

The Vanguard American

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New World Renaissance

IN THE fall of 1920 a modest but impressive little ceremony took place on the lawn of the Danish Old People's Home in Des Moines. That year the Treaty of Versailles had, by plebiscite, returned the province of Slesvig to its mother country, Denmark. Fifty-six years under the Prussian heel had only served to deepen and intensify the wholly Danish population's love for its native language, history and national life and the return was in every sense a home-coming, reuniting the grieving mother with the long lost daughter. Commemorating this happy event Slesvician natives and sympathizers in Des Moines planted a tree—an American elm, perhaps, I don't remember—in soil transported all the way from the home-land to Iowa's capitol city. It was a moving sight to see gray-haired natives of Slesvig gently press the beloved soil about the tender roots of the sapling; the soil that had been steeped in the blood and tears of the Danes through the centuries. Yes, a commemoration of suffering and hope and victory but even more a tribute to the American nation whose champions, living and dead, of justice for the oppressed had given this struggling little province a future.

I have not since that day seen this tree. I hope it has grown into a fine wide-spreading young elm, or whatever its seed was ordained to become. The years had all but obliterated the memory of the event until men and women of Danish descent recently have begun to search their hearts to find if perchance the early hopes for a distinctively Danish contribution to the American way of life is still alive and with sufficient vitality to rise above the disappointment of defeat suffered in the period following the first World War: the hopes for a Danish Folk School in America. The school that was not a school but an inspiration; the school with a compelling vision that polarized human forces

in a concerted drive toward the fulfillment of an individual and national mission; a mission that embraced completely the person and the people—yes, all mankind of whatever race from man's beginning to his final, complete emergence as God dreamed him before the world!

Out of this vision was born a reinterpretation of the past, present and future of men and nations in terms of poetic historicity, that it, Man and his Fellowship were led into their divinely appointed places in a magnificently conceived poetic "scheme of things." This amazing incentive toward a real conception of human fellowship at the same time issued from this feeling of being in harmony with the divine plan and made possible its realization as nearly as anything ever did. The much boasted and toasted co-operative movement was little more than a "practical" perversion of this fundamental sense of oneness with all life moving toward a common, victorious goal. The Danish people grew in stature and in grace under the vitalizing rays of this vision and if history has failed to live up to such high idealism—why, then history must seem to be remiss.

So when the Danish immigrant in America or elsewhere speaks wistfully of the Danish Folk School he speaks of no system of education, no course of studies and no plan for making the down-trodden farmer economically independent. He speaks of a spiritual fire which burned in the midst of the Danish people and gave light and warmth to him and his fellows. He speaks of a Promised Land which he in a breathless moment beheld from the top of Mount Pisgah—and then again lost from view as the exigencies and the feeling of homelessness in the New World as a fog closed about him, his children and his community.

With the first—and to a certain extent the second—generation, the Folk School remained the oasis in the desert, the fountain of vision and strength of song and prophecy. Then—inexorably—the springs began to dry up and the drifting sands of the varied demands of the new existence covered them—at least so it seemed to many parents and leaders as they witnessed the younger generations' preoccupation with other interests.

Originally the leaders of the movement in the New World confidently expected the spirit and language of the School to survive the transplantation unchanged; not with the object of remaining aloof from American life but in order to fulfill its mission: to hand over to the future American people its golden heritage untarnished. But gradually the old words became unintelligible to the new generations both in form and substance. Honest but myopic efforts were made to "translate" the School—but with disheartening results: the form became tortuous and the substance obscure. Efforts to recapture the old enthusiasm merely served to heighten the nostalgic sense of loss. It was no longer fear of defeat—it was defeat.

Many leaders fled the impending doom and returned to the still verdant pastures in the old country. Others could not give up either the faith or the hope and fell on the field of battle as behooves true descendants of the Vikings. For such as these the massive gates of Valhalla swing on joyous hinges!

And now after a period of quiescence there has come a very sincere searching of heart to find out if the hope for some form of movement analogous to the Danish mother movement can be revived or if all hope must definitely be abandoned. Hence this contribution to the discussion.

The memory of the tree planted on American ground in two cubic feet of Danish soil came to mind as a symbol of a failure on our part to understand the ways of living things. I hope that tree in Des Moines has grown into a wide-spreading young elm—or whatever it was in its seed to become—but if it has then it is only because it now grows in **American** soil. For two cubic feet of soil is enough to nurture the transplanted sapling for a while but it is not enough to grow an "Ygdrasil." The Danish Folk School thrived in America while the strength of the spiritual soil in the heart of the emigrant nourished it, but being unable to reach the deeper subsoil of a native American folk life its days were numbered from the start. Still, it lived long enough and intensely enough to cast its seed toward a new growth. There is nothing we can do with the withered trunk and branches. They have served their purpose and must go the way of all flesh. We can cling to them as we do to so many dead forms but nothing can give them foliage and fruit if their veins no longer throb with the rhythm of life.

