father totaled up the funds he had and discovered that the trip thus far had cost more than he expected. He lacked ten dollars of having enough to travel farther west. On the advice of a kindly Dane they walked the few miles to Perth Amboy, New Jersey where they were told they could probably find work. It was this unexpected and unpleasant change of plans that eventually resulted in Karl Mathiasen, who was then but a twelve-year-old boy, becoming, as an adult, a leading industrialist on the east coast.

Karl Mathiasen was born in Aalborg on March 18, 1860, but most of his memories were from Thisted, to which his family moved when he was six years old. His father had been a working man in Aalborg and he continued that activity in Thisted with whatever work he could find. His mother was able to supplement their meager income by the sale of produce from her garden. Karl, as the oldest of the several children, was called upon to help by filling two large baskets with garden produce and going from door to door trying to sell it. This was an unpleasant task. A more pleasant job was helping his father when he dug limestone under contract along the Lime Fjord. The most unhappy memory that the boy had was working at rope making in Thisted. There he had to work hard from five o’clock in the morning until late in the evening.

His father soon saw the futility of all this and saw no future for his children. He, therefore, made the decision to emigrate. He would seek his fortune in the new world, but since he did not wish to be separated from his entire family at once, the oldest boy, Karl, was to accompany him. All this he announced to his wife one morning. His mind was made up; there must be something better than this
constant struggle with no improvement in sight. His goal was the northwestern states of America where rich farmland was available.

Their journey first took father and son to Aalborg and then to Copenhagen. From there a steamer took them to Hamburg, Germany and then to London. Both Hamburg and London were strange places where neither of them understood the language. Finally they boarded a large steamship that was to take them to America. The journey across the ocean, filled as it was with the difficulties that emigrants faced, was nevertheless an adventure. During a storm the father became ill and said that he would gladly part with the cost of the trip if he could be safely back in Thisted. In due course the storm was over and they finally arrived at New York. Here they found lodging in a boarding house for emigrants.

At this point the father took stock and discovered that he lacked ten dollars of being able to reach the northwestern states which had been his goal. One can well imagine the state of his mind at that time. Here they were in a strange city and strange country. On the other side of the sea was the rest of his family, waiting for him to find a brighter future for all of them. Meanwhile, his remaining funds were rapidly disappearing.

The proprietor of the boarding house came to their aid. He explained to them that in the city of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, which was not far away, there was a cork products factory whose owner was an Irishman and who, for whatever reason, had a soft spot in his heart for Danes. There they would almost surely find employment. Though both father and son had concerns about this, there was no alternative and they promptly set out for Perth Amboy, which was across from New York City and close enough that they could walk. As they walked along the street in Perth Amboy the father suddenly stopped and listened. He had heard some men speaking Danish. He immediately accosted them and asked about the cork products factory. Yes, they knew where it was and in fact they worked there. Yes, as long as they were Danes there would almost certainly be work for them there. The father did find work in the clay pits outside of the town while Karl was given work in the cork products factory.
Malaria raged in Perth Amboy that year and Karl was unfortunate enough to contract it. He was quite ill and confined to his bed. As a twelve-year-old he longed to see his mother and the rest of the family. Months later Karl's mother and his brothers and sisters came. The malaria, with its fever, hung on until the winter was far advanced. The boy had been reduced to a mere skeleton and it was many months more before he was hale and fit again. Now the whole family was settled in Perth Amboy, far from the original goal of land in Michigan, but also far from the endless and hopeless drudgery they had known in Thisted.

After Karl finally recovered, he worked at odd jobs until he was fourteen years of age. At that time he found steady employment at fifty cents a day by providing the power to turn a potter's wheel. A year later he was taken into the factory to help with the pottery production. Three years later Karl had become a full-fledged pottery maker. Unfortunately, the pottery concern went bankrupt and closed. However, it was soon in business again, not as a pottery plant but as an architectonic terra cotta establishment. Karl was offered a job there and after he had been there four years he understood the production of clay products from the ground up. Because he was young and had an easy time learning, the son quickly advanced. He was able to adapt to the new land as well as to comprehend the various steps in the production process.

