The Transformation of Chris Madsen in 1875-76: From Troubled Young Man in Denmark to Mature Wild West Hero in America

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In October 2018, I published a book about Chris Madsen with the title *Et liv på kanten. En biografisk fortælling om Chris Madsen’s utrolige liv* (A life on the edge. A biography about the incredible life of Chris Madsen). The second edition, which I cite in this article, was published in 2019. This book grew out of two separate projects: one aimed at publishing texts that can encourage boys and men to read more books (again), and another focused on Danish emigration to the US in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Apart from my own workplace, the University of Aarhus, the partners in the latter project are University College Lillebælt, the Danish Village Museum (*Den fynske Landsby*) and the Museum of Danish America in Iowa. We hope to make the exciting enigma of Chris Madsen’s life better known, so it can be studied and discussed by many more Danes and Americans. The themes of his life are still highly relevant, e.g., the importance of education, avoiding poverty, building character, developing grit, integration of immigrants, and enhancing social mobility.
(Andersen 2019, 11-15). However, every time Chris Madsen's name is brought up, a basic question always arises: who was he really? Hero or villain? Johan Windmuller's article “A Question of Motive: The Chris Madsen Story Revisited,” which appeared in The Bridge in 2007, sums up the predominant answer: “Although Madsen did accomplish a lot in his life, some of which could be described as heroic and adventurous, the truth remains that most of Madsen’s exploits were nothing but wishful thinking and creative storytelling” (Windmuller 2007, 59).

Windmuller’s article has many details right, but since he wrote it, we have discovered that to some extent Madsen’s exploits were after all more fact than fiction. Together with both Danish and American colleagues, I have found new sources pointing to a different, more complex and somewhat more positive answer to the question of the true personality and identity of Chris Madsen. In this article, I will try to illustrate this. In his biography Trigger Marshal (1958), Homer Croy claims that Chris Madsen should be considered one of the greatest Wild West heroes, given his many years in government service and the number of his public accomplishments. Madsen had his bad moments and dark sides, and he crossed the line of the law several times during his long life, but so did Wyatt Earp and Wild Bill Hickok. So why didn’t Madsen, even before Nancy Samuelson (1998) and Ernst (2003) published their negative accounts, ever get the same attention or acquire the same status as Earp, Hickok, and other Western heroes?

There are several possible explanations for this discrepancy. First of all, Madsen came from the bottom of Danish society; his family were poor farm laborers and when he arrived in the US in 1876, Chris Madsen had no family, no friends, no relatives, no contacts and no money to support him in his new country. He was all on his own—he had to learn and earn everything from scratch all by himself. As an ex-convict, deported to the US by the Danish prison authorities, he saw no other choice than to enlist in the US Cavalry, which at the time had recruitment offices in New York, where Chris Madsen arrived on a cold January day in 1876. The US army gave him no instruction and no basic military training—instead he was sent directly to the war on the western frontier. Yet somehow, Chris Madsen managed. He survived, he learned everything the hard way. He gradually grew to meet the challenges. He was empathic and earned the friendship of his fel-
low soldiers, the appreciation of his superiors and the respect of his enemies, and thus he slowly became a better version of himself. His story is one of never giving up, never ceasing to learn, always looking for new solutions in the midst of disappointments, and building friendships all through life. During his fifteen years in the military, he eventually worked his way upwards, as high as you can get in the military ranks without having an officer’s education. Upon leaving the army, he became a deputy US Marshal for an even longer period.

Another explanation for Chris Madsen’s lack of fame could be his language: throughout his sixty-seven years in the US, he spoke English with a very thick Danish accent. Still, thanks to the good basic education he had received in his childhood and youth in Denmark, he quickly picked up English upon his arrival to the US. Thus, he was able to understand and read English after just a few months in America. However, as mentioned before, all through his many years in America his oral English was never convincing. In a radio recording of Chris Madsen from the 1930s his dialect is still, after around six decades in the US, very distinctly Danish. He loved writing, but Danish remained his favored language, even decades after his arrival in the US. He wrote his autobiography in 1920-21, forty-five years after he first set foot on American soil, in Danish – and kept his diaries, poems, etc. in Danish for decades after immigrating to the US.

A third explanation for his lack of status as a western hero could be his looks. Unlike Earp, Buffalo Bill, and Hickok, who had more classical, masculine, tall good looks, Madsen was rather short, stout and a bit overweight. He had large hands, big feet, and staring eyes, so he wasn’t exactly the handsome Hollywood dreamboat.

Finally, Madsen’s formative childhood and youth years in Denmark were full of troubles and trauma. Besides coming from the unskilled farm labor bottom of Danish society, he grew up at a time when his old fatherland was collapsing, and several tragedies stuck to him throughout his life. The Danish defeat in the German-Danish war of 1864 was devastating: Denmark lost almost half of its territory and population to Germany, the large Danish army of conscripts was badly defeated, you could say humiliated, and thousands of the soldiers were killed, crippled, wounded, and/or imprisoned by the enemy. It created a national depression. Major commercial and cultural
centers and cities like Haderslev, Sønderborg, Flensburg, and Slesvig became German, and the loss of them was problematic for both the Danish economy and identity. The introduction of constitutional democracy in 1849 was partly reversed due to the 1864 defeat. The rich land owners and the aristocracy, whose power had been limited with the new democratic constitution, used the moment of defeat in 1864 to seize power again, introducing a kind of martial law. It created a tense political situation that gave rise to groups of armed peasants, social democrats, and unionization movements, the latter being forbidden at the time with labor leaders persecuted and jailed.

The country was in a state of decay (a bit like the situation in the American South after the Civil War 1861-65), and Madsen lived through it all. Strikes and other types of unrest thus followed – and a huge part of the entire Danish population immigrated to the US after the 1864 defeat and the following turmoil. Many veterans of the 1864 war joined the emigration tide and, like Madsen, enrolled in the US military. Several of them died in the Indian wars; there were three Danes among the fallen at Little Bighorn. Chris Madsen thus grew up in an environment of unrest, instability, poverty, unemployment, national break down, union strikes, rising crime rates, political turmoil and radicalization. He became part of it all and eventually ended in prison but reduced his sentence by accepting forced emigration to the US. Emigration indeed changed the negative course of his life – his life in the US was a remarkable story of successful integration and a good example of the social mobility that the US could offer immigrants at the time.

