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# Danebod Fall Meeting<sup>1</sup>

by ELSIE S. HANSEN

In 1943 when Enok Mortensen and his family arrived in Tyler, Minnesota, to begin his pastorate at Danebod Lutheran Church, they were greeted by a severe blizzard which prevented them from moving into the parsonage for several days. The parsonage, located across from the church, had been redecorated, cleaned, insulated and made ready for their occupancy and soon they were comfortably ensconced. This was to be their home for almost 18 years.

To the east of the parsonage stood Danebod Folk School,<sup>2</sup> gaunt, grim, silent, empty, falling into disrepair and in disuse, a grim reminder of the passing of more glorious times. It was a large structure with many facilities — kitchen, dining room, classrooms and a lecture hall, plus two lounges, two floors of dormitory rooms, an apartment for the director, and yet, there was nothing. . . . In the late thirties the folk school movement in the United States was declining. The 1936 summer session at Danebod was the last attempt at a folk school in the United States. Earlier, a half dozen folk schools had ceased to function. Was Danebod to experience the same? Why not? The country was recuperating from a severe depression. Young people from all communities went to public high schools and many on to universities and colleges. Immigration of young Danes, familiar with Danish folk high schools, had all but ceased.

At heart, Enok Mortensen was a folk school man. Not long after coming to Danebod he sensed that here was still a need for the basic philosophy of the folk school. People seemed to want to listen and to learn in addition to attending church and worshipping. Would it be possible to restore the Danebod Folk School? There were other needs at Danebod. There were other buildings belonging to Danebod but none

of them adequate for a young and growing congregations. The church itself had no facilities for parish activities. In the parochial school, which had closed by this time, there were only two classrooms, too small for an enlarging Sunday School. At this time, the language transition was taking place, calling for the English language to be used both in Sunday School and Confirmation classes. Another building, the Stone Hall, was not large enough nor could it be heated adequately for ladies aid meetings and other gatherings. There was no gathering place for meetings and parish activities other than worship services in the church.

The challenge was great! There stood the Folk School building with all its possibilities — waiting. A Folk School Association was still in existence but inactive. At various gatherings Mortensen proposed that the building be renovated so it could be used for many and varied uses. In October of 1945 such a plan was adopted. But first the Folk School Association was dissolved after making it legally possible to sell the school and its assets to the Danebod congregation for ONE DOLLAR. A committee to raise funds for the purpose of renovation was organized. Loyal supporters rallied, but in the minds of others the idea seemed futile. Letters and pertinent information were sent out. Unit meetings were held throughout the colony giving every one an opportunity to listen and discuss, support or disagree. In the spring of 1946 enough money had been made available to begin renovation.

Still Enok Mortensen had misgivings. Was it a wise move? Able and dedicated leaders had failed in perpetuating the folk school but maybe it would be possible to salvage the remnants and make use of the substantial brick structure, at least for the uses of the Danebod congregation. During the winter and spring of 1946 many volunteers worked hard. Rotten wooden floors were replaced with cement floors. The roof was repaired, walls mended, many were replastered, windows replaced. It was a pleasant surprise to find that the heating system still could function. The plumbing needed repairs. The work and times were hampered by the war and resultant shortages.

Finally, the facilities could be used for some congregational activities. Arrangements were made for a couple to live at the school and act as hosts and custodians.

A "phoenix was rising out of the ashes," taxing resources and talents to the utmost. Responses from faithful and loyal friends throughout the country gave encouragement. Mortensen toyed with many schemes and possibilities. In trying to establish folk schools in the United States, perhaps the mistake was made to transplant the idea patterned after a Danish folk school. Why couldn't it grow and flourish out of our own needs and circumstances? In this day, it did not seem possible to gather young people for any length of time — for six weeks or three-month sessions. Maybe they would come for shorter durations? So Mortensen began to experiment.

In July of 1946 the national convention of the synod's young people's organization was hosted at Danebod. Later the Farmer's Union arrived for a ten day camp. Danebod was on its way.