New Jersey is perhaps best known today as being "The Garden State" because of the large number of truck farms found there. But in most areas of the state, beneath the top soil is an abundance of clay—clay that is especially good for making clay products. One of those clay products was terra cotta. Terra cotta is a glazed or unglazed fired clay used for vases, architectural purposes and relief ornamentation. It was used extensively by the ancient Greeks, but was relatively unknown and unused in modern times. However, in the late nineteenth century it won a place in the design of modern buildings. It was used largely for exterior ornamentation. Being considerably lighter than stone, it enabled the architects to use less steel in the construction of a building. Storefronts in particular were decorated with terra cotta and it was also used around windows and doors. It had a pleasing appearance and resulted in a saving in
building costs. It was Karl's good fortune to get in on the beginnings of this new industry.

Karl was not alone in this. One of his younger brothers was also employed at the factory and, like Karl, he learned all he could. After four years of learning there was nothing more to absorb in the New Jersey plant. They often talked of journeying to Boston where they could learn more under the direction of James Taylor, an Englishman who had introduced terra cotta production in all its details. The Mathiasen boys knew they should go to Boston and learn from Taylor, but found it difficult to break family ties.

The younger of the two finally decided he would break away and go to Boston. On a Sunday morning Karl took him in a row boat to New York City and there he boarded a train for Boston. There he was given work in Taylor's plant and was assured there would be work for Karl. Thus Karl, too, came to Boston and found work and the opportunity to learn more about terra cotta from Taylor. Here he advanced very quickly, and within a short time he was receiving a high salary. After some time there Karl was put in charge of the entire operation. One condition was exacted by James Taylor. Karl was to raise a mustache in the expectation that he would then appear a bit older and so more fitted for such a responsible position. Following two years in the Boston factory with good pay and an unparalleled learning experience, Karl and his brother returned to their family in Perth Amboy.

At about this time Karl began to think in terms of a family of his own. His sister had a friend, Metthea Eskesen, with whom Karl fell in love. She agreed to marry him and a year later they were pronounced man and wife. That marriage, which was to last a lifetime, was a happy and eventually a prosperous one which produced eight children, five boys and three girls.

In 1888 Mathiasen decided that the time had come for him to make use of his knowledge and enter the growing terra cotta industry. A brother-in-law, Otto Hansen, who had married Karl's sister, joined Karl in a partnership, establishing their own factory in Perth Amboy. It was a shoestring operation; the capital with which they began was a loan of $300. They would have to do all the work themselves and they had but one small kiln. They had to seek out
the right clay, bring it to the site, shape it, place it in the kiln and
tend to the firing of it. Not only so, but they would have to attend
the business matters such as making their business known through
advertising, attending to the contracts and collecting the payments.

The first job they had was for a stable in New York City and the
total was for $135. After the clay had been shaped and placed in the
kiln, Mathiasen fired the kiln for thirty-six hours and hoped for the
best. When eventually the kiln was opened it became obvious that,
in general, their effort had failed in that the color was questionable.
Nonetheless there was nothing to do but deliver the product they
had made. They hesitated to present a bill for it. Mathiasen even
went to New York City and viewed the building from the other side
of the street. Only when the last piece was in place did Mathiasen
dare to present the bill. There were no complaints from the builder
and the bill was paid.

Their next order was for more than $200, but they never
received a cent of this because the builder had gone bankrupt.
Nevertheless, orders continued to come, but all was not well.
Mathiasen knew how to make terra cotta, but he knew next to
nothing about running a business. Neither of them knew how to
keep books or how to keep track of the orders. They sometimes got
their customers confused and in other cases forgot about orders. In
spite of all this, ever larger orders came. The work became too much
for them and they would have to employ some help. The problem
was that there was no cash with which to pay the help. They
determined it would be necessary to provide room and board as part
of the pay. Further, there was more work than their aged mule could
handle. The mule was used to puddle, or stir up the clay to the
proper consistency. To make up for the mule, they bought a used
steam engine the workings of which were carefully explained to
Mathiasen. On the morning when they first planned to use the steam
engine, Mathiasen fired it up, but nothing happened. He kept
adding coal to the fire and the engine parts became red with the
heat, but still nothing happened. Finally, the man who had sold
them the machine was sent for and he saw at once what the problem
was. They had neglected to put water in the boiler of the engine.
When this was done the engine functioned as had been hoped.
Mathiasen and his partner, Otto Hansen, were not cut out to be manufacturers. They were skilled workers, they understood the making of terra cotta, but they were not prepared to meet the varied demands that running a business requires. They knew this, but saw no way out. There was nothing to do but to struggle along and hope for the best. With each order they accepted and began to fulfill they were ever more tightly bound to their task. More than once Karl's friend and mentor, James Taylor, who was now in New York City, came to advise them and help them over a specific problem.

