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Article Summary: Ebbesen describes the travails of the Danish community of Dannebrog. His family survived violent weather, insect infestations, and prairie fires while living in a sod house. Lively communal activities helped his parents endure the hardships of pioneer life.

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Photographs / Images: Mr and Mrs Rasmus Ebbesen and Peter; Peter Ebbesen; Marian and Andrew Hansen, Mr and Mrs Nels Hansen, and Hans Andersen in a sod house at Dannebrog; masthead of the Danish language newspaper *Stjernen*, edited and published in Dannebrog by Peter Ebbesen, 1886-1889

# Danish Pioneers on the Nebraska Prairie: Recollections of Peter Ebbesen

*Edited and Translated by William J. Orr*

## INTRODUCTION

Of the many Danish settlements in Nebraska those of Dannebrog, Dannevirke, and Nysted in Howard County were among the oldest, largest and best known. The origins of these colonies can be traced to a group of Danes in Waukesha County, Wisconsin, who hoped to acquire homesteads on the cheaper and more abundant lands of the western prairie. Their leader and spokesman was Lars Hannibal (1822-1882), a Danish immigrant and Civil War veteran.<sup>1</sup> Largely upon his initiative the Danish Land and Homestead Company was established in 1870 to promote settlement in Nebraska. That following year the company dispatched a committee, including Hannibal and three other Danes, to select sites in the then sparsely settled lands of the Platte Valley north of Grand Island which the Union Pacific Railroad wished to populate and develop.

Colonization began shortly afterwards. In 1872 Dannebrog was founded. Over the course of the next decade settlers, including a sizeable contingent of Danes and especially Jutlanders, streamed into the region, and three years later a sister colony at Dannevirke took root. The settlers in turn created their own ethnic organizations: cooperative societies, churches, a Danish-language press, and that most characteristically Danish institution, the folk high school. Indeed, the area was to preserve its Danish character well into the 20th century, when finally the ineluctable pressures of assimilation led to the gradual disappearance of the old language and culture. The Great Depression of the 1930s uprooted and dispersed many descendants of the original settlers.<sup>2</sup>

Of the earliest pioneers few were better suited to chronicle the history of these colonies than Peter Ebbesen (1860-1942).<sup>3</sup> The son of immigrants who settled on a homestead near Dannebrog in 1873, Ebbesen grew up during the travails and achievements of the early Danish community. On reaching adulthood he taught first between 1879 and 1893 in the public schools of Dannebrog and then briefly in 1888 at the folk high school in Nysted. From 1886 to 1896 he published and edited the Danish-language newspaper *Stjernen* (*The Star*) in Dannebrog, and from 1893 to 1901 the *St. Paul Phonograph*. Active in politics and reform movements, he was locally an organizer of the People's Independent Party and also served from 1894 to 1897 as Howard County Treasurer, a reflection of the trust he inspired among his fellow Danish-Americans.<sup>4</sup> In 1902 he and Judge Paul Anderson established in St. Paul an insurance company and savings and loan agency, from which he withdrew in 1911 so that he could nurse his invalid mother. Although he retired in 1921 to southern California, Peter Ebbesen maintained close ties with his old community, often sending letters and articles to the *Phonograph* as well as to Danish-American journals like *Dansk Almanak*. On March 8, 1942, while walking to church in Hollywood, this now frail 81-year-old was struck and killed by an automobile. He was buried in St. Paul.

Undoubtedly Ebbesen deserves to be remembered most of all for his articles, both in Danish and English, on the history of early Danish immigration in Howard County, a subject with which he was intimately acquainted and without whose recollections our knowledge of the period and its leading figures would be much poorer.<sup>5</sup> Of his many essays the following one, published in a collection of Danish pioneer memoirs in 1935,<sup>6</sup> is the most autobiographical and depicts most vividly the obstacles faced and the perseverance shown by Danish pioneer families like his own in opening an often inhospitable land to settlement and cultivation.

### THE TRANSLATION

If I am to render a fairly sterling description of my parents' pioneer life in the wilderness of the western prairies, I had better start at the very beginning—the untamable Danish urge to travel that stirs the village people of Lolland.<sup>7</sup>