Still, there were a few incidents during his many years in America when Chris Madsen reverted to his old habits. According to Samuelson, court records show that he was convicted of federal larceny in 1881. Samuelson says that the records are not clear about what that exactly entailed, but it had the consequence that Madsen served five months, from June 6 to November 6, 1881, in the Wyoming Territorial Prison (Samuelson 1998, 15).

Around Christmas 1875, Chris Madsen immigrated to the US, arriving in New York harbor two weeks later. 1876 thus became the transformative year in his life. It would forever change him for the better, adding "American" to "Danish." However, before we look closer
at that decisive year in Madsen’s life, let us go back to the beginning, to the quiet little village of Ørsted on the western end of the Danish island Fyn (usually called “Funen” in English) in the year 1851.

Danish emigrants at the harbor of Copenhagen wait for the America boat around the time that Chris Madsen made the voyage across the Atlantic. Painting by artist Edvard Petersen. Used with permission from The Royal Danish Library.

A Quiet Childhood on the Island of Fyn

Christen Madsen was born February 25, 1851 in a family of farm workers in the village of Ørsted. His parents, Mads and Maren Madsen, were both around forty years old at the time of his birth, making them relatively old parents by the standard of the time. He was their first and only child together, but Maren already had four children, Kirsten, Karen, Niels, and Jørgen, from an earlier marriage (her former husband having died of disease) (Ernst 2003, 33; Andersen, 2019, 23-4). Thus, Christen grew up as the youngest in a family of seven.
Christen Madsen’s parents were poor, unskilled farm hands but not entirely on the bottom rung of society. They did live in a little rented house that they could consider their own, at least as long as they could work. The house was called “Rørmosehuset” (the bog hay house) and, besides being the home of the Madsen family, it hosted the local post office. Therefore, in addition to working at local farms, Madsen’s parents also were postal workers, running the post office as well as delivering mail to local residents.
As soon as Chris Madsen started to go to school at the age of seven, he also assisted his parents in their work: doing chores in the house and garden, laboring at the big farms in the area, and delivering mail. Chris Madsen delivered mail to addresses throughout the local area. At the wealthy end, these included impressive manor houses, inhabited by rich aristocrats, while at the other, poor seasonal farm workers, including gypsies and illegal immigrants from Eastern Europe, lived in shacks, sheds, outhouses, barns and wagons. In between these extremes, the local area mainly consisted of farmers, craftsmen, teachers, millers, clerks, teamsters and business people living in small houses in the village or close to the large manor houses. But Chris grew up very much aware of the huge differences, inequalities, and divisions within nineteenth-century northern European society—a fact that was also aggressively addressed by new political movements of the time, such as union and social democratic organizations (Andersen 2019, 47-53).

Young Chris was both attracted to and appalled by the luxurious life style of the upper classes. He dreamed about living like that, but at the same time, he distanced himself from the posh and extravagant culture of the aristocracy. He was constantly aware of the fact that his family barely survived and existed at the brink of extreme poverty. The post office gave them a roof, beds, a kitchen, a fireplace, a vegetable garden, and a place in the hierarchy just above those at the bottom. However, Chris knew very well that if one of his relatively old parents should one day become ill and no longer be able to work, the entire family could fall into the abyss immediately and could be forced to leave the post office house and suddenly find themselves on the street.

In 1814, Denmark had introduced universal and compulsory basic school education for all children from the age of seven to fourteen, finishing with graduation and confirmation in the Danish Lutheran state church (Folkekirken) at the end of seventh grade. Therefore, as a boy Chris Madsen went to school in the local village school for seven years. At school, Chris was a smart and polite student who earned good grades. The vicar at the local church, who taught Chris theology in seventh grade, praised him and offered him a temporary job as a helping hand at the vicar’s farm and at the church after graduation. Chris accepted this offer and consequently worked the whole summer
of 1865 for the vicar and his wife. That summer he applied for the fall term at the new local agriculture college (*Folkehøjskole*) in Kauslunde, which had recently been founded by three veterans of the 1864 war.

During Chris’ last school years and summer job at the vicar’s, the dramatic events before, during, and after the war of 1864 between Denmark and Prussia took place right on his doorstep. Chris Madsen was only thirteen years old then, and, contrary to what he later claimed, he did not participate in the actual battles, but he probably worked in the military camps situated around his home in the spring of 1864. Chris Madsen could also for a brief period have been a drummer boy at the front. Boys his age did participate in this capacity – and some simply ran away from school to join. The western part of Funen, where the Madsen home was located, was where the Danish army regrouped, rested, and mustered new recruits, close to the battlefields of southern Jutland but protected by the straits between Funen and Jutland. Denmark still ruled the seas of the area back then, her navy being stronger than that of Germany. A German-Austrian fleet was defeated in the violent sea battle of Helgoland in the spring of 1864, and the Danes won in other small naval battles in that war for control of the islands along the German-Danish North Sea coastline (Andersen 2019, 31-46).