Then, to make matters worse, came the financial panic of 1893. Building projects came to a standstill and their outstanding receipts did not materialize. That same year the entire plant burned. They did have insurance, but this did not help the partners. It only provided enough to cover the mortgage. Shortly thereafter the partnership was dissolved. Mathiasen took over alone and, since he had no understanding of judicial matters, let others advise him in that respect. He assumed responsibility for the outstanding debts. This was in line with his moral principles. He believed that a debt was just as real regardless of whether the law was on his side or not. Sooner or later, he would pay off his creditors.

Like the Phoenix of ancient mythology, the plant once again arose from the ashes and a new company, the New Jersey Terra Cotta Company, was born. This time it took the form of a private corporation with the shareholders being, for the most part, family members. A brother-in-law, Peter Sondergaard, was one of the new members of the firm. Four brothers of Mrs. Mathiasen, Boyenhardt, Bennet, Thoger and Eckardt Eskesen also became a part of the new firm.

The latter, Eckardt, was four years younger than Mathiasen and had also been born in Denmark. As a young lad he had tended sheep for a very low wage. He took more interest in schooling than in tending sheep and was given permission to study German and English. To this he added the study of mathematics and bookkeeping. His father had plans for him to become a painter, but the boy found something that was more to his liking. He became an office boy in the slaughtering firm. He served in several businesses in Denmark and attended lectures whenever possible.
There were twelve children in the Eskesen family, some of whom had already gone to America. Now, in 1891, Eckardt decided to emigrate. He found work in a new terra cotta plant which had been established by James Taylor in New York City. He became acquainted with Mathiasen when he moved to Perth Amboy and worked in another terra cotta firm there. While there he became secretly engaged to Mathiasen’s sister. From Perth Amboy he moved to Philadelphia. It was while he was there that he received a letter from Mathiasen asking him to come to Perth Amboy as bookkeeper for the New Jersey Terra Cotta Company. The pay offered, which varied from six to nine dollars weekly depending upon the sources consulted, was not great, but an added attraction was the opportunity to be near to the girl to whom he was engaged.

He accepted the offer and moved to Perth Amboy. Here his purpose was to raise the financial status of the Company to a par with the terra cotta production. In one of the the last places in which he worked before coming to America, a wholesale house in Varde, the proprietor had said, "If nothing else, I have taught you three good things which you will sooner or later find useful. I have taught you order, order and order."

Eckardt Eskesen brought order to the business of the New Jersey Terra Cotta Company. Troublesome problems soon became a thing of the past. Every order was filled on time and the reliability of each customer was known. It all happened so easily and calmly that it could be hard to understand that there once had existed one troublesome problem after another. The business became profitable and expansion was possible.

Along with Sondergaard and Eckardt Eskesen, Mathiasen, rented a plant in Trenton, New Jersey for the production of a special kind of terra cotta. It bore the name Karl Mathiasen and Company. This was later united with and became a part of the New Jersey Terra Cotta Company. Then followed the purchase of a factory in Matawan, New Jersey which was exclusively used for the manufacture of floor tile. In 1903 the Raritan Brick Company was organized and a new plant built for the production of bricks. Though others, mainly his brothers-in-law, were involved in the various enterprises, Karl
Mathiasen continued as president of each of them. In all, these enterprises employed over 400 men.

During the early years, when Mathiasen was still unmarried, he lived with his parents in Perth Amboy. Theirs was said to be the first house built by Danes in Perth Amboy. Later, as Karl married and acquired a family of his own, he lived in Perth Amboy for a time. However, as the business prospered and his family grew, Mathiasen built a large home at Keyport, New Jersey on the Lower Bay of the entrance to the New York Harbor. Keyport is about twelve miles from Perth Amboy. In time he also had a winter home at Melville, Florida and Camp Denmark, in northern New York.