My father Rasmus Ebbesen was the eldest son of old Rasmus Ebbe who was forest steward in Rykkerup, on the Hardenberg estates near Saxkøbing, during a half century between 1832-82. My mother Ane Christine Pedersdatter was the daughter of the unskilled laborer Peder Johansen in Stubberup near Nysted. They were married on February 26, 1858, both 26 years old, and I, their only child, came into this world on June 9, 1860. "Our life was no bed of roses," Mother sometimes said—and of that we were to experience the truth. Our lot on the ancestral shores was scanty, salty, and wet. The forest steward's son must break new ground and rely on his own devices. There were many brothers and sisters, so the most my parents with diligence and frugality could achieve in the course of a couple of years was a newly-built home on three *Tønder* [about 4 acres] of beach near Stubberup. For ten years Father struggled with the Baltic's high waters, and Mother actually grappled with its low tide because she earned a little money bleaching coarse linen for a dyer in Nysted. During the day Father had to work for a farmer of the family of the estate and in winter at tree-cutting; but every evening at ebb tide Rasmus Ebbe [*sic*] had to busily put up seaweed dikes to shut out the high tide from the low, tiny plot of earth. But just as this objective seemed attained, a great wave struck and carried the entire embankment out to sea. That trick of fate recurred once or twice a year, yet Father continued his exciting struggle with the forces of nature for ten long years. This was good training for what would follow afterwards in America but finally became too tough—at any event for Mother. "Let us leave this disgusting beach and go up into the country," she entreated. But after they sold it, they thought after all that they should go to America instead where there was an abundance of land for all willing to cultivate it. That was what one could read in the yellow America letters which came once a year from mother's sister, Karen Mari. She and her husband, Lars Hansen, had traveled over on a sailing ship in 1857 and acquired 30 acres of forest land in Waukesha County, Wisconsin. Certainly this would have to be cleared, but it could hardly be worse than the struggle with the seashore.

So on April 25, 1868, we landed in the new world. I was then 8 years old. Father and Mother were both 36. My uncle

and aunt were still badly off, but were very helpful in getting us started. My father was so determined to be an independent cultivator that without consulting with his brother-in-law, he let himself be taken in by a slippery Dane, who hailed from Kulsvieregnet, to buy his farm for 3,000 dollars. On his arrival from Denmark Father had a capital of 300 American gold dollars which, when changed to greenbacks, increased to 500 dollars. This sum he paid out for the lot which soon proved to be a swindle. The cultivated land was merely gravel, and the only good land was that with virgin forest upon it. Tree-lover that Father was, that noble forest excited his enthusiasm, but it was without practical worth because there was no market for timber. Cutting and burning on the spot was the only way to deal with these magnificent trees, for they just stood there and made the land useless. Father and Mother had just about worn themselves out in Denmark; they were both crippled by toil and injury. He had an incurably bad leg which once in awhile laid him up in bed for a week, and her left hip had been crushed when she was a baby, a cross she had to bear her entire life, since in those days (1831) there was no medical or surgical service for humble people. So one can understand the position my parents found themselves in, since prior to 1870 they had for two years toiled like slaves to clear the forest and lug stones from that cursed farm. They were just as stiff and exhausted as the old horses Tom and Topsy. And still the entire venture could not meet the interest on the principal which was owed for the farm. There was nothing else to do but let the whole mess revert to the scoundrel who had practiced the same swindle on other trusting countrymen.

So we traveled to Council Bluffs, Iowa in May, 1870, to make a fresh start. Mother's brother, Hans Jørgen Pedersen, had gone out there the year before, and he provided Father with work on the night shift of the ditch digging for the first railway between the [Council] Bluffs and Omaha. Well, Father earned money, Mother earned money, and even I, the boy, earned money. Mother cleaned in Denmark House, a cheap Danish boarding and lodging house, for 50 cents and a few leftovers in daily earnings, and I received a half-dollar a day for bringing drinking water to the sweating workers who dug ditches for the new gas works. It wasn't long before we had saved enough to buy a ten dollar lot down on the Bottom



*Mr. and Mrs. Rasmus Ebbesen and son Peter (center).*



*Peter Ebbesen (1860-1942), son of Danish settlers, grew up on a homestead near Dannebrog, Howard County.*

(lowland) near the Northwestern [Railroad] Locomotive shed and keep a little house there for a cost of 130 dollars.

In the meantime Mother had put up long enough with the "Missus on the steps." The landlady in the Denmark House had the feudal practice of raising burdens without raising pay. After that Mother took in as boarders two Danish fellows—Christian Boesen ("Winds Christian") and Nybølle Jørgen who was later known under the Americanized name John Johnson; as pioneer and father to a large flock of children, he later played an important role as one of the leaders in opening Franklin County, Nebraska, to cultivation. In spite of the injured leg, which a couple of times laid Father up in bed for several weeks, everything otherwise went well with work, since we saved practically everything and spent very little. The second year George Madison (Jørgen Madsen), my boyhood friend from Stubberup, and I got work in Danforth's Window Shop as painter and glazier. When that business closed down, we went to a cigar factory as tobacco splitters. But I never made more than that everlasting half dollar . . . , and as a self-supporting man of twelve years that wounded my self-esteem. Already at the end of the second year Father had saved up enough money to buy a pair of horses and a wagon. That was a great relief for him in his crippled condition, because he now got a steady job driving clay earth through the streets, and besides it pulled him one step closer to his fond life's goal—of getting a home and cultivated farm in the West's open plains. This longing of his for land became more acute every time Lars Hannibal—who in 1871 had accompanied a dozen Danes from Wisconsin and started the colony of Dannebrog, 175 miles west of Omaha—came into the Bluffs and incited Father with the words: "Now you must get a move on, Rasmus, before all the free land gets snapped up."