"Unless the grain fall into the ground and dies it remains alone." Myriads of seed from old and young cultures have fallen on this continent to "die." Die as Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Russian, English, German, Dutch and by uncounted other names but to rise under one new name: American. You and all the things you loved and couldn't give up are part of it. You will find it here if you loved it. For only the thing that no one loved must die—utterly.

An American school for living, in whatever form, must emerge sometime; if for no other reason than because we need it so desperately. No such dire need can in the long run go unfulfilled. We have the best public school system that money can buy;—that is, any further expenditure of money would not increase its effectiveness. But a great many serious American parents, educators and youth leaders feel deeply that while we

go to such lengths to equip our youth for the task of managing a highly specialized and unbelievably complicated system for the production and distribution of the goods of life we have so singularly failed to give our children and youth any clue as to the essential meaning of this life or any great help in realizing its possibilities. With the increasing complexity of our physical life we experience a corresponding confusion of aims and purposes.

Our teaching is scientific. Mechanical skills and demonstrable facts dominate our curricula. There is little or no attempt on the part of the teacher to interpret these facts in terms of living. Our students finish high school and frequently college with a considerable fund of factual knowledge but with little understanding of its meaning and therefore undigested and unassimilated. Hence education has become synonymous with the accumulation of valuable information and the training in profitable skills, both affording the possessor certain definite advantages in a highly competitive market for business and professional ability but largely leaving out of account the welfare and growth of the individual as a feeling, hoping, striving entity in the great body of common humanity struggling forward toward the satisfaction of a powerful urge for completeness. While our standard of living has skyrocketed the college graduate still leaves the imposing halls of learning with all the age-old questions of life's deeper meaning trembling on his lips and enters a society utterly confused as to the ultimate **personal** good of all this.

There is not the slightest possible chance at present to change our educational system and perhaps no necessity for doing so. In any democratic society the majority must rule and our schools have become exactly what they are by popular sanction if not demand. But there is a wide almost untouched field for the interpretative school entirely independent of this system and yet taking advantage of its preparatory work. If the high school graduate has not the vaguest notion of the meaning of his completed courses in history, language, music, etc. in terms of personal orientation he has at least a workable knowledge of historical fact and the mediums of expression—a decided advantage in itself. From here on instruction should be unhampered by any extraneous consideration such as courses and credits and be guided and limited only by the common ability of teachers and pupils to enlarge the frontiers of their understanding. In fact it is not so much instruction as mutual inspiration; the seeing and experiencing things together. The field is the province of all man's living, his hopes and aspirations, his victories and defeats, the base and the sublime in his nature. The student must learn to understand the symbolic language of the human soul: poetry, painting, music, rhythm, song. He must come to understand the utterances of his people from the backwoods ballad singer to the skilled artist and he will discover his essential oneness with his fellow men and henceforth not walk alone. The process of a sort of reversed prism by which a variety of colors become: light.

Returning to the early days of the Folk School movement in Denmark we ask in amazement: What was the secret of their contagious enthusiasm, their obvious enjoyment of a school term that offered little more than a close, human relationship? What sent them back to their farm chores and house-work with a new song in their hearts and on their lips to recruit, with missionary zeal, pupils for next year's term? Certainly not the chance to get an "education." While few of them had more than a grammar-school education they were far from illiterate. Nor was it for the purpose of bettering their "lot." As a rule the pupils returned to

whatever honest task they had left and while they did not better their own positions perceptibly they certainly dignified their lowly tasks with a new enthusiasm and conscientiousness. One thing seems to stand out in what we would consider a ridiculously short term of from 3 to 5 months: the inspired speaking of the teachers through which the pupil identified himself with the great moments in history and the sublime visions of poets and thinkers. That the primary function of the lecture was not to impart knowledge is strikingly illustrated by the classic story of the pupil who sorrowfully confessed to the lecturer his inability to remember all the things he had heard, to which the wise man answered in the young farmer's own language: When you drain your field you mark the place where the tile are laid in case you want to find them again, but when you plant your corn there is no need to mark the hills; if the words you heard are living words they will grow in your heart—if not, they are better forgotten. Here is wisdom unsurpassed. The secret of the impact of the Folk School on its pupils and through them on the community is that this initial spiritual impetus somehow had the effect of releasing a spring in the individual which kept him in motion throughout life, so that even in old age the bright eyes and the ready, sympathetic interest in all manifestations of life very frequently marks the one-time pupil of the Folk School.