Camp Denmark was located on the west slope of the Adirondack Mountains at Fourth Lake in the Fulton Chain of Lakes. To get there it was necessary to take the train to Utica, New York and then change trains. From Utica a train went north to Old Forge. At this point a mail and passenger steamboat that serviced all the camps in that area was taken until Camp Denmark was reached. Just how many summers the family spent there is not known, though the number must be considerable because as early as 1911 Metthea Mathiasen published a book called *En Sommer I Adirondackbjergene* (A Summer in the Adirondack Mountains) The book, 129 pages written in Danish, is really a collection of essays. There were many guests at the Camp, but none of them are identified. Some are referred to as pastor so it is likely that they had served in Perth Amboy. Many of the essays were from the pen of Metthea Mathiasen herself and have an ardent feminist slant. She has two other books to her credit. One is called, *Under to Flag* (Under two Flags), and the other, a memorial tribute to a king, is called simply *Kong Christian IX*.

Karl and Metthea Mathiasen became the parents of eight children, three girls and five boys. Karl had never had much in the way of formal education, but he was very much in favor of providing his children with every opportunity in that respect. Both boys and girls received a good formal education. Indeed, in 1929, one of the Mathiasen daughters, Helene, earned a doctorate in philosophy from Columbia University and Bellevue Hospital Medical College in New York. Helene chose to serve at a hospital in Columbus, Ohio.
For a time Mathiasen, and Niels Poulsen, president of the Hecla Iron Works, in Brooklyn, were the publishers of *Nordlyset* (The Northern Light), a Danish language newspaper on the East Coast. Mathiasen also gave support, financial and moral, to numerous Danish-American causes, and not least those of the church. Nor did he forget and neglect his native land. Mathiasen was active in furthering cultural relations between the two countries by, among other things, promoting student exchanges. For all of this he was knighted by King Frederik by being given the Knight of the Order of Dannebrog award in 1910. Poulsen was similarly recognized.

A serious illness during the last year of his life drained Karl Mathiasen's strength. He was nevertheless able to go to his summer home in the Adirondack Mountains in the summer of 1920. It was here that he died on July 31 at the age of sixty.

Funeral services began with a brief service in the family home at Keyport, after which the cortege moved to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church in Perth Amboy. The Rev. Svend Kjaer, pastor of the church, presided at the service. Former pastors of the congregation each spoke in praise of the life of the deceased. Pastors present, in addition to Kjaer, were Rasmus Andersen, from Brooklyn, Ole Jacobsen, from Troy, N.Y., and A. Thorkild Dorff, from Chicago. An Episcopal pastor from Keyport, the Rev. Benjamin Dagwell, also spoke. Burial was in a Perth Amboy cemetery.

Eckardt Eskesen, whose life and work is a story in itself, became president of the Terra Cotta Companies after the death of Mathiasen. Under his leadership the companies were consolidated in 1928 under the name The Federal Seaboard Terra Cotta Corporation, with offices in New York City. Eskesen became the president of the new Corporation. Among the notable events during the presidency of Eckardt Eskesen was the building of a swimming pool at the White House during the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for which the Seaboard firm donated the terra cotta. Eskesen, who liked to write verse in his spare time and who had one volume of poetry
in the Danish language to his credit, died in 1943. Seaboard Terra Cotta ceased operation in 1968.

The role of chance in human life cannot be underestimated. Who knows what might have happened if the boy, Karl Mathiasen and his father had had the necessary funds to go farther west and pursue a life of farming. We do know, however, that due to this shortage of funds, they settled in New Jersey where the boy in time became a leading businessman and industrialist. His ability and his determination, of course, had much to do with his success, but the initial blow was struck by chance.

A Word About Sources

Neither footnotes nor endnotes have been used in this article because in many cases they would refer to papers that are no longer extant. A word about sources is in order, however.

A good deal of information is based on a reading of the chapter called, "Familierne Mathiasen og Eskesen" (The Mathiasen and Eskesen Families) in Karin Michaelis and Joost Dahlerup's Danske Foregangsmænd I Amerika (Danish Pioneers in America). This was among the many clippings sent to me through the courtesy of Birgit Flemming Larsen, Archivist at Det Danske Udvandrerarkiv at Aalborg. The clippings are almost all written in the Danish language and are from a wide variety of Danish and Danish-American publications.

Representative of the Danish newspapers from which there are clippings are Politiken and Aalborg Amtstidende. The Danish-American Press is represented by Nordlyset, Illustreret Familie Blad, and Den Danske Pioneer. The few English language clippings come from the Perth Amboy Evening News and the Bulletin of The American Ceramic Society.

Agnes M. Hagmueller, of the Danish Archive Northeast, located at Edison, New Jersey was also helpful in providing information.

All of these materials will be deposited in The Danish Immigrant Archives at Grand View College under the heading, New Jersey Terra Cotta Company.