As a result, already in April, 1873, Father set out there and picked an 80-acre homestead four miles northwest of Hannibal's sod hut where the town of Dannebrog had sent up its first shoots. The few dispersed settlers' deep longing for companionship was evident in the hearty welcome they gave Father. He received another kind of greeting from a raw, hostile nature which bellowed through the prairie wind: "These are my preserves from time immemorial; if you want to dispute the field with me, I will show you what it costs to

tackle me." So the unforgettable Easter Sunday snow storm of April 13, 1873 broke loose! The day began with a cold rainstorm. But the next morning, when the settlers stuck out their heads from their sod huts, they were greeted with an icy, violent hurricane with the air so filled with whirling, frosty dry snow dust and so blinding that one could hardly see five feet in front of himself. The paralyzing, stinging storm raged without letup for 60 whole hours until 2 o'clock Wednesday afternoon. Only then could people venture out and look for their poor cattle of which some had died and the survivors gone crazy from cold and hunger. The week before the weather had been spring-like and the grass was shooting up, so the cattle were roaming freely in the prairie when the sudden storm broke out. The animals, blinded by snow, stumbled toward the creek in which they fell or crowded one another, and some of them froze to death or drowned. None of the few Danes, however, lost their lives, whereas six Americans on the county's north side died after daring to go outside, a venture that was certain death in almost every case. One exception was the 11-year-old girl, Emma Cooper. Space limitations do not allow detailing of her account of her miraculous rescue after she had spent Tuesday morning to Wednesday noon, bare-legged and with ragged clothes, on the open prairie in constant flight and circling. She survived, but her legs were crippled for life.<sup>8</sup> The fact remains—these so-called blizzards or electrical snowstorms were characteristic of primeval nature that fought to preserve its freedom. They were so paralyzing and blinding that one could not venture 100 steps from his dwelling with the certainty of being able to find the way back. But, just like the other terrors of the wild, they have become gradually milder under the influence of cultivation. Since 1890, after tree growth and agriculture had been extended, they lost their barbarous force. The snowstorms which people now-a-days call blizzards are feeble in comparison. Moreover, as far as moisture and wind are concerned, there has been a significant change of climate in the course of the past sixty years.

When Father came back to the Bluffs with the Homestead certificate in his pocket, we busily prepared ourselves for the expedition. Now we had our first taste of the misfortune (*Vanheld*) (or water woe [*Vand-Uheld*]) which was our fate

throughout our journey. With the thaw the Missouri River had already risen so high that it put the low "Bottom" under water, and the slush and mess was sustained by continual rains almost all of May. That was the wettest spring in memory. The "prairie schooner" Father had made by covering the work wagon stood like a Noah's ark waiting to depart. In vain did our neighbors attempt to dissuade us from this daring adventure. George Madison's parents declared: "We have followed you from Denmark to Wisconsin, and from there to here, but now we say—stop. We won't let ourselves be dragged out there and killed by Indians." But talk did not help. After a week of dry weather we set out on June 6 in that oddly outrigged emigration-vehicle, with the six-foot wide cover upholstered with tent canvas. There was still place for a gas stove, supplies, and bedding; and a crate with two pigs inside was tied to the tailgate outside. I drove our three cows and the heifer behind the vehicle. We successfully slipped over the Missouri by ferry, but thereafter our trials began.

The one horse had such violent tantrums of craziness that we had to give up driving with him. While Mother and I camped in the schooner which was hauled in by Mark Hansen's horse,<sup>9</sup> Father turned back to Bluffs with that crazy horse and traded it for a lame one, but he had to pay 40 dollars to boot, which put a dent in his pocket book. Nevertheless, we got started again the next morning, and the first day's journey from Omaha went entirely well. At night we camped in the low, flat Elkhorn Valley, a dozen miles north of the town of Elkhorn. But—alas and alack!—in the course of the night heaven's floodgates opened once again; it rained all the next day and still further for seven full days and nights. We pulled our schooner up on higher ground but otherwise did not move from the spot the entire week. Naturally we felt miserable; some salty tears mingled with the incessant rainwater. But when the need is the greatest, then help is on the way. Three other schooners joined us—two belonged to an older Irish couple with a large flock of children and the third was manned by a younger Irishman with his wife and child, both of whom were sick. These people made common cause with us and revived our sunken spirit.

