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L.C. Laursen

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# Children Of Danish Roots

by L.C. LAURSEN

## Introduction

*Children of Danish Roots* is a translation by Willard R. Garred of *Stammens Børn*, an article that appeared originally in the 1931 issue of the "Ryslinge Julebog," a Christmas magazine of the Ryslinge Folk High School, Ryslinge, Denmark. The article was written by L.C. Laursen when he lived in the western Nebraska community at Mirage Flats near Hay Springs. After his arrival in the community he named it Ryslinge, a name generally accepted by the settlers and their friends.

In submitting the article for publication, Garred writes, "This is not a story in a true sense, and yet it is, because L.C. Laursen was such a poetic, lyrical and happy person. Laursen wrote that he and his group were struggling against 'death,' meaning the death of the spirit.

"L.C. Laursen seems to have packed more into his life of 67 years than many people do in 80 to 90 years. Those who lived through the depression of the 1930s remember how bad the times were; yet Laursen, even under these circumstances, was an everlasting optimist and idealist. He was one of those young persons who, in Denmark, received an inspiration from the Folkhighschool and its Christian fellowship that would sustain him through the rest of his life. Pastor Monrad of Ryslinge Folk High School refers to Laursen as 'Pastor,' which he was to several congregations, although he was not an ordained minister and had not received formal theological training."

Who was Laursen? What sort of person was he? What did he do? At times he wrote under the pseudonyms of Karl

**Marg and Per Nabo.** *We were introduced to him in preceding issues of The Bridge--Volume VII, Number 2, "The Cow and the Pastor" and in Volume IX, Number 1 with "Table Talk." Now we publish "Children of Danish Roots," primarily because here Laursen expresses feelings that consciously or unconsciously were in the minds of many immigrants. Laursen was not well known in Denmark so the article was preceded by a letter of transmittal in which Laursen tells something about himself and of experiences during the harrowing 30s in Ryslinge, Nebraska.*

Dear Pastor Monrad: From the beginning of October 1930 and until early March 1931 I traveled a good deal--seven thousand miles in the central states and over the mountains to the Pacific Ocean. I covered the West Coast from Los Angeles to Vancouver, Canada. Two days after I returned home, the farm I was renting was sold. I bargained with the buyer and managed to get permission to move the cabin to my 80 acres of land. In a sense, my home for the summer had been on wheels. All our possessions have been packed into boxes and for a while we lived in "Samlings-Husets Undersal" (basement room of the meeting hall).

Then we built a basement and placed the cabin on it. Since then we have moved from one room to another, and still there is work to be done in each room by bricklayer, carpenter, and painter. Every time I had an extra dollar I bought materials and continued building. At the same time I helped our son farm 190 acres, some of which is his own and some rented. Capital was in short supply, and I have had to move cattle fences almost every week, build pig houses, and erect shelters for cows and horses.

Every now and then I have "preached" for this one or that one in the parish by giving him a day's work with my tools. I believe this is the hardest I have ever worked, and I am now 54. But there is something of the skylark in me. I whistle and live in continual wonderment. And yet I wonder at how my Sunday sermons come about.

Bad times, extremely bad times, is the lot for all my fellow Danes who earn their living farming. Here in Ryslinge we are better off than most places, but this year for the first

time we have experienced such a prolonged drought that we have winter-fed our livestock most of the time, and now we face winter with very short supplies. There was almost no harvest. Three-fold crop for barley and wheat; no oats. I got less barley than I sowed. This year I can thresh my crop in one hour, whereas usually we employ a steam thresher for three or four days. Then it rained on August 5, and now there will be a little corn. Otherwise, we would have had to sell our suckling pigs and our cows at sacrifice prices as no one around here could feed them this winter. Thus all of us are heavily in debt this year and the small crop we are able to sell brings no price. But no one here will starve this winter. In the rest of the country there are more than 15 million human mouths who for more than a year have had only one small meal a day; some have only three meals a week. And all this amidst abundance.

Oh, how I pray that God will give me a harvest sermon to preach to His congregation this year! It is a good thing God gave us a heart. There are people here whom I love so much at times I long for judgment day so I can be together with them for days without number. It is strange how a congregation can become the spiritual advisor for its minister so that they can take the sting out of death for him! It is altogether a wonder that one can get so infinitely much out of life, though time whips us headlong onward. How rich heaven must be!

