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Article Summary: Three Scandinavian immigrants—each represented a different ethnic homeland; each ventured into a different part of the American west; each wrote at different times in the evolution of the frontier. Yet, there is a strain of unity both in action and thought that threads the lives of these three: Ole Johnson, Rasmus Nielsen, and Gustaf Unonius.

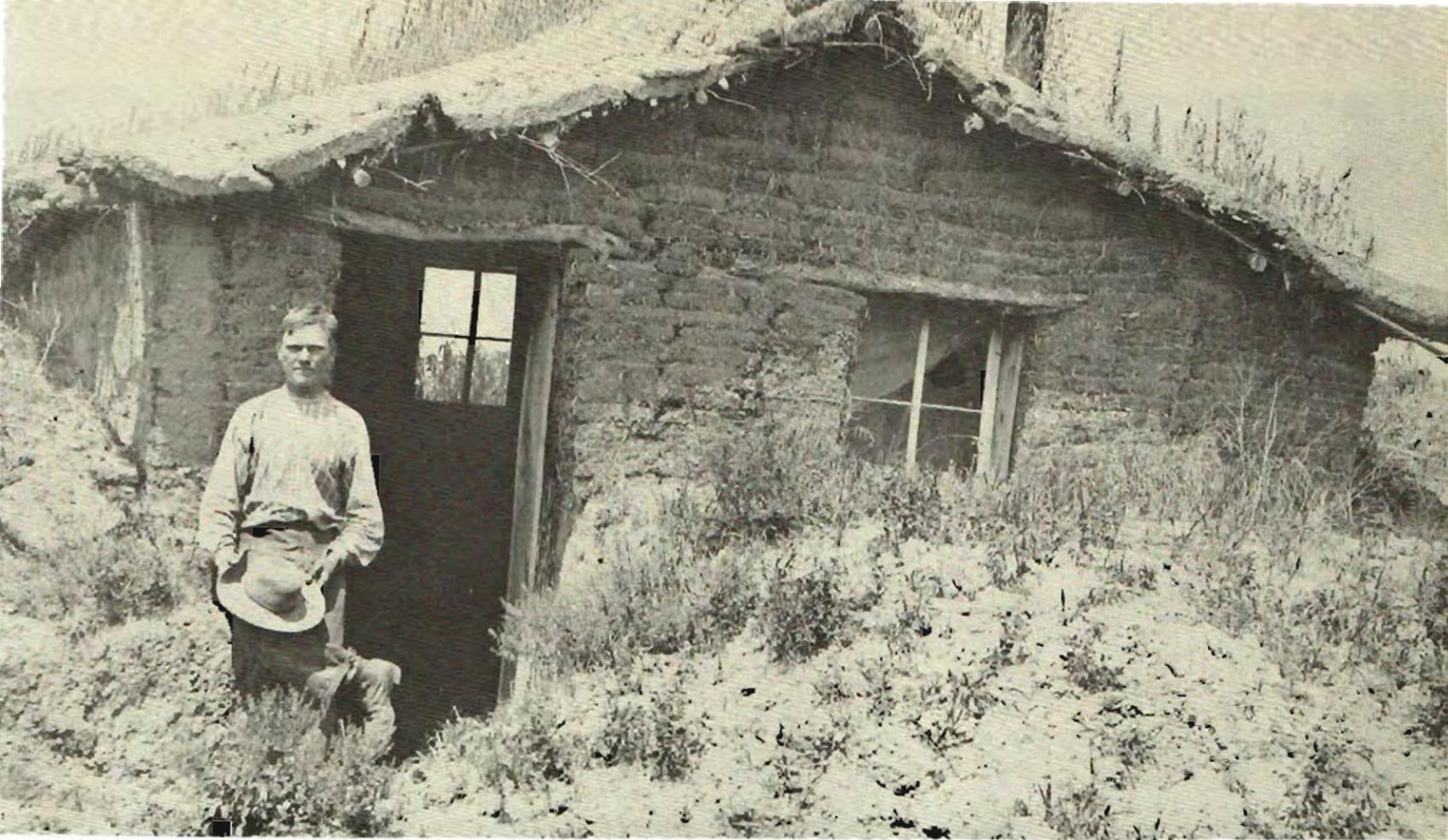
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"Hope and contentment on the Claim".



THREE SCANDINAVIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE AMERICAN WEST

D. JEROME TWETON

WISCONSIN in the 1840's—the wooded country, spotted with small lakes and meadows, just a few miles west of the small, but booming, town of Milwaukee. This was the West of Swedish immigrant Gustaf Unonius.