We then had no idea of the many holes that came to trip us up. On the first clear day, when we finally weighed anchor,

figuratively speaking, we found navigation extremely dangerous. Almost all the flat land of Elkhorn Valley stood under water from a couple of inches to a couple of feet in depth. Through this sea plowed the heavy-laden vehicles which had to break new paths since the flood had covered all the old tracks. We had to drive about fourteen miles through this lowland. That was the longest wading trip I have ever undertaken; for the three cows' and the heifer's circular course extended the watery path for twenty miles. This was the most dangerous and most adventurous day on the entire trip. Under the surface of the water were many hidden holes and sloughs, and many times our overloaded schooner got stuck in them, but our doughty Irish fellow sailors were always ready to couple their powerful horses to the bar and haul us up on firm ground. Despite Father's carefulness, once it happened that our horses staggered out into such deep water that the near horse, in a fit of desperation, apparently tried to commit suicide, for it stuck its head down in the deep water which gurgled into the poor animal's ears. With united heave and ho, the men were able to get him back on his feet. We agreed that Mother ought not to risk her life and health any further in our sinister old tub. So she waded over to the younger Irishman's schooner, but there she sat in constant worry that the sick woman was infested with one or another infection. Eventually she climbed out and wandered over to my side for the rest of the day. I am convinced that it was God's miracle that Mother could live through that journey's travails and the trials of the following year, because the previous year she had been sick almost to death and had not entirely regained her strength when we left the Bluffs.

Finally, towards evening we made our way to higher ground but the way was still mostly swampy. We found firmer roads when we made our entry the next day in the town of Fremont and caught the citizenry's attention. We also aroused something of a more bothersome sort. Because we cut across an empty building site, the owner came running up and cursed us out. Our battle-worthy leader, the elder Irishman, felled the cranky fellow with a blow of his horny hands. That could easily have given us a nasty interruption in our journey, for the fellow who had been thrashed ran bellowing to the police and lodged a complaint. At first we put our man under Mother's

quilt. But since he felt unsafe there, he sprang out of the wagon and set over the meadow, light and agile like a deer, and joined us again a couple of miles out in the country after we had gone over Fremont Hill.

The way from Fremont to Columbus was the trip's easiest. Bit by bit, we followed the Mormons' old sunken road. Gradually, as we proceeded westward, the landscape became more thinly populated. Sod huts were almost the only dwellings and even they were few in number. Our hero, the older Irishman, strong-as-a-horse, now left us and set his course with his two schooners and large family southward towards Kansas—he had had enough of Nebraska. Fortunately, the other traveling companion chose to stand shoulder to shoulder with us for a way farther, even though this part of the country did not particularly appeal to him. Already near Columbus we again came upon a critical situation. The frightful flood of water had swept away the bridge over the Loup River, so we had to navigate on the treacherous sandy bottom, the quicksand of which was covered with bunches of willow, but with our usual fortune and misfortune we pulled through.

From here on, right up to our journey's final destination, we crept along lazily and slowly over a low and very soaked terrain. There were many creeks; and the "bridges" which the settlers had laid from tree trunks, brushwood, and earth had naturally all "gone down the drain." One ugly day we flopped down again in water someplace where there had been a bridge. The entire inventory was soaked except for the quilts which an earlier misfortune had taught Mother to bundle up under the wagon's top cover. We had to go a long way, though, and get a settler with a team of oxen to help us out of the deep hole. The combined forces of the two oxen and the four horses just barely succeeded in hauling our vehicle onto solid land. In crossing Silver Creek we were again on the point of disappearing in a slough even though we had a local pilot to point the way or astray. It went haphazardly—we were now so accustomed to teasing fate that never let us founder in our foolhardiness. For the sake of a sandy and easier route it had been our intention to turn farther northwards through the Pawnee Indian Reservation, but people warned us against this with the assurance that the Indians that spring, during their "powwows" and hunting dances, had worked themselves into

a warlike mood. As it later happened, the redskins behaved themselves, but it would have been risky to so trespass without any further ceremony on their preserve. Our dread had as its consequence that we continued to drudge and wallow through Merrick County's swampy flats. One Sunday morning both schooners were so hopelessly stuck that we had to seek aid from a settler far away over on the other side of the bog. His powerful oxen hauled us through a mile of mud to more solid terrain. Next morning our last Irish friend separated from us; he declined to come any closer to Indian territory. He too set his course straight south to the Republican Valley or perhaps eventually to Kansas. Yes, it was hard to separate from those redoubtable Irish traveling companions, who had so readily helped us from so many nasty scrapes and without whom we would never have made it through.