Chris’ two older brothers, Niels and Jørgen, were old enough for regular military service. They were drafted to serve in the war, as were almost all the older boys and younger men Chris Madsen had grown up with and knew in the area. Denmark had introduced compulsory national service with the introduction of the new democratic constitution of 1849 and large Danish units of both cavalry, infantry, artillery and navy were stationed in the neighborhood of Ørsted, close to the important coastal towns and harbors of Assens, Strib and Middelfart before, during, and after the war. Assens was also the Danish army headquarters during the summer of 1864. Niels was a soldier in the Danish Fourth Cavalry Division and a member of the special force called Aaroe’s Commando Regiment after its commander, Lieutenant Bernd Aaroe. This regiment engaged in a few spectacular and daring, albeit rather ineffective, cavalry raids on the German forces. On a smaller scale, this unit can be compared to the Confederate cavalry unit under General Bedford Forrest in the American Civil War. Niels probably came home during leave as his unit was stationed in Assens,
just six miles from the Madsen home in Ørsted. The Aaroe commando unit is especially interesting, not just because Chris Madsen’s brother was part of it, but also because the false identity that Chris Madsen would adopt during his conman years, Lieutenant Carl Daniel Hoff­man, is based on a real person with that name from that unit. No doubt Chris Madsen heard many stories about the daring activities of Carl Daniel Hoffmann from his brother when he was at home during and after the war (Andersen 2019, 31-46).

A unit in Aaroe’s Commando Regiment, 1864. 
Used with permission from the Royal Danish Library.

Bad Luck, Sickness, and Despair in Copenhagen

After graduating from the agricultural college at Kauslunde, Chris Madsen returned to his home in Ørsted for a year or so. He worked at neighboring farms and manor houses as well as assisting his parents with the postal services, just as before. At the same time, though, he started to apply for more attractive jobs that were better suited to his new educational level. Just like many young people today, Chris wanted to move closer to a bigger city, preferably the capital Copenhagen, by far the largest city in the country. Consequently, he applied
to agricultural work places, large manor houses, aristocratic estates, etc. close to Copenhagen.

Copenhagen labor team from the time when Chris Madsen moved to the city. Used with permission from the Royal Danish Library.

Chris Madsen and a classmate from Kauslunde Agricultural School around 1866. Used with permission from Vends Herreds Udgiverselskab (Vends Country Publishers)
In the spring of 1868, he got a positive response from the famous Eremitage Estate, known for providing hunting and dining services for the royal family, situated just a few miles north of Copenhagen, offering him a temporary job as a coachman. Although he was overeducated for the position, it was exactly the kind of workplace he had dreamed of, which allowed him to live and work close to the upper classes and close to the capital area (Ernst 2003, 40-45).

In the summer of 1868, Madsen went to Copenhagen, rented a room in the city, and in every way enjoyed his new life in the capital, close to high society and the royals. Unfortunately, his luck and happiness only lasted a few months. In late fall 1868 Madsen became sick. We do not know what disease he had—probably a severe flu—but it sent him to bed for weeks. As his position was just a temporary one, he was fired after just a few days’ absence. There was no public welfare system to support a young unfortunate worker in those days—no work, no pay. Fortunately, Madsen had saved some money, so he could stay in his Copenhagen room over the winter. As his condition improved, he started looking for work, but he would not take just an-
ything—he still wanted something similar to what he had started with in Copenhagen. No dirty, low paid factory work for Chris Madsen. He had his fine education and wanted an appropriate position.

When the first signs of spring appeared early in 1869, Chris Madsen had recovered completely; unfortunately, he had also used up all his savings, and still had not found an acceptable job. Therefore, he was unable to pay the monthly rent for his room. The property owner had no mercy for this farm boy from the province, and he threw Madsen out right away. Suddenly he was alone in the street with no job, no money, nowhere to sleep, and nothing to eat. A shocking experience—something the eighteen-year-old boy from Funen never thought could happen to him. Yesterday he was close to realizing his dreams of a fine job and the good life in the better parts of Copenhagen, today he was in the gutter, marginalized, poor, hungry, and helpless. What a social decline! But what could he actually do? He did not really know—he was bewildered and bitter, sorry for himself and afraid. How should he get something to eat? Where should he sleep the coming night? Would he be arrested for staying overnight in the street? There were no obvious answers, but Chris Madsen soon realized that he had to hurry home to his parents and family in Ørsted.

There was one problem though: he had no money for the train and ferry needed to bring him back to his island, and without any property, he could not get a loan in a bank. He had heard, though, about something called a “pawnshop,” where you could apparently get a loan “on your bare face.” He went to the nearest local pawnshop, where he found a whole bunch of people waiting to get a loan, lining up on the pavement. What he saw there, though, was appalling: in the line, there were beggars, hoboes, cripples, gypsies, drunks, immigrants, etc. What a pile of misery in one place. He lined up with all this lowlife, a shocking experience for young Chris Madsen, who had never imagined there could be so much grief and poverty in his beloved Copenhagen. The Copenhagen pawnshops back then were indeed traps, dangerous places for poor, unemployed, sick, and homeless people to go. They were more than just normal pawnshops, they were also loan shark offices, and poor people could easily get up to their ears in debt there. A Danish newspaper from that year, 1869, reports, "What really can destroy poor individuals from the working class are
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these new pawnshops,” going on to note that the ridiculously high pawnshop interest rates could reach 60-70 percent annually. Besides, the loan sharks in the shops had their own “methods” to make sure they got their money and interest back (Ernst 2003, 47).

Now that Madsen had some money, he could start the journey home. He walked to the Copenhagen central railway station, bought his ticket, and got on the train. He probably enjoyed the ride through Copenhagen and the rolling farmlands of the island of Zealand outside the city. What an experience – what a great technological time to be alive! His optimism and hopes for the future may have resembled those he had the year before, when he took the trip in the opposite direction. After a couple of hours’ ride, he reached the ferry town of Korsør at the western end of Zealand. As Madsen stepped out on the platform and walked towards the ferry harbor, he may very well, having an ear for music, have hummed or sung one of the most beloved Danish songs of the time, “Velkommen lærkelil!” (“Welcome, Little Lark”), composed in 1868 by Christian Richardt, the vicar at the local church in Ørsted: “Velkommen lærkelil, jeg ved ej strengespil, så sødt og rent og jublende så vide, som disse tonedrag de glade klokkeslag, der ringer våren ind ved vintertide” (Welcome little lark, no string music is so sweet and jubilant as your happy bells, greeting spring after winter) (Andersen 2019, 53).