Loving greetings, L.C. Laursen

### **Children of Danish Roots**

Danish emigrants are not a flock of youth who went out to look around in the strange land and after some wandering return to the old country. We are rather a shoot from the trunk at home who have let ourselves become transplanted in foreign soil. We are a new clan ourselves! I might as well say it straight: In my mind I no longer belong to Denmark. Denmark is the ancient soil of my forefathers and I love it--as the married son in his years of manhood can love his parents' home and occasionally visit it with reverence--but it is not my land, and that which is specifically of Danish national

concern (I distinguish sharply between "national" and "folkelig") is for me of only cultural interest.

I have hurt some people by saying so, and perhaps I will offend some by repeating it here, but it is better to honestly emphasize a reality than to let sentimental tears roll at the banquet table of romanticism. I was not born at the cross-roads, and my being cannot swing back and forth each time. I have been embraced by the people and the soil here. From that precious embrace shall arise a new generation in my new homestead.

Yes, the Russians may ridicule Keyserling<sup>1</sup> and all they will, he is still right: Life and land belong to the open-minded and those of a simple heart who can sink into a new landscape and then in the fullness of time, rise out of it as a new harmonious generation, out of soil which has become native soil.

That is my own, my fellow travelers' and our descendants' destiny.

It is not an easy road! To let oneself be buried in order to rise again is like hearing the music of one's life played on all the octaves of the human soul. There is lamentation in the lower notes and jubilation in the highest overtones.

Yes, even the second generation among the immigrants can both groan and sing praises in this melody of life. Many times I have heard, both on the open prairie and in the Danish-American folk schools, young people curse the fact that they were born of Danish parents and brought up in the Danish language. And these were alert and sensitive youths. In all their nerves and souls they were American with a passion, yet they felt themselves half homeless here in their beautiful native land. Tragic! I have seen in their faces how this tore at their innermost beings.

But half an hour later we sat together and they thrilled precisely because they were children of the immigrants. They saw the richness and depth of vision in being a bilingual people. Only spiritual food from their two treasure troves could satisfy their soul.

These were, of course, exceptional young people--wonderful, wide awake exceptions. There are enough living

people who walk about as dead, who haven't the stuff of resurrection in them. To a greater or lesser degree, consciously or unconsciously, most of our people experience what I have described--at least those who wish for more than fleshpots and the hypnotizing effect of rushing automobiles.

I remember well Christmas Eve in our home during the first years of our marriage. For years our custom was that the first song we sang around the tree was "Glade Jul," and the second invariably, "I Danmark er jeg født, der har jeg hjemme."<sup>2</sup> We probably had a hundred Danish flags on our tree, and only one American. The Danish flags are still there every Christmas, for the second and third generation's Christmas is: Danish Christmas. Christmas for the entire emigrant group is a Danish Christmas! Yet I believe the singing of "I Danmark er jeg født" around the tree has ceased. Instead we sing our forefathers' Christian hymns, and we will find that the immigrants' children will continue to sing these hymns, whether in Danish or English.

Yes, it is strange. There are English hymns which we sing in an English translation from a Danish translation which was originally translated from the English! The baptismal hymn, "Herren strækkur ud sin arm"<sup>3</sup> is an example. The gifted poetic editor, John Volk, translated it into English from our Danish hymnal in the belief that it was Grundtvig's own hymn. The result can be seen in his "Songs and Poems," New York 1903, and though Grundtvig, after his usual manner, has given the English hymn a new splendor in Danish, still Volk's translation of it shines even deeper. It would hardly occur to us now to sing this hymn in the original English form. If we do not sing it in Danish, we will sing it in the English translation. That is called to bear water over the river, have it turned into wine, and carry it back home again!

I am certain of this: That those among us who have not "gone to the dogs" spiritually-speaking, are becoming a people of our own. We do not feel ourselves isolated among the American people. We feel ourselves to be Americans of a different origin. We are a new generation in this country of a special mind-set. Unexpected things can happen during such

a transplanting and growth process. Rooted in American soil, we are growing into something more universally human rather than something specifically national American or Danish. When we meet a newcomer from Denmark, we find it difficult to smile at his jokes and appreciate his modern songs from the Danish summer theaters. (You should know how flat we have felt in our good-natured indulgence of some of your performers who travel about our communities though there have been some exceptions whom we have admired for their art and depth of spirit.) We find it equally difficult to take the American very seriously in his all-too-often naive pathos. We hope to teach our children to strike a healthy balance between American nationalism and a common appreciation of humanity. I have noticed that educated young Americans, those called "the radical type," seem more at home talking with us than with the older American generation. They discover in us something which they are seeking. I have heard several of these youths say, "Here I have met some real people."