It seems evident then, that the secret of the effectiveness of the Folk School is not that of purveying a certain type of education or training; the subject matter of the "curriculum" seems to be largely incidental to that other element which we, for lack of a more definite term, call inspiration. History, literature, folklore, physics, singing, gymnastics—all is grist to its mill, and each one no more than a means to an end. The pupil is not asked to give an account of what he has absorbed of this material, he is not required to pass a test, he is given no "grades." If he chooses to forget all he has learned the school would in no wise be offended. The only thing that matters is: is he in motion under his own power? Has the spiritual fellowship of the group been so intense that a living fire has been kindled in his soul—never

to die? No attempt is made to ascertain these personal factors. The seed is planted—so leave it alone; from there on it is up to the forces of life. On these forces the school fearlessly staked all its hopes;—nor was it let down.

Any similar school in America must be founded on the same principles if it is to be more than a crutch to the "under-privileged" classes who have been denied the blessings of our full educational treatment. To combat illiteracy is certainly a worthy cause but spiritual anemia is as common among the highly educated.

It would most likely be a mistake to tie a school of this type to any older or existing line of work, whether educational or religious. Organizations which have been in existence for some time invariably collect a certain amount of dead matter. It may have a sentimental value to those who remember by-gone springs but leaves don't grow on monuments and the school should have a chance to live its own life and find its own forms. Let us have new wine in new wine-skins. Whatever else the school may be it must be fundamentally honest. There is no other way of bringing about that close and unreserved communion of personalities which is the absolute condition for the functioning of the school except by dropping all pretenses and guards and "speak the truth each one with his neighbor." Concealment and dissimulation create fear and fear causes distrust and violence. That vicious circle must be broken somewhere if we are to live together in peace and work together in mutual confidence.

And the school must be native American, not in narrow-minded isolationism but in a deep sense of being at home, of being of the substance of the American soil and people, of being the inheritor of a great national treasure: the wealth of human faith, hopes, idealism, sacrifice brought here from many lands and refined in the struggle for freedom and human dignity. A school built on the plans of the Great American Clipper: enough rudder and ballast to steer a steady course but an acre of sail in the wind to give swift progress.

HOLGER J. KOCH.

The New American

THIS is the land of the great rendezvous. Every nation on the face of the earth has contributed its quota to the greatest reunion of the family of man ever seen under the sun. At least symbolic of a dreamed-of brotherhood of all men. In spite of differences in customs, habits of thought, attitudes toward life, the outcome was none the less a surprisingly happy one. Differences tended to become incentives rather than irritations. The blending of national characteristics added flavor and sparkle to an existence which years of sameness had dulled. It produced a society of people more responsive to the myriad manifestations of life, more sensitive to its contrasts and with more zest for its experience than could be found in older national groups, inbred to the point of lethargy. The interaction created on the one hand daring without ostentation, loyalty without histrionics and compassion without condescension. On the other hand it created individual irresponsibility through the breaking down of traditional behavior barriers before a new group pressure could arise. However, on the whole righteousness prevailed.

The conquest of a continent, the establishment in the wilderness of homes and communities good for the new generation to grow up in, is a saga of high purpose unique in history. On the surface it presented the appearance of formless and undirected flux as the eddies of the tides seeking out the channels and reservoirs of least resistance; but all strength was expended in the effort to become rooted in the virgin soil. Life was earnest and reduced to its essentials as it must be when seed is to meet soil. The cultures of the older countries seemed remote and artificial. Such social graces as were quickly imported for the frontier American fitted him as badly as his store clothes and made him as uncomfortable. His political life was patterned after the back room of frontier saloons where narrow-eyed men played for high stakes and the front room where raucous jibes and six-shooters separated men from their honor and lives. So, the American became the laughing-stock of the world of culture. First it laughed itself sick over him, then it laughed itself to death.

And the thinkers thought, "It's a Melting Pot"; and they imagined a great nation fashioned of many cultures and national heritages. So much of this, so much of that. And each heritage was preserved and fitted into the great mosaic called the Composite Man. But there was no blood in his veins and so the planners became discouraged and went home.