Luckily we could now manage by ourselves. Around the afternoon, June 23, we passed over the Loup River on the new bridge which just recently had been completed near St. Paul. That was our first and only firm bridge crossing on the entire trip. On the afternoon of the next day (June 24), we finally came to journey's end on our homestead and Father put the schooner in a spot near the ravine which he had selected for our "dugout." A three-fold sigh of relief swelled up. For eighteen days and nights we had been out on adventure, eleven on the trip itself. Nowadays a motorist covers these 185 miles in less than eleven hours! In those roadless times a car would have been useless.

Yes, now, thank God, we were on firm ground—and where true virgin soil lay neat, luxuriantly covered with clean prairie grass. What a relief, for we had only a faint idea about imminent trials and not the slightest notion of the plagues lurking behind the horizon. That night we enjoyed our first bed in a house. Laerke and Johanne Sørensen,<sup>10</sup> the first and only pioneer couple in the district that first year, welcomed us with open arms and hearts. Nevertheless, comfort was not unmixed because next morning Mother complained that her rest had been disturbed by flea bites—she thought they came from the dog. Already the next day, with the expert help of Laerke and his brother Povl, our first dugout was excavated in the slope of the hill near the schooner's cover, with a layer of sod for a roof; only a door and window were lacking, but we took up

residence there that same evening. A welcome incense of the blended aroma of raw soddy soil and age old clay flowed vigorously to meet us. Nature's Judas kiss! We went crazy from the confounded fleas. Father and I were fortunately thick-skinned, but the stinging, burning flea bites drove Mother to the edge of desperation that first summer. It was evident that this was a kind of ground flea that exclusively thrived in raw earth; later they disappeared with the cultivation of the soil.

Another annoying and even more disgusting pest struck the following summer. Suddenly, as though conjured up, myriads of flat yellow worms swarmed out of the ravine's black topsoil. The soil literally teemed with them. They pushed into the dugout, and although they were harmless, their snake-like crawling up the timbers and down the walls aroused a nauseating disgust. If one were to sweep them out or crush them, then a new contingent would come in the course of a half-hour. Fortunately, the vermin disappeared after a dozen days just as suddenly as they appeared, and we never saw them again in such number. A similar phenomenon turned up in the lower stretches between the sandhills toward the east. There was an equally sudden appearance of toads so packed on the ground as if they had descended in hail. When one traveled across the prairie they popped unremittently under the wagon wheels like a modern boy's toy torpedoes. Neither did this plague ever occur again. That was the weakest link in primeval nature's chain of weapons. Meanwhile, during this crisis period, the wilderness' great attacking guns opened up time after time over the seasoned pioneers who realized that this stern treatment (*Medfart*) was a dowry (*Medgift*) for the "free land" and consoled themselves with the assurance that liberation would come when the drudgery and trials of this time of adversity had passed.

The dangers which we had imagined beforehand did not turn out to be as serious as those we never anticipated. Certainly, we hovered in doubt the first year regarding the redskins, and this gnawing uncertainty was one of the reasons why the first settlers sought to make themselves as invisible as possible, to which end their dugouts were excellently suited. That the "peaceful" Pawnee Indians were not quite dependable, one could also infer from the fact that a company of soldiers was permanently encamped in the northern part of

the county, and that later Fort Hartsuff, constructed of stone walls and well fortified, was established on the east side of the Loup River in nearby Greeley County in order to protect us pioneers against the ever present danger of an attack by the Sioux Indians. As is well known, these Indians were the most warlike and untamed among all the prairie's children of nature, and they ruled all of Nebraska's northwest section. Like flying demons they burst forth like a stormwind on their fast-running ponies for murder and robbery expeditions, most often a hundred miles or more from their haunts. Early one spring day in 1874 a mounted messenger came riding down from Valley County a half a hundred miles above us with the dread warning that the Sioux were on the warpath and that the few settlers up there had entrenched themselves in the sod houses of the Danish pioneer leaders, Fall and Møller. It cannot be denied that this piece of bad news instilled terror into us through and through. An express message for weapons was sent to Lincoln, and Peter Hannibal<sup>11</sup> exercised the men in the use of weapons with sticks that substituted for rifles. A fortnight later news again arrived from the border that the danger had passed. As it happened, it was the Pawnee Indian ponies that the dreaded Sioux were after; and once they had seized a number of these, they had scurried back to the Black Hills so quickly that the military and settlers could not catch them.