Something else we have experienced in the transplanting process is that, though there is a lack of modernity in the Denmark which the emigrant knew, yet his Denmark is in reality greater than that which the home-Dane knows. The reason for this is the farewell and the separation. In the sadness of his departure, and in his difficult struggling years in the new land, it is as if his soul stretches its arms back into times long past and he embraces something of the experiences of past generations of Danes into his own soul. It is probably from the memory of the history teacher's class in his childhood school, from reading, and even more from legends and myths shared in the servants' living room or by the stone fence in the village on late summer evenings back home in Denmark. From all this he builds in America during his difficult first years a wider and deeper Denmark in his soul, and he and his wife paint this Denmark as a series of pictures for their children. There, in the children, it settles softly and beautifully as a fairy tale without chronological order and statistics. What do our children want with numbers, when they would rather have life? They will get

numbers enough when they begin public school!

I know of nothing more beautiful than to tiptoe into such a couple's home and hear them draw out memories from the picture of Denmark which they inherited and have built upon. These pictures are full of heroes and touching love stories so we weep with them; we sense the smell of the strange Danish cooking pots; our eyes sparkle upon meeting "de ædles æt," the generation of the noble ones, and our spines tingle at the telling of all the ghosts which Denmark's roads and castles have contained. Everything is living in Denmark--even those who died a thousand years ago!

All I need to do to see this Denmark is to read through a few of our immigrant magazine outpourings--a Denmark which blossoms in our and our children's minds. Let me parenthetically say that the material in our immigrant magazines is 99.9% written by the subscribers. That is, if you exempt the Danish and American news items which the editor takes from exchange magazines. The profit from such magazines is so small that it is not possible to pay one red cent for even the most valuable article.

This hidden Denmark in our minds is as rich as the saga or the fairy tale. It reaches from the time of the worship of Thor through the Viking expeditions, the days of the Valdemars and right up to "1848" and "1864" and not much further.<sup>4</sup> The rest our children know only from their parents' Danish-American newspaper reading and from their own reading of American papers.

Lengends, myths and folk songs play a large part in the shaping of their picture of a Denmark which they have never seen in reality. They dislike to hear an oath or obscene talk from the mouth of someone who is talking about Denmark. I have met people of the second generation who confessed that for many years when they imagined "the land of the blessed" it was a kind of Denmark raised above the clouds. I urge them to recapture the idea, for I am convinced that they should see "the land of the blessed" both as a Danish country and an American Ryslinge. Dear God! The way I have lived my life in these landscapes, it is impossible that I should not see them again in the resurrection!



Let me say more while I speak of the landscape, even if it exposes me to the risk of being considered a visionary. Often in the second generation I have seen something appear which I did not see in the immigrant. In our youths who reached maturity I have often seen a Danish landscape type and seasonal mood quite clearly spread over their person. Notice that I do not say a human type of the landscape, but literally a landscape type. I can assure you that I can point to a person born in this country of Danish parents, in whose face and figure lies an eastern Jutland landscape in mid-summer mood. In others I have seen the picture of the Jutland heath lie in their entire figure and movements. And with others I have seen the features of the islands of Denmark. You may smile at me, because I don't suppose this can be scientifically proven or explained, but I know it is so!

If it will help, I will claim that when a certain landscape's fruit for a thousand years has fostered a race of people, that people gradually take on some of the features of the landscape. In the immigrant, this feature is erased under the onslaught of his immigrant experiences, but then it can appear in his child when it reaches adulthood. I am not alone in my idea of this. It was reported that when our great Danish-American sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, visited Denmark for the first time in 1931, he said he felt that the mystery of his origin was solved when he experienced the Danish landscape.

But we are a new people with roots of our own, separated from our roots in the Danish landscape, and still growing. Our poet of considerable talent, Adam Dan, who at an advanced age was laid to rest a few months ago, taught us to sing, "We did not arrive here poor" (*Vi kom ej fattige hertil.*)<sup>5</sup> This song is the most beautiful ever written in praise of America, and we sing that particular line with pride. We are not wretches who came to America from a wretched land. We received an inheritance and character from the people at home. Nor are we "Per Nittengryn"<sup>6</sup> who stands blinking in front of you.