A Fateful Decision at the Ferry Inn

Chris Madsen’s joyful mood was replaced by irritation and worry at the harbor, where he was told that the expected ferry departure was delayed until next day. Having used almost all of his (borrowed) money for the train and ferry tickets, he had virtually nothing left, just enough to for the ferry inn. Going to that inn turned out to be a fateful decision for Chris Madsen, which would change his life forever. At the inn Madsen met a con man, who introduced him to his “business.” The con man showed him an elegantly written document describing the misfortunes of a sergeant during and after the Danish-German war of 1864, signed by several prominent people, such as doctors, vicars, counts, and lawyers. All the signatures recommended the sergeant as worthy of a small donation to support him in his plan to join the French Foreign Legion, hoping that he this way could help France
win its impending war with Germany and thus avenge and give satisfaction to Denmark for its losses in 1864.

Chris read it all thoroughly and was impressed. The con man told him that many rich and influential people, after being presented with this document, gave him a small—some even a larger—amount of money. Chris thought this sounded very tempting. Maybe he should try it himself for a short period? If he could “earn” some money this way, he could pay back his loans and interest from the pawnshop in Copenhagen, and then return to more honest work afterwards. Chris probably felt it was somehow harmless to try it for a while, since he would not really be robbing or threatening anybody: he would simply peacefully knock on the doors of rich people and present his document. This would not harm anyone, and if the rich people he addressed gave him a few pennies, it would not matter to them. In addition, they could simply just turn him down, and he would walk away peacefully. Chris Madsen had always had a lively imagination, which he retained throughout his life. He loved to listen to, read, tell, and even write good stories. Chris had probably always been fond of the exciting, though also terrifying, stories his brothers had told about the Danish-German war. As mentioned earlier, one character in particular seems to have caught his interest: the Danish lieutenant Carl Daniel Hoffmann from Aaroe’s Commando Regiment. Hoffmann seems to have been Madsen’s hero: a true patriot, a good comrade, a competent soldier, and a real daredevil. Madsen may have dreamed about being like
him—and soon he would walk around the country pretending to be Hoffman, begging for money for an unfortunate patriot and veteran (Andersen 2019, 62-63).

A very dangerous idea had now taken root in Madsen’s eighteen-year-old mind, and over the coming years he would continue to develop his new identity as—and story about—Lieutenant Carl Daniel Hoffmann, walking around the country begging for money. A year later, in 1870, when the war between France and Germany actually finally broke out, he adjusted his document accordingly, adding a forged statement and signature from cavalry colonel Trepka, dated November 3, 1870, that testified:

Lieutenant Carl Daniel Hoffmann is a highly decorated officer from the war in 1864, and he has continued his service in the Danish armed forces since then. I consider him one of the best and most competent lieutenants in the cavalry. He is momentarily relieved from his duties in the Danish army so that he can volunteer for the French side in the ongoing war between France and Germany.

Trepka finishes by recommending that the reader give Hoffmann a small donation for his travel to France (Ernst 2003, 119). As quite a number of Danish veterans of the 1864 war, among them Captain Wilhelm Dinesen, the father of the future Danish author Karen Blixen, did in fact travel to France to volunteer for the French army in its 1870 war with Germany, the plea was credible.

Thus began Chris Madsen’s four-year period as a con man, which ended with his arrest, conviction, and a multi-year prison sentence in 1874, which he avoided by agreeing to be deported to the US in late 1875. The Carl Daniel Hoffmann fraud initially brought Chris moments of exuberance and happiness, but he kept struggling with his conscience about it. He would periodically drop the con business and return to honest work, but whenever he got sacked or lacked money he would take the swindle up again. The court sent Chris Madsen to the new prison, Vridsløselille, where he endured harsh conditions, lousy food, and forced labor. He grabbed the chance to get out of it when the prison authorities offered a reduced sentence in exchange for accepting transportation to the US (Andersen 2019, 86).
Chris Madsen Arrives in New York, January 1876

Chris Madsen left Denmark on December 28, 1875. He had accepted the offer of substantial reduced imprisonment on condition that he sign a contract agreeing never to return to Denmark (Ernst 2003, 189). While aboard ship across the Atlantic, Chris apparently decided to quit the con business for good, and to try to cover up his Danish con man period upon his arrival to the US. Actually, he had little choice in the matter—deportees like Chris were instructed by prison authorities to lie about crimes committed in the old country in order to avoid being sent back. Consequently, he presented himself to the US authorities as a mixture of his own identity and his fictional alter-ego, Carl Daniel Hoffmann. He arrived in New York on a bitterly cold winter day, January 17, 1876. He passed the port authority interview, but he immediately faced another serious challenge: he had absolutely no one to contact in America, no friends or relatives, and, worst of all, almost no money. He desperately needed to find a job quickly; without work, he risked being deported back to Denmark – and imprisoned there again. Madsen later wrote, “It was in the middle of winter and a great many unemployed men walked up and down the streets to look for jobs. I had neither friends nor relatives, and the little money I had left would not last long, so I was desperate to find a job quickly” (Madsen 1921, 8).

He decided to try his luck with the US military, which, as his biographer Croy explains, was a fortunate choice:

Chris didn’t know it, but he had come at exactly the right time and to the right place. The great Indian campaigns were on, and they were not doing well. So greatly did the US Army need recruits, that it was signing them up in New York City. Sergeants walked the streets; when they saw a young man who might develop into a fine Indian fighter, they would go up to him and tell him about the glories of Indian fighting. (Croy 1958, 3)

When Chris encountered a recruitment sergeant on the street in New York, he may have asked the sergeant in English as best he could, as Croy imagines on the basis of interviews conducted with Madsen’s son Reno: “Where is eet peoples sign oop to join the war against the
Indians?” Once he understood the question, the sergeant would have smiled and said, “You come with me,” and marched him to a nearby US Army recruitment office. After being interviewed by an officer, for whom he would have repeated his story from the port authority interview, a doctor would have examined him and may have asked, “Did you know, when you came in, that we are now enrolling men to join the [...] cavalry [out west]?” (Croy 1958, 6). To this exciting news, Chris may have answered something like, “No, sir, I did not know eet. I have a goot piece of luck, is it not zo?,” to which the doctor could have responded, “I think we want you. Due to your military background in Europe, you will not have to be trained over here. We are enrolling you now for the cavalry, and we can start you out West at once” (Croy 1958, 7). Chris Madsen’s plan had worked; his story was accepted, and he was enlisted in the US Army, just as he had hoped. After a few more days in New York, Chris found himself on a train, heading west to the battlefields of the northern plains.