Texas in the 1870's—the valley of the Brazos, a short distance northwest of Waco. This was the West of Norwegian-born Ole Johnson.

Nebraska in the 1880's and 90's, the windswept prairies near the villages of Nysted and Dannebrog. This was the West of Rasmus Nielsen—recent arrival from the shores of Denmark.

Three Scandinavian immigrants—each represented a different ethnic homeland; each ventured into a different part of the American West; each wrote at different times in the evolution of the frontier. Yet, there is a strain of unity both in action and thought that threads the lives of these three.

At age 19, Gustaf Unonius seemed disillusioned with his native Sweden. As a student and young idealist, he was leery about the prospects of what he called “becoming

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a cog in a wornout machine."¹ At the same time, his imagination was stimulated by descriptions of America. "I had heard about America," he stated in his diary; "its rich soil and industrial advancement right now offered a home, a means of livelihood, and an independent life. . . ."²

The young Swede saw more to America than economic betterment. "America, what was there to prevent me also from going to that country," he dreamed, "which like a new El Dorado appears before each venturesome youth . . . Her fabulous birth and history has excited our wonder . . . ; she has realized . . . millions of hopes, she has become a tomb for age-old prejudices, a cradle of true civil liberty. . . ."³

Ole Johnson, 35 year old Norwegian bachelor, unsettled in his life, was drawn to America more by materialistic motives than by idealistic hopes. "My knowledge of America was quite limited," he wrote in 1870, "but my knowledge of Texas grew each month as I found letters in *Morgenbladet* [a Christiania newspaper] extolling the virtues of migration to Texas."⁴ Johnson revealed his primary motive for leaving Norway when he declared that "the rich lands of Texas beckon as the north star—this is the place to find my fortune."⁵ Johnson was also impressed by transportation company propaganda which held that in America—"and probably Texas"—were lakes that could cure various maladies such as back ache and sore feet."⁶

Although 27 year old Rasmus Nielsen left Denmark because of economic conditions in that small land, the lure of America played a decisive role in his final immigration

¹ *A Pioneer in Northwest America, 1841-1858: The Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius*, Nils W. Olsson, ed., Jonas Backlund, trans., (Minneapolis: The Swedish Pioneer Historical Society by the University of Minnesota Press, 1950), I, 17.

² *Ibid.*, 4-5.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ The Ole Johnson Diary. These excerpts come from the fragmentary diary of Norwegian immigrant Ole Johnson.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

plans. The hope for economic betterment was foremost in Nielsen's mind. The discovery of gold in California and the passage of the Homestead Act stirred his imagination.⁷ His parents had "many children . . . and poor soil." He had fallen in love with a milkmaid and his parents were "not very happy with this affair."⁸ These factors coupled with the propaganda of a Union Pacific immigration agent who described Nebraska as a "Garden of Eden" brought Nielsen to the conclusion that his future was best made secure in the American West.⁹

So it was that Unonius, Johnson, and Nielsen set sail for America, Unonius with his young bride seeking a "home and a hearth" and independence, Johnson searching for his fortune, and Nielsen looking for economic security for himself and his prospective bride. All three thought that this could be found in America and more specifically in the West.

The dreams of America which these men built in their respective minds were tempered with a dash of realism. Unonius knew that "many labors, many difficulties, many privations await me. I shall have to do without the comforts to which I have been accustomed. In a literal sense I shall have to eat my bread in the sweat of my brow."¹⁰

Norwegian Johnson wondered: "Can all this that is said of Texas be true? Is there more to the matter than has been told?"¹¹ In the same vein of thought Nielsen knew that the American West held free land and a new life only for those of "courage and willing hands."¹²

The three sons of Scandinavia did not know what to expect upon arrival in the United States. They had heard

⁷ Alfred C. Nielsen, *Life in an American Denmark* (Askov, Minnesota: American Publishing Co., 1962), p. 10. This story of Danish immigrant life in Nebraska is based upon the notes of Rasmus Nielsen and the recollections of his son, Alfred Nielsen.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰ *The Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius*, I, 17-18.

¹¹ Johnson Diary.

¹² Nielsen, *Life in an American Denmark*, p. 10.

stories—some true, some half-true, and some false—about the nature and character of the American people. Although Unonius set foot on American soil in the early 1840's, Johnson in the early 1870's, and Nielsen in the early 1880's, all three had common experiences with the American Yankee—experience that left a sour taste in three Nordic mouths.

