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"Schools For Life"

By Harold Petersen

A man having read *Schools For Life* remarked, "It is a good book, but Enok still hasn't told us what a folk school is." I doubt that there is any living American today who knows better what a folk school is than Enok Mortensen. If he has not defined what a folk school is through the pages of his book it is because the folk school cannot be defined in such a way that it has meaning to a person who does not know what the folk school is. It has to be experienced. It carries with it a spirit that one comes to carry within one's whole being and comes to be expressed in words and deeds and attitudes in one's life.

Enok Mortensen, throughout his book, does reflect those inner values that the Folk School gave him. About his first Folk School experience at Nysted in Nebraska he writes, "For me it was a rejuvenating experience, listening and learning. From one point of view it was like coming home to find half-forgotten values, and I cherish the cozy little world of the school, a close knit community of kindred souls; but paradoxically the world also widened and became larger and I sensed new goals and purposes for my life." . . . "With mind awakened and imagination kindled my heart from then on belong to Nysted and to the Folk School."

The first chapter of the book is devoted to the background of the Folk School in Denmark and N.F.S. Grundtvig's emphasis on "enlightenment of life." In this chapter he also tells about the first folk schools and the early leaders such as Christian Flor, Rasmus Sorensen and Christen Kold.

However, most of the book deals with the history of life, the aspirations, the ideals and the struggles of the Folk School and its leaders in America. A valuable historical description is presented of six of the schools that were in operation for years on American soil. The first, Elk Horn, Iowa, was founded in 1878. Then followed Ashland in Michigan, Nysted in Nebraska, Danebod in Tyler, Minnesota, Atterdag in Solvang, California and Dalum in Canada.

As we read about the frustrations, the lack of funds for operation, frequently a lack of students, and lack of sufficient community interest, we can realize that those who worked to

build the Folk Schools were dedicated people who had a vision and a purpose in mind. They were looking beyond mere institutions toward communities enriched by the lives of men and women who had tasted the good life in the close knit type of living which the school had given them.

Mortensen tells about at least two instances where the school burned—enough to make the weak-hearted abandon any further attempts to pursue the course they had begun. But the schools were rebuilt, and larger than before. In spite of the other hardships four of the schools continued to draw students until the early 1930s. Even after they ceased to exist their influence has been felt through those who attended them and through their contributions to the life of church and community in the areas where they lived.

It must not be overlooked that Enok Mortensen pays tribute to the men and women who were the leaders in these schools. Each school strongly reflected the personality and the intellect of the man at the helm. This writer remembers well the day when the Folk Schools were not always called by name, but referred to as "Knudsen's School", or "Højbjerg's School", "Aage Møller's School", "Evald Kristensen's School", etc. Enok Mortensen has given us an excellent portrayal of the leaders, pointing to their strength, and to some degree, to their weaknesses. This is important. Without the inspired and dedicated leaders there would have been no folk schools.

Mortensen ends his book with the following paragraph: "The indisputable fact is that in spite of failures and incredible obstacles, the Folk School for almost 60 years succeeded in contacting thousands of Danish American young people whose lives were enriched, touched by a spirit, surrounded by a climate difficult to classify or define, but an essence which in many instances gave their lives content, meaning and identity. Though the Danish American folk schools have been failures in surviving the process of being transplanted to American soil, they were not failures to those whose intellects were sharpened, whose curiosity for learning was stimulated and whose hearts were warmed and challenged to nobler achievements."

If you know what the folk school was, you will find yourself in the midst of great memories as you read the book. If you do not know the Folk School you will find Enok Mortensen's book informative and good reading.

The book costs \$5.00, postpaid, and may be ordered from the Danish American Heritage Society, 29672 Dane Lane, Junction City, Oregon 97448.

Schools For Life--A Danish American Experiment in Adult Education by Enok Mortensen, American Publishing Company, Askov, Minnesota, 1977.

Harold Petersen was for more than 30 years a pastor serving Danish American congregations in the former American Evangelical Lutheran Church. In his early years he was closely associated with many of the leaders of the Danish Folk Schools in this country. He is presently retired and lives in Tyler, Minnesota.