A New Life as a Soldier on the Western Frontier

After leaving New York in late January 1876 by train, Chris Madsen reached his first Western destination at Fort Hays in Kansas some days later, where he joined the Fifth Cavalry Regiment (Madsen, 1921, 19). The Fifth Cavalry Regiment would be Madsen’s home for the next fifteen years. The regiment consisted of 1,200-2,000 soldiers, and Madsen was in Troop A, which had about 100-150 cavalrymen. The Fifth was heavily involved in the ongoing war against the Sioux and Cheyenne tribes of the northern plains. Although unscathed by the defeat that Custer’s infamous Seventh Cavalry suffered on June 25 that year, the hardships Chris would go through with the Fifth Cavalry Regiment the coming half year were considerable, similar to what many other US soldiers at the time experienced on the western frontier (Finerty 1955, 280-302; Samuelson 1998, 17-18). Over the coming months many of the men in the Fifth Cavalry would either die, be wounded, get sick, starve, go crazy, be discharged due to incompetence, or desert the regiment, but not Madsen. It is a mystery how he managed the campaign hardships so well. One explanation, besides his grit, intelligence, and social skills, could be that Chris preferred all the challenges and problems of the campaign to the depressing
prison life in Vridsløselille penitentiary. He was ready to ride any distance, fight any enemy, eat any food, and suffer any wounds, hardships and diseases to avoid being sent back to that prison (Andersen 2019, 150-164).

In any case, the regiment's month-long stay at Fort Hays was important in getting Chris accustomed to the chores and routines of the cavalry in fairly peaceful and safe surroundings, far away from the battlefields further north. Chris also experienced and got used to extreme weather conditions at Fort Hays. His life had changed drastically over just a few weeks. In December, he was still serving a long prison sentence in Vridsløselille penitentiary in Copenhagen; at the turn of the year, he sailed across the Atlantic Ocean, in mid-January he walked the streets of New York, and now by February he was a soldier on the western frontier, on the lonesome prairie, in this remote fort in a strange land with bitterly cold weather. The army he had joined was multicultural: many of the privates, like Chris, were newly arrived immigrants from Europe, primarily Germany, Ireland, Poland, Switzerland – and Denmark. According to Utley (1973) about half of the recruits in the US military at this point were foreign-born. There were more Irish than any other nationality, over 20 percent. In some instances, Danish and German immigrants, who a few years before had been bitter opponents on the battlefields of the Jutland peninsula in northern Europe, now served in the same American military units, facing a mutual enemy in their new, shared fatherland. It was similar to what American soldiers who had originally fought on opposing sides in the Civil War also experienced out west.

Many of the immigrant soldiers, like Chris, had been tempted to join the army by the lure of quick citizenship and a fixed, basic, secure – however small – monthly income over a five-year contract (Agnew 2008, 95). This was exactly what Chris Madsen had planned for—for him, earning thirteen dollars every month for five years was far better than prison, where he had received no pay at all. The pay was low, that was true, but it was honest and respectable work with future perspectives; if his service was satisfactory, he could sign up for another five-year contract, plus he was entitled to a small pension fund, which contributed one dollar to the soldier's pension account for each month in service. In addition, he had hopes of promotion and gradual
pay and pension increases over the years, which Madsen thought was fantastic (Madsen 1921, 13).

However, for most young American men at the time, an army career was not attractive. A few years earlier, Army wages had been reduced from sixteen to thirteen dollars a month. In addition, the quality of equipment, food, weaponry, uniforms and quarter standards was quite low due to the massive cuts after the Civil War. With regard to uniforms, Agnew explains, “In an attempt to save money in the lean economic times following the [Civil] war, Congress insisted that the army use as much of the [Civil War] stockpile as possible. Unfortunately, due to hasty wartime construction, much of the stock was shoddy and of varying grades of color. Furthermore, it had often been stored under poor conditions, which led to deterioration—mildew and moths ruined most of the uniforms” (Agnew 2008, 97). The situation was the same with regard to boots, hats, belts, saddles, guns, etc.; the outdated and deteriorated stockpiles from the Civil War had to be used on the western frontier, regardless of suitability (98-101). In practice this led to a situation where many soldiers, enlisted men as well as officers, “wore whatever they liked” and tried to get better equipment of their own (101). Even General George Crook, under whom Madsen’s regiment served, wore whatever he liked during the 1876 campaign. Captain Charles King, serving in the Fifth Cavalry with Madsen, observed, “General Crook was in a rough hunting rig, and in all his staff and line there was not one complete suit of uniform. Left to our fancy in the matter […] we were attired in deerskin, buckskin, flannels and corduroy; in the Fifth Cavalry you could not have told officer from private” (Finerty 1955, 249).

After some months in Kansas, Chris Madsen and the Fifth were sent further north to Fort D. A. Russell, closer to the battlefields. Chris Madsen felt excitement in the air: “There was to be a battle […]. We would cover ourselves with glory. We would twist Sitting Bull’s tail. We would make him paw dirt” (dialogue based on Croy 1958, 8; Madsen 1921,11-16). At Fort D. A. Russell in the spring of 1876, Chris Madsen caught a glimpse of the most impressive, fairy tale-like person he had ever seen in his life. Croy imagines the incident happening in this way:
There came swinging toward him the most gorgeous human being Chris had ever seen. He wore black velvet trousers with a lacework of gold strings, a belt with enough silver ornaments to fill a store window, a hat that looked like something used by the freshman class in a high-school play, and hair to his shoulders. This extraordinary gentleman marched on by, his chin in the air, speaking to no one. ... Chris edged over to one of the men and said:

"Who was that?"

