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CONCLUSION

Chicago and the Evolution of the Danish Community

As contemporaries and historians noted, the development of the ethnic American depended upon a unique blend of two cultures. This study has illustrated that fact, beginning with the sources of immigration. We found that immigration resulted from a complex interplay of European and American factors, which influenced not only the immigrant and his community, but the old culture as well. For example, the existence of plentiful American farmland led to an immigration to American farms. As American produce then rose in volume, more was exported to Europe, contributing to an agricultural crisis in Denmark. That in turn generated a new supply of Danish immigrants, many of whom became American farmers. The introduction also suggested the importance of impressions about a country or a people. Danish impressions about America contributed to the increasing flow of immigrants and their concentration in the Midwest. Native impressions about Danes were equally important and in one sense, self-fulfilling. Because Americans assumed that Danes were americanized, they never isolated the Danish immigrants. The greater contact with Americans insured that the Danes americanized rapidly, just as everyone said. This brief sketch hardly begins to explain the whys and hows of Danish-American life. But it suggests where answers might lie. As long as there are Danish-Americans, they must be viewed as products of both Denmark and America, of Danish perceptions about America and American impressions of Denmark. Such external factors as technological change and urban growth also contributed to the evolution of the Danish-American.

In assessing the forces producing an immigrant

community, one must move cautiously through the inter-related factors. But the process undoubtedly began in Denmark. Before the first immigrants thought about America, they became so dissatisfied, that they believed life had to be better in an unknown place than at home. Trends in Denmark largely determined the demographic patterns of immigration — the age, sex, occupation, and geographical background of the typical immigrant. When the first wave of immigrants reached America, elements in America greatly affected their choice of settlement, occupation, and lifestyle. The immigrants in turn influenced the Europe they had left, chiefly by means of the "immigrant letters," prepaid tickets to America, and contributions to American economic growth, while Europe seemed to stagnate.¹

In a study of the arrival and development of an immigrant group, a major theme is the attempt by the immigrants to accommodate themselves to American life. The greater the correspondence between the homeland and America, the easier the transition to a new way of life. Danes immigrated with specific expectations about America and particular skills learned at home. In large measure, they found what they expected in the United States: a nation with relatively high wages, plentiful land, and available opportunities. Luckily the Midwest allowed them to utilize the occupational assets which they brought. The large number who had worked in agriculture could become Midwestern farmers. The skilled and unskilled workers found jobs in the cities. Other nationalities were not as lucky as the Danes. Italians and Irish peasants who came to American cities brought few marketable skills. They therefore accepted unfamiliar, unskilled labor because they had no choice. Many Danes wanted to change occupations and did so as soon as they could. But few Danes were compelled to tolerate unfamiliar occupations because the new environment rendered old skills useless. Thus a major source of insecurity among many ethnic groups had little impact on the Danes. Compared to other immigrants, relatively few Danes experienced economic dislocations upon arrival.²

The Danish adaptation to American culture was as

smooth as the economic adjustment. One reason was that the Danish political tradition was similar to the American. The Danes had gradually developed a parliamentary system characterized by a written constitution, political parties, and toleration. Thus they were familiar with many of the important features of American political life. Furthermore, the Protestant Danes immigrated to a largely Protestant nation. If American Lutheran churches seemed too alien, then Norwegian-American congregations recreated the familiar religious environment.³ Even English posed few problems for the Danish immigrant.⁴ The cultural shock so noticeable with some ethnic groups was largely absent in the Danish case.

Native Americans and immigrant Danes both believed that the two groups were particularly compatible. As discussed earlier, Chicago newspapers and American nativists contrasted the Danes to other groups, finding that the Danes reinforced American virtues. Whereas Italians believed that they recreated the homeland in America, the Danes recognized that they were especially quick to adopt American ways.⁵ The similarities between the Dane and the native in occupations, culture, and impressions of each other allowed the Dane to fit into American society with extraordinary ease.⁶

This was particularly true for the Danes in Chicago. The booming city provided broad employment opportunities, especially in a few fields for which the Danes had an affinity — construction, dairy products, wood products and food processing, for instance. The newness, fluidity and wealth of life in Chicago generated an urban consensus generally favorable to immigrants who were strong, skilled and concerned about financial gain. The city particularly welcomed the Danes, who seemed less conspicuous and more americanized than other immigrants to Chicago.

In fact, Chicagoans believed that the city and the Danes benefited each other more strongly than was the case with most other nationalities.⁷ Historians have frequently recognized that immigrants brought to the city necessary workers and valuable skills.⁸ Although the Danes of Chicago

were too small a group to dramatically alter the urban economy, they were viewed as important contributors to Chicago's character and prosperity.⁹ As we have seen, the Danes supplied expertise in several crucial fields. On the other hand, Chicago exerted enormous influence on the small Danish element, especially on Danish-American institutions. The Danish mutual benefit society, for example, was an American phenomenon unknown in Europe.¹⁰ A Danish-American mutual benefit group was undeniably similar to an Italian-American group; in both cases, the institution sprang primarily from American sources.¹¹ The impact of American life led Danish-American churches to adopt an American structure, just a few years after their generation.¹² Clearly the Danes contributed to the development of Chicago, as did other immigrants. Simultaneously the small Danish community was strongly shaped by the city itself.