Landing in New York in 1841, Unonius immediately pointed out that the "materialistic spirit" was basic to the American character. He wrote: "The mercenary spirit ascribed to Americans is perhaps more in evidence here than elsewhere."¹³ He reasoned, however, that, "We are living in an industrial age, and Americans are perhaps to a greater degree than most people the representatives of their generation. They want to make money, but so do the Swedes . . . The only difference is that Americans seem to know better how to do it."¹⁴ It was not long until Unonius felt the sting of this "mercenary spirit."

Unonius made arrangements with a transportation company for passage from New York to Chicago—first class—for only \$12.00. This was the beginning of trouble. The naive Swede had not been told about the many 2 and 3 dollar service charges that accompanied such a trip. He had not yet reached the end of the Erie Canal when he expressed concern after these continual extra fees whether there "would be much left for purchasing cattle and farming equipment."¹⁵ He was frustrated and embarrassed at "not knowing what steps to take to defend our rights," and "our inability to deal directly with those who seemed to have our fate in their hands."¹⁶ American ingenuity had turned a \$12.00 journey into a very costly experience.

Johnson, after arriving in New Orleans early in 1871, faced somewhat the same problem. He described his first experience with the Yankee as follows: "I had always

¹³ *Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius*, I, 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

heard the American referred to as a Yankee, yet when I arrived in New Orleans I addressed a gentleman as such and he hit me squarely in the nose—enough to cause blood to flow.”¹⁷ While in New Orleans he met a clergyman who claimed that he had studied in Norway and had married a flaxen-haired Norwegian girl. This man of the cloth offered to transport Johnson to the Norwegian settlements in the West for only \$50.00. In Johnson’s words: “I paid him \$50.00 and he assured me that a group would leave for Texas within a week. He would keep me informed about the journey. If I had waited for him, I would still be in New Orleans.”¹⁸ Fleeced by what appeared to be a respectable Yankee clergyman, Johnson made different arrangements for his westward trek.

Misfortune also met Rasmus Nielsen as he made his way to his new home in the West. While on the train, his pocket was picked. Fortunately, most of his money was concealed “in an improvised pocket in his underwear.”¹⁹ Nielsen had outwitted Yankee craftsmanship.

Because of these initial difficulties with “Yankees,” these three men carried distasteful impressions with them into the West. Although all three met many more honest than dishonest Americans, events in the West buttressed their convictions that Yankees were to be dealt with in a spirit of caution.

Unonius continually decried the Yankee treatment of newly-arrived immigrants. “They often fall into the clutches of swindlers,” he lamented, “who lure them into undertakings in which they are likely to lose their small capital. . . .”²⁰ Unonius’ diary and memoirs reflect a feeling of distrust of Americans—especially Yankee businessmen.

In Texas, Johnson, writing in 1876, admitted that “lack of Yankee know-how has led me down the path of ruin

¹⁷ Johnson Diary.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Nielsen, *Life in an American Denmark*, p. 15.

²⁰ *Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius*, I, 284-5.

several times. My difficulty in New Orleans was but a beginning of a cloud which has cast a shadow over me. I have found no relief for my back in Texas waters, and medicine sold to me by a traveling physician almost caused my life to end sooner than anticipated."²¹ Two years later, the Norwegian reported that he had bought stock in a western mine, but soon discovered that "he had been taken in by a fast-mouthed American."²²

Nielsen's experiences with western Yankees paralleled those of Johnson. Nielsen's son recalls that "during the year he had no use for this foreign tongue [English] but in the presence of the Grand Island grain merchants he really needed a knowledge of English. He felt that the rascals cheated him."²³ The genuine lack of trust accorded the Yankee by the immigrant Danes is reflected in Nielsen's recollection that ". . . There was one political office in the county which was filled by a Dane as far back as I can remember, and that was the office of county treasurer . . ., they had to do business with the treasurer . . . in this office they wanted a man whom they knew they could trust. They wanted a man with whom they could speak the native tongue."²⁴

Although there were many qualities in the American character which the Scandinavian immigrants admired, the mercenary business spirit was not one of them. Unonius, Johnson, and Nielsen soon found that they had to use common sense and caution in their business relationships with both eastern and western Yankees.