"That was Buffalo Bill."

"What does he do?" asked the puzzled Chris.

"He’s an actor, but now he is going to be our scout," answered the fellow soldier.

(Croy 1958, 8-9)

Chris Madsen would soon learn much more about Buffalo Bill, as they would share center stage in a disputed skirmish that has gone into history as a kind of turning point in the campaign of 1876.

The Skirmish at War Bonnet Creek

Around the same time Chris Madsen first caught a glimpse of Buffalo Bill at Fort D. A. Russell, the 1876 campaign experienced two major setbacks, namely at the Battle of Rosebud on June 17, and, the week after, the devastating defeat at Little Bighorn on June 25. Crook’s forces, which had suffered the setback at Rosebud, were now to receive reinforcements and try, once again to find the Native American tribes, defeat them and force them back onto their reservations. Madsen’s regiment was among the reinforcements. On their way north to join Crook’s forces, now called the “Yellowstone Column,” the Fifth Cavalry Regiment under General Wesley Merritt made a stopover at Fort Laramie. A large group of Cheyenne hostiles had been observed in the area, and the cavalry regiment was ordered to attack in order to prevent them from joining the main bands of Sioux and Cheyenne on the warpath further north.

The stop delayed Crook’s campaign, and the general later regretted that he waited for General Merritt and his Fifth Cavalry. Crook
Buffalo Bill in his characteristic outfit. Photographer Joseph Gessford. Used with permission from the Denver Public Library. Western History Collection Z-3604.
was already far behind schedule due to the ill-fated battles of Rosebud and Little Bighorn in June. Finerty reports, “Major T. H. Stanton [...] brought information to Merritt on Saturday, July 15th, that eight hundred warriors fully armed and equipped would leave [the area] early Sunday morning for the purpose of joining the hostiles in the Big Horn region” (Finerty 1955, 223). In the early morning on Monday, July 17, 1876, the regiment was ready to confront the hostiles close to Fort Laramie. Chris Madsen, Buffalo Bill, and five other soldiers were ordered to ride ahead of the regiment to scout for the enemy. It was in the middle of summer, blistering hot and extremely dry. The scouts wanted to get as far ahead as possible before noon, where sun and heat would be the worst. After a couple of hours, they reached a flat hill by a creek called “War Bonnet Creek” (Finerty 1955, 219-36).

Sources disagree on what happened next. According to Madsen (1921) and Croy (1958), Chris was at the center of events.² Croy, citing Madsen, describes the encounter as follows:

Standing on that flat hill in the morning July 17, Chris, Buffalo Bill and the other five scouts did spot a large group of enemies on horseback. They looked like being a war party. Buffalo Bill, who was in charge of the small unit of scouts, ordered a couple of them to ride back to the main 5th Cavalry column, being just a few miles behind, and inform the commander, General Merritt about the observation. Meanwhile Chris, Bill and the other three scouts continued to approach the enemy, cautiously. (Croy 1958, 10; Madsen 1921, 25-27)

Suddenly, however, an Indian brave jumped out from a bush quite close to Buffalo Bill, who was a bit ahead of Chris and the other scouts. The Indian, whose name was Yellow Hand, carried a rifle and fired a couple of shots at Bill at short range, but did not hit him. Bill fired back immediately, and Chris could see that Yellow Hand was hit in the leg. The bullet went right through the leg and into the horse that fell down, throwing Yellow Hand off. Nevertheless, in spite of all that, Yellow Hand managed to get back on his feet, shooting once again at Buffalo Bill, this time hitting his opponent’s horse, so that Bill also fell off as his horse hit the ground. They exchanged a few more shots and this time Bill wounded Yellow Hand mortally.
What happened next shocked Chris, as he reported in his memoirs. As Yellow Hand fell to the ground, fatally wounded, Buffalo Bill ran hollering towards him, scalping the dying Indian, and waving the scalp in the air afterwards, shouting proudly, “The first scalp for Custer” (Croy 1958, 12; Madsen 1921, 27-28). Chris had heard about the Indian practice of scalping enemies but had never imagined that a white man could act so savagely. Chris therefore ran towards Bill and confronted him with his outrage. Bill acknowledged that his action was extreme but justified it by what he had seen on Yellow Hand’s horse: a bloody and torn seventh Cavalry flag, surely from the slaughter at Little Big Horn the month before, and a scalp of long brown woman’s hair, that he believed must have belonged to an innocent settler. When spotting all this during the fight, Bill had lost his temper and done something he normally would not have done (Croy 1958, 12).

Once the main band of Indians had heard the shots, they approached rapidly while Chris and Bill were arguing. Meanwhile, the two scouts who had been sent back had alarmed the regiment that now also came closer to the scene of the skirmish. Bill, Chris, and their fellow scouts now discovered columns of soldiers and warriors on horseback preparing for battle. At a distance, the two main columns now began exchanging fire with each other, but after a little time, the Indians suddenly withdrew. Apparently, they did not want
to fight any more that day—instead they retreated further back into Nebraska.

According to Samuelson (1998), most of this account is just another example of Madsen and Croy mythologizing Madsen’s life. She could not find any evidence of Madsen having participated in the drama at War Bonnet Creek. However, newly discovered sources indicate that Madsen did actually participate in that skirmish.  

**Crook’s “Starvation March”**

After the skirmish at War Bonnet Creek, Madsen and Buffalo Bill, along with other units of the Fifth Cavalry, were ordered to leave Fort Laramie quickly and join the “Yellowstone Expedition” of General Crook (Finerty 1955, 236). After joining the Yellowstone Expedition, Chris Madsen experienced a very different, almost opposite mood to the exuberance he had felt at Fort D. A. Russell some weeks earlier: “The 5th of August we then set out on a campaign, that hardship-, starvation- and weather-wise became unique in the history of the Indian wars,” he writes (Madsen 1921, 16).