In spite of the city's domination, some old world heritage survived in ethnic organizations. Danish churches, for instance, retained for many years the Danish language and Danish hymns. Other groups often owed their origin to some event or tradition in Denmark — the many Danish cultural organizations were good examples. Finally the form of ethnic organizations could be influenced by old world tradition. For that reason, Chicago's Danish groups were generally based on national heritage, whereas Cleveland's Italian societies were organized according to local or regional groups.¹³ Some differences survived among the ethnic organizations of different nationalities.

Since the Danes seemed less isolated than other groups by geography and culture, I expected to discover in the Danes a relatively low level of residential concentration and a rapid transition to American cultural habits. Before 1870, the Danish community seemed highly concentrated, mostly owing to Chicago's small size and the Danish community's few members. Once the Danes grew numerically, they spread out rapidly to the northwest and the south. At no time did they constitute a majority in a single ward. In 1898, a time when the Danes were relatively numerous in Chicago,

they formed a plurality in only two precincts, out of roughly one thousand in the city.¹⁴ Even the strongest Danish neighborhoods had largely disappeared by 1920.

Danish organizations, never particularly powerful, suffered before the movement of Danish neighborhoods. Ethnic churches, so important among many nationalities, never maintained a similar hold on the Danish community, partly because of a lack of religious commitment among the Danes, and also because of a disinterest in maintaining Danish culture through Danish churches. For whatever reason, Danes worshipping in Danish churches were proportionately few in number. With migration to secondary settlements followed by dispersal, even fewer Danes supported Danish churches. Ethnic Lutherans generally joined native Lutheran churches in the new neighborhood, and the Danes were no exception.¹⁵ Not one Danish church appeared in new parts of Chicago or in the suburbs. Secular organizations generally followed the Danes as they migrated to secondary settlements. Those organizations which hesitated usually found that they eventually needed to migrate, in order to survive. Later, as the community dispersed, the societies faced an insoluble problem: where would the central organizations go, when the community itself ceased to exist? Ultimately they could go nowhere, so they died slow deaths in the old neighborhoods. These groups disappeared because their reason for existence — the Danish community — itself disappeared.

The Danish neighborhoods died partly because americanization had advanced sufficiently to destroy the sense of community. Simultaneously, population succession chipped away at the geographical basis of the settlement. The Danes seemed helpless before population succession, which first drove them from the Loop and then sent larger groups of immigrants along their path of migration. The Danish retreat partly resulted from prejudices and fears regarding other immigrant groups. But Cressy's study attributed to succession such relentlessness, it is difficult to imagine that a tiny enclave of Danes could withstand it. The Danish colony had already lost much of its sense of unity

and community, because of growth, expansion and americanization. Population succession dealt the final blow. The growing and changing city, which had supported the Danish neighborhoods, finally destroyed them.

In so doing, Chicago and other American cities lost something unique. They lost some of the diversity, enthusiasm and unbounded optimism which the immigrants brought. Along with the immigrants' indomitable spirit, Chicagoans sacrificed a bit of their faith in the ability of an individual to survive and succeed in a huge metropolis.

While they survived, ethnic neighborhoods were workable, understandable regions in an overwhelming, incomprehensible city. These settlements disappeared at a time when Americans increasingly complained about the alienation and fragmentation of urban life. Possibly the urbanite reacted to the loss of neighborhoods which mediated between the individual and the overgrown city. In earlier days the immigrant had always found a home in the ethnic community. When his world vanished, we, the urban natives, became the aliens.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 For evidence supporting the theory that the American economy was overtaking Europe, see Chapter I, especially the discussions of American grain entering Europe, wages in Denmark and America, and prices in Denmark and America.
- 2 Handlin and Nelli stressed the difficulties in economic adjustment among the Irish and the Italians, respectively. Handlin, *op. cit.*, chapter 3. Nelli, *op. cit.*, 20, 55-87.
- 3 This view was held by the Danish Church itself. Trinity, *op. cit.*, 26-29.
- 4 See my introduction.
- 5 Nelli, *op. cit.*, 10-11. Bille, *op. cit.*, 8. Fonkalsrud, *op. cit.*, 39. Nelson, *op. cit.*, 49, 66. Riismøller, *op. cit.*, 92-93, 103. Flom, *op. cit.*, 91. Skaardal, *op. cit.*, 87, 113, 145. Marzolf, *op. cit.*, 1, 18, 213.
- 6 In my discussion of occupations, I showed that the Danes were spread as widely as the native population, with few major areas of concentration.

- 7 *Chicago Record-Herald*, July 24, 1901. *Chicago Tribune*, June 6, 1886. Both cited in Bessie Louise Pierce Papers, University of Chicago.
- 8 Handlin, *op. cit.*, 74-75.
- 9 *Chicago Record-Herald*, July 24, 1901. *Chicago Tribune*, June 6, 1886. Both cited in Bessie Louise Pierce Papers, University of Chicago.
- 10 Handlin, *op. cit.*, 176. Nelli, *op. cit.*, 156-7, 170-76.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 156-7, 170-76. Handlin, *op. cit.*, 160, 176.
- 12 Nyholm, *op. cit.*, 99.
- 13 Barton, *op. cit.*, 60-62. See my previous chapter, as well.
- 14 *School Census of 1898*, *op. cit.* This census was the only one tabulated by precincts.
- 15 Hansen, *op. cit.*, 146-147.