Let the Danish emigrant of old rest in the haze of the saga. We have enough shields with heraldry upon them. I

think of Danish emigrant Tycho Brahe (what a victory that man must have won in his soul when he sang, "Heaven is everywhere, so what more do I need?"). I feel as if he often walks with me here on the high plains under the mountain air's shining stars. And if I am walking along the river's edge here in Ryslunge parish in Western Nebraska and look up toward "Stevns Klint" (Stevns Cliff), or I am digging in the rock strata elsewhere, then I think of the Danish emigrant Nicholas Steno.<sup>7</sup> He became the father of the science known as geology. I don't know how often his name is mentioned in the volumes on my shelves, but it is a considerable number. The last time he was fully in my thoughts was out in a lovely pass in the Sierra Madres, where I stopped during California's mild winter to read the age of the place in the weathered layers of granite.

A month later I stood on a ship's deck and heard the Northern Pacific's great, deep breathing along the Canadian coast. I thought of another brave man of my emigrant race, Vitus Bering. In my pocket I had a newspaper with the news from one of the islands in the Bering Strait where he fought his last and hardest battle. The paper told of the findings of two young American scientists on one of the islands. Among other things, there was a fossilized leaf print which proves the movement of plants and animals from Asia over the Alaska bridge to the American continent. Proud Danish emigrant, Vitus Bering!

Do you smile at me back home when I say that my hand trembled when I visited J. Christian Bay's fine private library collection in Chicago and held in my hand the letters Tycho Brahe, Vitus Bering, and other great Danish emigrants had written? These letters are among the most precious relics of the emigrants!

Yes, there are enough coats of arms on our shields. There are enough names which ring with greatness because of their bearers' deeds--from the hard work of building a home to the building of the ramparts of today's society. We gave America its first surgeon and its first marine painter; we have given it sculptors and musicians. We have given it leaders in many fields; we. . .well, now I am sure you will

say, "He is from America!" Perhaps I had better put the trumpet away, because if we toot it too much, the tone will become ridiculous and ugly.

But as a son of Denmark, I would like to sit a moment by your Christmas table and tell you that we are not causing you any shame in our new homeland. Of course, there are those among us who are "going to the dogs" spiritually and humanly, but that happens everywhere and at all times. It has happened to some of us, and to some of our children, and this happens in Denmark too, even if it looks like paradise. We are a considerable number who are contriving the mystery of the resurrection in a "folkelig" sense, and therefore we are always struggling against death.

As Pastor Thorvald Knudsen<sup>8</sup> in Ryslinge, Fyn, wrote to me a couple of years ago, we are "an enviable flock which will not die." To him, at a great distance, we look like a busy anthill which is struggling with the big problems of time and existence as seriously and as capably as is done in the larger ethnic groups. And he is right! Everything which is stirring in the larger cultural nations is also making itself felt here in our little world of immigrants; perhaps I should say, "within the Danish Church in America." It cannot be said that in this country the church is the guardian of culture, but we may claim that within the ranks of our congregations all of human nature has its place to grow and play under the banner of Christ. A world which is grappling with life's problems, a world in the light of a new world, that is what surprises and interests many alert Americans in us. In this burgeoning life we have been given spiritual warriors for our pulpits and lecterns. We have been given poets who gave us songs we long to sing. I could mention ten or twelve poets and authors among our immigrant group, some of whom are of great stature and of continuing worth, not only for us, but for a wider group.

Now these men are leaving us one by one. The bard who crossed the ocean with the immigrant race, passed away this summer.<sup>9</sup> F.L. Grundtvig is gone, and H.J. Pedersen, and E.F. Madsen; and the bright poet of summer, Ivar Kirkegaard, was silenced before old age.<sup>10</sup> Old Kristian

Ostergaard, the toughest realist of them all, has gone into hibernation, probably for the last time. Those who are left have already crossed the divide and are wandering through the pass.

Are there new singers who will sing for the children of the immigrants while they are wandering up the morning side of the landscape? Are there new spiritual warriors en route to the lecture desk and the chancel? I believe there are! I even have the feeling that some of them are standing in our midst--we just don't know them yet. The life which fathers fought for with blessed weapons and which mothers fought for with tears can never die! He who struggles against death has the spark of resurrection material in himself, and he will receive ever more if he endures in faith. All of us have been baptized into Him who is life, and everything which is His shall become ours. Let this be our daily food seven days a week as long as we live. Christ is not Sunday medicine, Christ is food for every day!

In our Ryslinge congregation here on the high plains we pray every Sunday that God will send prophets to our alert youth groups and raise up chieftains among them, and I am certain they will come! I am certain my immigrant people will have new men everywhere where the old fell away! The conditions will change; certain methods will be changed or entirely new ones taken up. I think immediately of our Danish language. Will it survive in our group? It is still the "string of roses which embraces big and small."<sup>11</sup> Even children of the third generation pray in our language; I also know of fourth generations where this is true.