The expedition quickly ran into problems: the hostile camps could not be located, and the huge column encountered extreme weather conditions: first, a heatwave with a blistering drought that paralyzed the troopers; when it gave way to severe storms, heavy rain and mud flows slowed down their advance. During the drought Madsen experienced something frightening, a kind of natural disaster he had never seen before back home in Denmark: an aggressive bush and forest fire. He later described the “march along the river, at the foot hills,” as “pure true torture. The thick forests on the hills were burning […] and the extreme amounts of heat and heavy smoke it generated was devastating for soldiers and horses alike” (Madsen 1921, 16).

Madsen blamed the Indians for the fires that he thought they had ignited on purpose, complaining, “The Indians had burned all grazing areas, and one by one our horses went down. But our enemy knew very well where lush grazing and fresh water could be found for their own horses” (Madsen 1921, 16). Madsen mentions that the column still, in spite of everything, hoped they could lure the Indians into an open battle, where the soldiers would benefit from their better weaponry, but they did not have any luck with that. Instead small bands
of Indians started sneaking into the camps at dusk, night, and dawn, firing a few shots, perhaps wounding one or two soldiers. Although these tactics did not damage the strength of the force as a whole, it frustrated the soldiers and contributed to the rising feeling of desperation and hopelessness in the Yellowstone Column. Madsen explains, “The Indians seldom met us in open battle. But in small groups, they would sneak up on us during nights and fire some shots. They normally didn’t hit anyone, but it was frustrating to be shot at without
being able to fire back” (Madsen 1921, 16). Sometimes a lone picket was killed, though, while diseases combined with malnutrition and outright starvation finished other soldiers off: “Every morning, before we left camp, we heard 3 volleys and a tattoo as a final farewell to those comrades who had died during the night” (Madsen 1921, 16). Madsen felt that the campaign continued to deteriorate as it dragged on and on without any accomplishments or victories in sight, reporting of the situation at the end of August 1876, “We were down to two biscuits and a little meat from our own horses that we had to slaughter to survive” (Madsen 1921, 16).

However, at this dark moment in the campaign, some of Chris Madsen’s strengths and virtues turned out to be invaluable. He had already proved himself an excellent sharpshooter, both when hunting and in combat, and now more than ever these competencies mattered. So far, the officers had been reluctant to let Chris and other marksmen use their talents too openly for hunting, as they feared the shooting would reveal their position to the enemy. However, to all the enlisted men it was apparent that the Indians already knew exactly where the column was. Madsen and his comrades clearly felt that the enemy followed every move they made, so the hunting restrictions made no sense to them. Gradually, as the starvation situation continued to deteriorate, Madsen, by his own account, went hunting more and more openly:

One day, when camping in some hills, I sneaked out of our camp to hunt. After some time, I spotted a group of partridges and shot at them right away, hitting several. However, I dared not bring them back to the camp openly—I knew that some of the officers were still fiercely opposing all hunting. Instead, I hid the birds under some bushes, and walked back. When returning to camp I found out that our captain had become very sick. As he was already very weakened by the campaign hardships, it was obvious that he could not recover having only the severely reduced rations. The captain was quite a coxcomb and a bit of a crackpot, but actually a very nice fellow, fair and just to us as long as we worked hard and did our duty. I thought it would be good for him to get some of the fresh bird meat
but dared not suggest it directly to him. Instead I told it to our lieutenant, whom I was acquainted with. He immediately approved of my suggestion, thanked me and ordered us both to rush out of camp and pick up the birds to get the cooking going. When done, our captain really loved the “feast” we got for dinner that evening. After that episode, I got a permanent permission to go hunting whenever possible and was officially appointed regimental huntsman. (Madsen, 1921, 17)

The Battle of Slim Buttes

Whether or not Madsen’s hunting was as heroic an act as he claimed, the game that he and other hunters could provide the sick, exhausted, and starving soldiers was only a drop in the ocean. Madsen believed the whole campaign to be in jeopardy. Crook had to do something fast, which he did, sending 16 muleskinners, 61 mules, and 150 cavalrymen on the best horses available south to the Black Hills to get fresh provisions. Madsen claimed he was chosen to be a part of this expedition. With Captain Anson Mills in command, the expeditionary force left the main column on September 7, 1876 and headed south for the Black Hills. However, the next day, September 8, Mills’ men by chance discovered something the whole Yellowstone Column had been looking for in vain over the last four to five weeks: a large enemy camp of hostile Sioux Indians. The camp was situated in a kind of ravine at Slim Buttes, and Mills’ scouts reported that the camp consisted of around 37 tipis, 400 horses, and 260 Indians, of whom fewer than a third were warriors. Upon hearing this, Mills thought that a surprise attack was the right thing to do in this situation and started planning it right away. He chose to ignore his orders to rush down to the Black Hills, relying instead on the possibility of finding dried meat in the Slim Buttes camp (Donovan 2008, 333; Finerty 1955, 280-303).

On the morning of September 9, Mills’ 150 cavalrymen attacked the camp at Slim Buttes. It indeed came as a surprise to the Indians, but some warriors were quick to fight back while others, mainly women and children, fled to safety and to alarm their kin in other nearby camps. Mills’ force gained a quick victory by being able to
capture or chase away the larger part of the Sioux ponies, dealing a devastating blow to the Indians. Mills sent back a couple of scouts to inform Crook about the ongoing attack and ask for reinforcements as Mills rightly feared an upcoming Indian counterattack. In spite of the fact that Mills’ force outnumbered the remaining warriors at Slim Buttes, however, he gradually lost the momentum of the battle due to fierce resistance, especially from a number of Sioux entrenched in a ravine above the camp, from where they shot down a number of soldiers.