The Pawnee were regarded as peaceful, but we never knew if one could rely on them. Their reservation was just thirty-five miles from us, and in winter they were permitted to leave their area and hunt along the river where they camped in their "wigwams." But they had the annoying bad habit of roaming over to us to beg and pilfer whatever lay around. Once they stole our hand axe, and this Father could never forgive, for it took several months before we could afford to buy another one. Father otherwise had not the slightest fear of these red pelts, as he called them. That winter, as our first corn crop lay piled up on the bare earth, the Indians came by frequently and begged for corn. Although our stock was small enough, Father gladly gave them a sackful. One day Father had filled sacks for two of the red fellows when one of them dragged out a third sack with gestures that indicated he wanted to have more. Angry, Father emptied the full sack and cast it in the face of the redskins and ordered them to leave at once, and they did so

with a strange grunting. For several days Mother was terribly worried that they would come back and scalp us while Father did not feel a trace of unease. When his fighting mood was aroused, there was nothing in the world that could scare him. We never saw those Indians again.

Wild animals were not so numerous in the prairie as in the forest areas, rattlesnakes excepted, but of these there were different kinds which were annoying enough and contributed to the discomfort of life on the border. There were plenty of badgers and prairie wolves and they were not rare neighbors. The latter especially had the ferocious habit of making murderous attacks on the chicken yard. The badgers' mischief affected only the beautiful prairie terrain which they disfigured with their eternal excavations. Along the streams wildcats, beaver, otters, fox, and mink were found, but naturally they were useful to the pioneers for their pelts which had value. Antelope were reckoned in the same class, but disappeared or were shot down in the course of the first two winters. The shier and more easily frightened elk and buffalo had retreated farther out into the wilderness as soon as the white man approached. Most annoying were the so-called "dog towns." The prairie dog is a social animal which digs its holes deep in the earth, in groups so large that in some spots they destroyed large areas of land. But their worse offense against the settlers was their peculiar habit of offering free lodging to rattlesnakes which in spring then spread out over the prairie to the peril and detriment of man and beast. It was these poisonous snakes that scared us more than anything else. Nevertheless, poisonous bites were not as frequent as had been feared.

The raging prairie fires, frequent in the first dozen years, were a constant danger, for sometimes the corn and haystacks caught fire. These runaway waves of fire ran with unbelievable speed over hill and dale; the so-called main-fire with a strong wind could run a race with a galloping horse. But this enemy was held somewhat in check by the settlers who provided for sufficient "fire breakers." With a break plow, one plowed two parallel furrows 30-40 feet from another and burned off the grass strips between.

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Now the sod huts are practically "a legend only," but sixty years ago they were a raw reality. They were usually cozier in

winter than our California bungalows but in drawn-out rainy periods—ugh! In their original construction they had a weak “side,” namely the roof. First there was a dugout, then a sod hut, and finally a sod house with a wooden floor and eventually a water-tight roof. Our first cave was so cramped that already the following summer we dug No. 2 in larger dimensions with an earthen floor and a deep basement cave behind the inside end for keeping milk. Naturally that was progress, but such a mole’s dwelling remained somewhat sad and musty all the same. So we longed to go outwards and upwards—to something lighter and roomier, a sod house according to the latest, improved design.

The brothers Jens and Christian Andersen, who were carpenters from Denmark and self-taught masons from Chicago after the 1871 fire, constructed a sod house for us, which was entirely comfortable and roomy. It was built entirely on the earth’s surface with two-foot thick walls of prairie sod. The sod pieces were cut up with a breaking plow in 10-inch width and 2½-inch thickness.<sup>12</sup> They were cut off with a spade to 2 feet in length and laid in a wall two widths in breadth, laid crosswise in the nearest layer and so forth. Each layer was leveled off with dry top soil. This formed a two-foot thick firm wall to a height of seven feet. On the outside the wall was cut off with a spade to about a fifteen inch thickness on top. Posts with forks in the topmost end were mounted vertically at the center of each end wall, and on them were ridge poles at a height of a couple of feet over the side wall. Rafters were laid with ends resting on the ridge pole and a post laid towards the side wall; a tight layer of willows were laid crosswise over the rafters, likewise a layer of hay, followed by a layer of turf prettily topped off with a good layer of clay. The trees used (cottonwood and willow) we got from the government forest along the Loup River. In this house there were three rooms and also three windows. For partitions, cottonwood boards were used, to which Father had helped himself while driving tree trunks to the saw mill. There was not enough, however, for the wooden floor we wanted. The walls inside were plastered with clay and white-washed, so the new dwelling became quite bright and fine. But the splendor lasted only through the winter. In March there was a great wet snowfall, which was succeeded for 24 hours by a steady

rain that gradually seeped through the clay and sod and gradually dripped water too in a steady rain over the entire house's interior and caused pitiable filth and discomfort.