Mortensen had another dream. He wanted the new Danebod to be for people, for the feeling of "folkelighed" — the spirit of the people. He proceeded to invite and spread the word to the people who had had this experience earlier, remnants that lingered or remained, perhaps from attending folk schools in Denmark or one of the other short-lived folk schools in this country. He sensed that the desire for the folk school experience still existed and lingered in many hearts.

So the invitations were extended and the doors were opened to the first "Folkemøde" (folk meeting) in October of 1946. The attendance was not large. Mortensen recalled, "I can remember standing at the mailbox, anxiously waiting for registrations." He had invited his good friend, Thyra Nussle, from Chicago, to come to accompany the singing of the rich repertoire of songs—songs of homeland, mother tongue and love of Denmark, songs of values of human life, and folk songs. Jens Jorgensen played the violin. It was a six-day course in Danish singing, Bible periods, lectures and fellowship. Enok Mortensen spoke on "Minder og Mål" (Memories and Goals). The group was eager for this kind of experience



and for the fellowship. The Danish language was used throughout.

What were the goals of which Enok Mortensen spoke? He wanted Danebod and the subsequent folk meetings to be a place for cultural enrichment, where people could gather and be part of a fellowship.

Forty years later, invitations are still sent to a growing mailing list. The ripples emanating from this group are as ripples in the lake into which a pebble is thrown. Few of those who attended the early meetings attend today. They came as long as they were physically able. For several reasons, attendance has never waned, but has continued to grow. Today everyone cannot be housed in dormitories. Many stay in motels in surrounding towns or with friends. The Bible periods and lectures are not conducted in the Danish language. It was never officially decided that the prevailing language should not be Danish. It was just a natural transition. Everyone understands English and not everyone understands Danish. But the content and the spirit remain. It is worth noting that the singing remains predominantly Danish. The songs of childhood and youth still seem best sung in Danish. Thyra Nussle comes as she has for 40 years. When she sits at the piano and begins to play (no notes or music) the group gathers and the Fall Meeting has begun. How they can sing! The favorite song book is still the old red "Sangbog for det Danske Folk i Amerika," giving way now and then to other good translations and songs. Nothing changes the quality and spirit born on the wings of song.

The speakers have numbered in the hundreds throughout the last 41 years. One of the early speakers was Rev. Peter Rasmussen of Dalum, Canada, a patriarch of the old American Evangelical Lutheran Church. The rafters rang when he sang. He never used a songbook, and always sat near Thyra Nussle and the piano.

There have been great speakers from Denmark, among them Halvdan Helweg, pastor and early leader in the American Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; folk school leaders Knud Hansen and Hans Haarder; and the Grundtvig scholar, Kai Thanning. Literally every pastor from the old

American Evangelical Lutheran Church has at one time or other been a guest speaker, plus many others who had much to share and offer to an eager audience. Women have frequently shared the podium. Mortensen continued to plan and lead the meetings.

Programs were varied, including history, literature and the humanities—and often dealing with the controversial issues of the times. Participants, in true folk school spirit, became comfortable with disagreement and discussion.

When Enok Mortensen left Danebod in 1961, other leaders were found to take his place. There was never talk of discontinuing this annual event at Danebod. At present, Ardis Petersen heads a committee which suggests and plans the program. In seeking guest speakers, the committee bears in mind the different and varied interests of participants.

In 1981, at the 35th Fall Meeting, a group of friends planted a Sunburst Locust tree near the Stone Hall as an enduring landmark. At its base is a bronze plaque inscribed with the words:

Enok Mortensen  
Vision — Action  
35 years 1981

A stone marker was considered, "But stones do not grow," said Otto Hoiberg, a long-time mainstay and loyal supporter of the meetings. Hoiberg continued, "It is a tribute to the culture, spiritual power and influence of the Fall Meeting and what it has meant to us over the years in terms of our personal growth."

#### FOOTNOTES

- 1 Through the years it has been called *Efterårsmøde*, *Dansk Folkemøde*, *Folk Meeting*.
- 2 *Schools For Life*, by Enok Mortensen, Chapter V - Danish American Heritage Society (out of print).



**Danebod Folk School - Tyler, Minnesota**