It has been my experience for 27 years that where the question of language change arises, it usually stems from nervous immigrants for whom life has gone into a deadlock. They cannot get their children to come to church and so one fine day the question comes up of changing the language and changing the minister. If a congregation falls asleep, it can sleep itself as splendidly into the kingdom of death in one language as in the other.

In the group of young people to whom I attach my hope, and to whom I will pledge myself, it is typical that it

was because of the language that I came here to the wild, open, high plains to a little flock of pioneers of the second generation. They had the opportunity to be served by English-speaking congregations in the area, but they tired of it. They said, "A lecture in English is very good, but we get very little out of an English worship service." Yet all of them, with a few exceptions, were born in this country and have had a good education here, several of them in the institutions of higher learning.

However, I suppose the time will come when our descendants will convert to the country's language completely. It is painful for one who loves the Danish language with a passion, but it does not mean the destruction of our special character. England and America testify to this. In a strict philological sense they do not have a "mother tongue," in that eight percent of their vocabulary consists of foreign words. "English is, as far as vocabulary goes, a Romance language with English grammar," said Max Muller in his Oxford lectures back in 1860.

And yet they exist as distinct national groups! Deeper than the mother tongue is the content she measures out to her children in the language. It is that content which constitutes the mind and the essence of the race. I have met plenty of Danish immigrants with a well-preserved Danish language, and yet they have no more of a true Dane in them than my fence posts. The language clung to them, but foreign elements had knocked the mind and the essence of the race out of them. When I consider such people, I think of very old mountains in their last stage of nakedness. Sun and snow, frost and thaw dissolve them, and year after year the sediment is carried out to the ocean by wave and wind. Farther out it is washed away completely, and one fine day the ocean will roll in over the place where they stood.

It is not going to go that way for all of us. We are determined otherwise. A part of our people will be deposited in the soil of the American people as a layer which has the color and the warmth of the heritage of my people. That is where the decisive battle, in a cultural sense, will take place. We must fight against being deposited in American soil as a

colorless layer of nothing. We must be what we are; we must become what we have been destined for by the seed deposited in the mind of our forebears.

No power on earth has the power of mind; no dynamite is as powerful (it explodes old societies and shapes new ones); no tidal wave is so all powerful (it topples empires and lets new ones rise).

In the universe there is no primeval force as grand and mighty as that which is found in the mind, which was in Christ Jesus. It is a completely world-changing power. It creates a new earth under a new heaven! We must tremble in fear and jubilation before that which is called mind! Is the mind of our people living among our youth? Yes, it is! Although they, during the routine of the day, prefer the English language, they are still marked by the Danish mind. I see this clearly, and they accept it without question. The mind and the character of our people causes them to arrange their lives differently from other kinds of minds. Thus, the women wish to build their homes; the men tackle their work; our people celebrate Christmas and other feasts; thus it meets the problems of the times and the mystery of life. Yes, for in that manner has our people approached God and the "white Christ," and thus He spoke to us by His spirit!

Dimly and in the depth of the primeval lies all this in our youth who have been faithful to the lifeline--those who did not and will not "go to the dogs." That seed has been planted in generation after generation with you back in Denmark, and it has continued in us. It includes the most precious experiences of our people. It is the primordial rock of our people, and by it you--and we--shall help to build a new humanity!

So it will be Christmas when you read this. Danish Christmas, and thus it is also with us. Our people have met Him who owns life's greatest power--the mind of our Lord Jesus. Those in whom this mind has been planted shall become the new rock on which a new world shall be built.

Merry Christmas and a Lord's year full of growth!

L.C. Laursen

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Kerserling, 1880-1946, a German philosopher and writer.
- 2 The first song is a Danish translation of "Silent Night"; the second is translated "In Denmark I was born, there is my home."
- 3 The Lord stretches forth his arm.
- 4 Dates refer to the two Prussian; Danish wars over Slesvig.
- 5 From Adama Dan's song, "Du store, rige, frie Land."
- 6 A fussbudget, or pedant.
- 7 Danish name: Niels Steensen, 1638-1686. He was an anatomist, geologist, and theologian.
- 8 Thorvald Knudsen, pastor, and former President of Grand View College, Des Moines, Iowa, and Danebod Folk School, Tyler, Minnesota.
- 9 Adam Dan, 1848-1931, pioneer pastor and one of four founders of The Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, founded in 1872.
- 10 No. 397 in *Sangbog for det Danske Folk i Amerika* is by Ivar Kirkegaard.
- 11 From Grundtvig's "Moders navn er en himmelsk lyd."