Mother's finest treasure, the quilts, she had wadded up in so small a size that the oil cloth could just cover them. Slogging to the ankles in the soaked earthen floor, we succeeded in getting to the wet brushwood to supply warmth for a cup of coffee. That was a rough day and a musty night, but the next day was clear and we were able to dry out in the open the little furniture and ourselves. But inside it still dripped for some time. Luckily this sprinkling never recurred, seeing as how the roof worked well enough under usual rainy weather. Although the roof never held completely tight in strong rain, not even in the last massive earth house we erected on the ridge, greater damage nonetheless never occurred. The only one who succeeded in manufacturing a leak-free sod roof was the well-known pioneer and industrialist, Mads Anderson, but he was also, to be sure, a versatile inventor.<sup>13</sup> He simply set the rafters at a very steep angle and placed the layers of sod on each other with corresponding ledges that diverted the water. Others avoided leakage in the hut by setting straw roofs on them, and a few of the more well-to-do could afford a shingled roof; but only sod roofs were used the first two to three years. The sod hut in its different forms was general in the beginning, but here and there could be found such departures as clay houses with wattled walls pasted on with clay, and there were also a couple of examples where walls were cast of solid clay. For the primitive humble sod hut, a word of praise is due: it was, apart from the drawbacks mentioned, comfortable, cozy, friendly and restricted enough to hold the family circle in close union. Many a welcome cup of coffee and hearty party were enjoyed within its modest walls. Our sod house life lasted for seven years during which time we dwelled in four different, gradually improving types. And the two-story wooden house which was finally built in 1880 on our homestead was paid for with money I earned as a school teacher, for the income supplied by farming was not greater than that needed to pay for the horse stables and barn built a couple of years earlier. Expensive farm machinery swallowed the lion's share of the money we received for the farm's produce.

Nevertheless, we had made a good start all the same. My

Father was one of the most systematic and correct men I have known. Tilling the soil was his passion, and everything was ordered in advance, as far as possible, according to an unswerving plan. Too bad that he had not received training as an engineer or mathematician, for he was the greatest genius in arithmetic I have ever seen. But enough said about what could not happen in his impoverished and straitened youth. As I have mentioned, he threw himself into the work of cultivation with eagerness. Upon our arrival at the homestead, five acres had been broken and planted with corn, which Father had paid Laerke Sørensen to carry out. As soon as he could, Father broke a further twenty-five acres. That was "backset" (cross plowed two inches deeper) the same fall and sowed with spring wheat in March, 1874. With abundant rain the wheat grew luxuriantly until July 17 when the portents of disaster loomed in the sky.

Something that resembled rapidly rising, broad and thin smoke clouds appeared in the southwest sky around afternoon. Now what could *that* be, I wondered? Certainly not a prairie fire because the grass was now at its juiciest green. Shortly afterwards one could glimpse the silvery glimmering wings of an insect swarm against the vault of sky, and soon thereafter the swarm, apparently dead tired, tumbled down to earth like a hailstorm. Aah, it was grasshoppers—that was, though, a dangerous mass. Yet one still had no notion of *how* dangerous they were. It was only the next morning when the sun was well up in the sky that we got a view of the destructive work they had wrought.

From the entire great wide-open spaces of the prairie the "hoppers" swarmed into the settlers' small grain field until every single straw and stalk was occupied as tightly as pearls on a string. And how they could eat—it absolutely stank of the green ooze. In less than two days the corn stalks were completely devoured, in places even down to the roots themselves. The oats and the half-ripe wheat were also gnawed off so that they were ruined. These voracious demons in insect form were ubiquitous—into the hut, even on the body under one's clothes. And outlines of the hoppers fine sawing job were found even on hard objects like rakes and pitchforks. The third day, when its destruction was completed, the swarm lifted off and was borne away in a northeasterly direction by the never

resting southwest wind to fresh eating grounds. But already on the 25th they came back with an adventitious northeast wind in a still more compact mass. The swarms were so dense in the air that they dimmed the sunlight and cast shadows on the earth. But now we didn't care—other than prairie grass there was indeed nothing much left; but to our astonishment we saw that they took after this and likewise the foliage on the trees along the streams. The following two months the hoppers repeated their expedition several times.

*That* was a pestilence that singed and buffeted and hardened Danish tenacity and spirit with a vengeance. Very few of the Danish pioneers had anything left of the trifles they had brought with them. Starvation threatened—but where would they go? Some Americans fled back to Iowa, Illinois, or where their relatives otherwise dwelled, but the Danes had no place to go. And that was good, for the future showed that those who stayed behind won in the end. Of course, it was not out-and-out starvation, but nonetheless, want now prevailed in the huts. We and many others barely had enough. We could get a little milk from the cows and a few eggs from the emaciated hens, but bread and porridge cannot be made without flour and groats, so these foods were terribly scarce. Potatoes, whose deep-rooted tubers the hoppers had disdained, were a good relief. The Americans collected some provisions and discarded clothes in the East which were distributed among the destitute, but the Danes made few demands—better to suffer deprivation and care for oneself.