Just as the European immigrant did not know what to expect when he landed in New York or Boston, he knew less what to expect from the wilderness of the American frontier. Unonius was very pleasantly surprised by what he found in the West. Upon his arrival in Milwaukee, he observed, "There was certainly nothing here to suggest that

²¹ Johnson Diary.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Nielsen, *Life in an American Denmark*, p. 20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

I had arrived in the wilds of western America. I had imagined something entirely different. I had imagined houses and huts without arrangements; an inn with a big log in the middle, one end sticking out the door and the other burning in the fireplace. For breakfast I had believed nothing would be served except cold, smoked or salted food."²⁵ The Swedish pioneer was amazed at the orderly and modern appearance of the city and even more surprised by his breakfast which included "well-done beef-steaks, butter and white bread."²⁶

Although Unonius' first contact with the West in Milwaukee satisfied him, the American Indian was a great disappointment. "The romantic notions I had formed about these people from reading Cooper's novels and other descriptions," he reported, "tumbled down completely before the reality as I now saw it."²⁷ Instead of the noble savage, he saw a "melancholy and depressed" people. The American Indian reminded the Swedish immigrant of "a caged eagle dragging its wings," and he predicted that the "only future is early and complete extinction."²⁸

While Unonius was impressed with the condition of the western frontier as he found it in Wisconsin, Johnson found little good to say about Texas. The letters which he had read in *Morgenbladet* had painted an exaggerated picture of the soil, climate, and general conditions in Texas. On July 11th of 1871 Johnson arrived in Waco; the temperature was over 100. His sole entry for that day was: "This western paradise has more in common with hell than heaven."²⁹ Johnson continually complained about the Texas weather—especially after losing most of his cattle during a period of drouth and fever. Johnson, who had apparently spent some time in Christiania, expressed dissatisfaction over the lack of culture in the West. Writing shortly after his arrival in Waco, he lamented the fact that

²⁵ *Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius*, I, 115-6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Johnson Diary.

"this is an empty place. No books, no music, no learning."³⁰ The spirit of discontent characterized Johnson's attitude until he left Texas.

Perhaps more typical of the western immigrant experience was that of Rasmus Nielsen in the Nebraska of the 1880's. To be sure, Nielsen—like most immigrants in a strange land—at first found fault with his new home. The Union Pacific propagandists had described Nebraska as a "Garden of Eden." Nielsen maintained that it reminded him of "Siberia."³¹ Comparing the West to his native Denmark, Nielsen found the "scorching winds in summer or the roaring blizzards of winter" of Nebraska distasteful. He complained that "there was hardly a house or tree to be seen on the endless prairie."³² Coming from Scandinavia, Nielsen also related that he was "not much impressed with Nebraska seafood."³³ For the most part, however, these were minor flaws in the total fabric of the West. To Nielsen, the happiness and economic security that he found on the frontier far outweighed the shortage of fish or the overabundance of prairie.

One thing which perhaps impressed Unonius the most about the American frontier was the spirit of western democracy. "I love the democratic social order," he declared, "where the majesty of the people really is a majesty before which a man can stand with the same veneration . . . than before a royal throne. . . . I believe that the American people, left to themselves, will one day reveal that majesty to the world."³⁴ Unonius' description of frontier democracy in action is a classic. A claim jumper's case was brought before a mass meeting of the community; after the different sides of the case had been argued, a vote was taken. Even Unonius, who had not yet filed for citizenship was allowed to vote. To the Swedish immigrant, this was real democracy.³⁵

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Nielsen, *Life in an American Denmark*, 17.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁴ *Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius*, I, 324.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 325-330.

Johnson in Texas wrote in 1875 that "if western America holds any benefit to the settler, it is the presence of total justice. Nothing is done without the proper avenues of consent."³⁶ To Nielsen the West stimulated a spirit of fair play and democracy. Where else could farmers "look a moneylender straight in the face and tell them they were going to vote the Populist ticket in the next election."³⁷

As the European immigrant came to America, he tended to settle where his fellow countrymen had already established communities. The Norwegian sought land where Norwegians were the dominant group. Insecure in a strange environment and ignorant of the native tongue, the immigrant sought the security that ethnic fellowship provided. Although Unonius had no Swedish settlement in Wisconsin which he could join, he viewed his "New Uppsala" as a place where later Swedes would settle. Until the arrival of Norwegians and Swedes in the Pine Lakes region, Unonius' family was socially isolated. "We had not maintained," reflected Unonius, "much social intercourse with our neighbors. Only a couple of times had we made or received visits."³⁸ The Swede was happy to see more Scandinavians arrive in his Wisconsin.

Most of those who came west during the post-Civil War flood headed straight for their respective Scandinavian settlements. As Johnson traveled across Texas to Waco, he continually expressed great anticipation over seeing "his people again." Johnson found that the Norwegian settlements in Texas reminded him of a "mountainless, fjordless, hot Norway."³⁹ Norwegian was the accepted language and those who knew English were "suspect." The Texas Norwegians maintained their traditional ways with a rigid regularity. Johnson relates that "American

³⁶ Johnson Diary.