But all this time the land was pregnant with a new race—the Native American. For men had passionately loved the free earth, unsullied by the refined indecencies of decadent civilizations; loved her because she was without deceit and artifice and because she also hated every false thing. This New American is being born. Above the tumult of a dying era his voice can be heard speaking truth, justice and mercy. He is not a composite man, he is all of one piece. In his bones is the strength of integrity, a thousand no's to compromise and duplicity. The strength of Abraham Lincoln and millions like him. In his soul is the fierce compassion of pioneer women who fought to the death to salvage a square mile of life for their children and the children of all the mothers on earth. With Gene Debs he exults, "While even one man is in prison, I am not free!" America is his home but the world is his country. He is the Common Man because he arrogates to himself no privileges; he can enjoy nothing denied to his brothers. In his veins is a compelling need to make real the hopes of past ages. The hope that man may at last become just and generous, truthful and unselfish. The poet's dream, the prophet's vision, the knowledge of every man that within him is an ice-bound world of potentialities. He is the kin of all men of whatever race. His goal is the common weal of mankind.

HOLGER J. KOCH.

Vanguard Guild Objectives

In spite of our modern means of communication and travel—swift beyond the dreams of fifty years ago—we still live our lives very much by communities. We may know about a great many things that happen far beyond the borders of our little valleys but we are able to feel strongly only within the limits of our actual human contacts. It is still the lives and fortunes of the people whose faces we see and whose voices we hear that loom large in our daily consciousness. I believe it is well that it is so. Our contact with our fellow men is rich and warm only as far as it is personal and real. Emotions that are alive require live means of communication. That special word, that particular inflection that certain expression on the face makes even a casual encounter with a friend assume a special significance far beyond the literal meaning of the spoken words. Motion pictures and the radio are disappointing in their lack of interest in us individually. Like snapshots they recall to our minds experiences that we **have had** but afford us no new ones. They are parasites in this that they must feed on the emotional blood stream of the people in order to give their symbols of life. Unless our daily existence by actual, immediate human contacts supply us with the stuff of life our souls are doomed to wither. So to each of us the community—varying in extent with the individuals—is still the most important place in the world: the place **where we live**; and whatever understanding and help we are able to give to and receive from the greater outside world depends entirely on the depth and intensity of life as we live it within the compass of our ken.

To the end of fostering mutual trust and understanding

among members of our communities and to facilitate the experience and enjoyment of our common fund of inherited and created cultural values the Guild humbly dedicates itself. It has no membership list and no by-laws, it has no patented cure for human ills, it aspires to no greater distinction than to be a part of man's struggle to become human.

Various phases of the American community's history and function will be discussed in detail in coming issues of the Vanguard American. We are going to hear from many different sections of the country and, I hope, realize that our people is marvelously rich in its inheritance and in its variety of creative expression.

H.J.K.

May we ask all our readers to be on the alert for exceptional community activities or educational ventures, either as attempts to solve a problem or quite simply as an impression of some creative urge. Please report it in these pages or bring it to our attention.

The Town Square

IN THE center of the American community is the Town Square. It is a comfortable, homey sort of place where children play and the hobo sleeps on the grass with yesterdays paper over his face. Towns people stop to exchange views on the weather, politics, babies, life, death, the new styles, the war, the mayor, juvenile delinquency and the weather. Here the high-school band plays of a sultry summer evening and your remark to the neighbor and to that man ("I should know that fellow!") are more than commonly free of controversial matter and delivered with a touch of the oratorical.

The town square is the community's observation post and its court of opinion. Here a man speaks his mind more honestly than perhaps anywhere else—at least in public. He is less the member of a party, a church, a fraternal organization and just a plain American who has his own peculiar slant on everything and doesn't mind telling all and sundry.

The Vanguard American's office is located on a park bench in the town square. It has no other object than to discuss leisurely and with the greatest freedom any matter that concerns the American community—also to listen to the American minstrel and the story-teller—of fact or fancy. We invite all congenial souls to join us on our bench—tell us, "What do you know, Joe?"

Seriously, now, we would like to have you contribute to our Americana; long pieces or short; formal or informal. If you have an idea you rather fancy or a bit of poetry you have written—send it to the editor; we guarantee you a sympathetic ear.

This copy is being mailed to a number of people we think might be interested. If your name is on this you will receive subsequent issues; if not—and you want it—drop a card to the editor and your name will be added to the list. Extra copies may also be had. There is no charge.

And then just a very sincere greeting to all our friends, old and new, wherever you are. Please accept this as a friendly attempt to keep in touch with you. We don't want to lose one of you!

Yours,

Dora and Holger Koch.