Mills then ordered a halt in the attack, while a group of sharpshooters took position to fire back at the group of Indians in the ravine. Madsen was allegedly one of these expert riflemen. He reports:

Along a creek running through Slim Buttes there were some steep slopes. In a cave high up these slopes, a group of warriors had hid, and from there they shot down several of our men. At first, we could not see where they were hiding, but when we finally located them, our attack was halted while ten of our best sharpshooters were ordered to climb up the opposite hill. I was part of this group, and when we reached the top of the hill, we fired around 15 rounds each at the enemy in the cave. We then stopped for a while so our Indian scouts could approach the ravine and try to negotiate a truce or surrender with the enemy there. (Madsen 1921, 18)

The sharpshooting almost eliminated the Sioux in the ravine. Once everyone had been hit, they all surrendered, limping or crawling out of the cave. Now the soldiers could move on, capturing the rest of the horses, the provisions, the loot and ammunition at the Slim Buttes camp. The soldiers burned down the tipis and feasted on the captured dried meat.

But the Battle of Slim Buttes was far from over; in fact, it had only just begun. Reinforcements were on their way on both sides. The news of a successful surprise attack at Slim Buttes created euphoria among the troops in the main column farther north. It was the first good news they had received since the campaign started more than a month before. Their despair and exhaustion disappeared, and Crook
immediately ordered the troops to move south to join Mills. Madsen writes that the first reinforcements from the main column up north reached the expeditionary force at Slim Buttes already around noon. Every time a group of reinforcements, riding or marching, entered the Slim Buttes area, the soldiers there would meet them with hoorahs, clapping and hollering. More fires were lit and everyone joined in a feast of dried meat. However, the officers tried to stop the party and ordered the soldiers to prepare defensive positions instead—they knew from their Indian scouts that the counterattack was on its way. And indeed, it was. When around seven hundred warriors counterattacked at Slim Buttes later that day, Chris Madsen and more than one thousand soldiers were well entrenched and ready to fight back. The Sioux were met with roaring and precise volleys, and no matter what they did, they could not come close to the fortified lines of soldiers in the hills. They suffered a clear defeat.

However, the hardships for Madsen and other soldiers in Crook’s force were not over. The campaign would continue for many more days. The Indians had lost the day but they would come back and fight on, no longer with large-scale attacks, but using guerilla tactics. For Chris Madsen personally the worst hardships of the campaign were yet to come—he would almost get killed in a number of ambushes while hunting on September 12. His hunting partner, private Cyrus B. Milner, was killed and scalped, with his throat cut ear-to-ear and his breast gashed (Madsen 1921, 38). However, on the night of September 9, 1876, Chris Madsen and all the other soldiers at Slim Buttes celebrated the victory they had won that day.

The campaign had finally had some success, accomplishing something the soldiers could be proud of. Moreover, Chris Madsen for once had some time and energy to reflect on his new life in America. Eight months had passed since he had arrived in New York, and everything had changed in that period. He was doing honest work and had proved to be excellent at it; he had become part of a new forward-moving nation that, unlike his old country, was prosperous and successful. In spite of all the hardships he had reasons to feel good about the new life course he had begun. His plans had worked, he had done well as a soldier in the US—he had made friends with other enlisted men, won appreciation from his superiors, earned a promotion (to
sharpshooter and regimental huntsman), and had been appointed to special duties. He had made it—so far (Madsen 1921, 38-39). So, for the first time during his eight months in the US, he participated in a kind of party, as the Yellowstone Column celebrated their victory with dried meat, drinks, laughing, and singing at the campfires under the starlit autumn sky. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* reported on September 18, 1867, “Night is here, and 1,000 camp-fires light a scene never to be forgotten. The soldiers last night, ragged, cold, weak, starved and well-nigh desperate, are feasting upon meat and fruits received from a savage enemy.... Merry songs are sung, and everywhere goes up the cry, Crook is right after all.” Chris Madsen enjoyed that night—and rightly so because already the next day reality with all the well-known hardships and frustrations returned.

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of this article I asked the question, “Who was Chris Madsen really?” He has previously been described as either a hero or a villain. While the many sources of his long life point to a very complex answer, I think he was more hero than villain. Chris Madsen started life as a normal Danish country boy, growing up in a poor, hardworking family at the bottom of a very class-divided society being torn apart by a devastating war and social unrest. Yet he did well at school and continued to get a good education at an agricultural folk high school. Like so many other young people then and now, he wanted to try his luck in the big city, and he managed to find good jobs in Copenhagen and almost made it there. However, a series of unfortunate events suddenly hit him: he got sick and hospitalized; he then lost his job and his apartment and ended up in the street with serious debt. He found an easy but wrong way out by conning the Danish elites. Rightly, he was imprisoned for this behavior and served his time. However, he tried to get the best out of his prison time, where he studied, wrote and learned from clever but jailed union people, whose organizations back then were outlawed.

When Chris Madsen was released after one year, it appeared that he had decided to start a new, more honest life in America to make up for his few criminal years in Denmark. He arrived in New York in early 1876, a decisive year in America’s history. It would turn out to be
a decisive and formative year for Chris Madsen too. He would soon be out West, at center stage of major events, transforming him into a mature grown man, qualified and motivated for meeting the challenging hardships of the Old West. Together with both Danish and American colleagues I will continue to dig into the amazingly large number of sources, well known, lesser known or until now, unknown, to further unfold the exciting and enigmatic life of this truly interesting Danish American character.

Works Cited


Finerty, John F. 1955. War-Path and Bivouac. The Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition. 1890.

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Endnotes

1 Ernst presented some of these poems in the 2003 biography.

2 Warren Watson, from the Museum of Danish America in Elk Horn, Iowa, and I have found sources confirming this, which we will publish about soon.

3 As mentioned before, in the ongoing research I am conducting in cooperation with Warren Watson, we have found sources indicating that Madsen did actually participate in that skirmish. We are planning to publish more about that in the future.

4 Madsen had probably learned to shoot as a boy, assisting his father and brothers when they went hunting. The area where he grew up, the western part of Funen was, and is still, one of the best hunting grounds in Denmark.