³⁷ Nielsen, *Life in an American Denmark*, p. 61.

³⁸ *Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius*, I, 244.

³⁹ Johnson Diary.

holidays were ignored, but the Norwegian celebrations were held."⁴⁰

Just as Johnson was lured to Texas because of existent Norwegian communities, so Rasmus Nielsen went to Nebraska near Dannebrog. According to Nielsen, "All the neighbors and businessmen in Dannebrog were Danes."⁴¹ Here was a Danish speck in the vastness of the American West. In Dannebrog there was no need to learn English. Nielsen recalls that "the Danish Lutheran Church and the Danish Folk School were at the heart of the community and Danish was the language of both."⁴² Some teachers in the school insisted that the students "owed their first allegiance to Denmark."⁴³ Danish holidays were celebrated with enthusiasm—one of the largest came on September 8th, the birth date of N. F. S. Grundtvig, the Danish religious leader and founder of the folk school movement.

The Danes made intruders feel unwelcome. Nielsen's brother Jorgen went to Omaha to adopt a child and came home with a Chinese boy. Nielsen recalls that "all of their friends were dumbfounded and asked why in creation did he not get a Danish boy or at least a child who looked like one."⁴⁴ Later the Chinese-Danish-American ran away from home—perhaps for obvious reasons. One of the Danes in the community married a Polish girl—from that day on he was a "social outcast."⁴⁵ another time a Polish family moved near Dannebrog. "That was enough," related Nielsen. "We were against them."⁴⁶

These settlements—such as Johnson's little Norway in Texas and Nielsen's Nysted or Dannebrog—appeared as ethnic islands pledged to uphold the traditions and ways of the homeland in the American West. They stood apart as if to challenge Frederick Jackson Turner's idea that the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Nielsen, *Life in an American Denmark*, p. 20.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-42.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

frontier promoted the formation of the "composite nationality."

Gustaf Unonius, Ole Johnson, and Rasmus Nielsen were three Scandinavian immigrants in search of their livelihood in the American West. In the end only one of the three found the economic security and happiness that the immigrants thought would be theirs on the frontier.

As time passed, Unonius found the West a difficult place for a student to eke out an existence. After a short time of toil on the farm, he admitted that the West "had nothing to offer young officials, military officers, and poor students."⁴⁷ Unonius' poetic dream of a "home and a hearth" was increasingly interrupted by doubtful intermezzos. When a Swedish immigrant family came to America and to "New Uppsala" upon the urgings of Unonius, the Swede admitted that "I felt a pang of regret as I realized that through my descriptions . . . I had perhaps been the innocent cause of a decision I feared [they] would soon come to regret."⁴⁸

The realization that he had not been cut out to be a pioneer farmer coupled with the growing influence of Episcopal missionaries caused Unonius to quit farming and to begin training for the ministry. After becoming a priest of the Protestant Episcopal Church, Unonius served in the mission field and later in Chicago. Disillusioned by the "sufferings and privations encountered in that calling" and by the growing religious rivalries in Chicago, Unonius decided to return to Sweden. Looking back, he believed that he had made two mistakes: "One, that I ever emigrated to America; the other, that after I had made my home and found my field of service there, I returned from that country."⁴⁹

Ole Johnson, too, found the American West an undesirable region to earn a livelihood. After nearly a decade

⁴⁷ *Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius*, I, 305.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 304-5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 322.

of pioneer life on the Texas frontier, Johnson moved to the booming town of Fargo in Dakota Territory. "I must admit," he wrote, "that I was wrong in the notion that a fortune could be quickly gained. Experience, yes, but fortune, no."⁵⁰ Johnson exchanged frontier farm life for frontier village life—and he found the exchange rewarding.

On the other hand, Rasmus Nielsen survived the storms of economic adversity and remained on his farm near Dannebrog until his death. In reminiscing about growing up on the frontier, Rasmus Nielsen's son remarks: "Many people think that such an alien pocket . . . was an evil. I think not. Strong enlightened citizens are an asset to any nation. Furthermore, we children, through our acquaintance with the cultural heritage of our parents, came to love it and them. We were spared the heartaches of so many immigrants and their children in our large cities. . . . Too often these children reject the cultural heritage of their parents and fail to discover the best in America."⁵¹ Rasmus Nielsen preserved the heritage of the homeland, but at the same time found the American West to be a good land.

⁵⁰ Johnson *Diary*.

⁵¹ Nielsen, *Life in an American Denmark*, pp. 141-142.