A small example of the prevailing scarcity can be cited from my own home. Father was bed-ridden with the painful leg in the worst period of winter, and since misfortunes seldom come one at a time, it came to pass that the winter (1874-1875) was the longest and most severe in the entire era of settlement. For a couple of days we did not have a bit of bread in the hut. So we got hold of some "glass wheat" which was too hard for the mill in Grand Island to grind. But we could crack it in our coffee grinder, and from this coarse meal Mother baked biscuits. Never had bread tasted so good as that!

Mother generally had a magic gift of making something out of nothing, I thought, but for bread she also had to have flour. The yellow corn meal was generally our life's support that winter. Mother cooked porridge and baked bread from it, and

to season it we had lots of sorghum syrup. The hoppers could not gnaw through that bone-hard sugar cane. In Wisconsin Mother had learned to cook maple syrup, and here she cooked sorghum for the whole settlement with a profit from every eighth gallon. So our hut was sweet as a beehive that winter.

Otherwise I scraped together what I could outside. But I had to settle for Shank's gray mare, for with the lack of grain the horses were too weak to travel on the road. By a stroke of luck we managed to trade the stiff old nag for a couple of oxen which could subsist on plain prairie hay for spring work. We had no guns, but with the help of some falling door traps I made of wicker I succeeded in catching enough prairie hens to provide us, together with bacon from the slaughtered pig, with meat over the winter. People who had guns had a surfeit of meat, for the snow crust lying on the prairie was richly filled with rabbits that winter. A few made themselves winter caps of rabbit skin. The hoppers had also, for the most part, eaten up the tobacco plants, even if they became giddy with nicotine from them; so that winter the men filled their pipes with the bark of a little bush, the so-called Killikinick.<sup>14</sup> Coffee was made of burnt rye and tea of dried elder blossoms. The clothes brought from Denmark or the East were well suited to alterations and mending. The wooden shoe man, Niels Simonsen, kept the entire colony shod with "Jutland pots" and "French" wooden shoes.

These scanty conditions seem awful today, but actually they were not so crushing then, for the pioneers had what cannot be bought today, namely the highest degree of physical robustness and the enduring strength of soul. In any case the situation was not hopeless. "There comes a time—there comes a remedy"—and fresh spirit. By spring Father was able to work again. When we had put seed into the earth with cattle power, I was fortunate enough to find work at C. O. Schlytern's<sup>15</sup> farm for the two months at harvest time with monthly pay of ten dollars. There I broke prairie with a stubborn horse and was allowed to "go to the parson" two times a week. When I met Pastor-emeritus A. M. Andersen here in Los Angeles last year he greeted me as his "first candidate for confirmation." As a newly ordained and newly married minister, he was installed as the congregation's pastor in Dannebrog the previous fall.<sup>16</sup> In the class there were three other

boys; and when we went to the parson, our mothers used to send with us a bottle of cream, a piece of meat, and other provisions for the pastor's wife. That was the clergy's salary then.

In the course of the summer (1875) the dreaded grasshoppers made several inroads; but the settlers brought out enough of the crop to keep themselves beyond distress and also for fodder for the animals. And again the following year they appeared once more, but in much diminished number so that the damage they wrought remained insignificant. That species of grasshopper was the so-called "Rocky Mountain Locust." Its hatching place was the Rocky Mountain valley region whence they, like their blood kinsmen in Egypt and Palestine, swarmed enmasse on foraging expeditions to the distant regions to the East where cultivated plants could be found. After 1876 we remained entirely free of them, and from that time on the pioneers reaped the harvest they had patiently toiled and hoped for and which inaugurated a transition period to improved dwellings, livestock, and conditions of life as a whole.

Father continued breaking open the prairie with such zeal that in the fifth year he had a homestead, less a few acres, under cultivation. So, in order to get enough grazing land, he bought another 80 acres (railroad land) for six dollars per acre. The free government land had been taken up a couple of years previously. Now Father had enough playing room for his urge to cultivate. And he *was* a thorough farmer, perhaps a little too thorough given the Midwest's capricious weather and growing conditions. He could turn a half-mile long furrow just as straight as a string. In part he employed the farming methods current in the homeland which, however, did not all prove practical here. He used the roller which pulverized the arable soil so finely that the strong March wind blew the topsoil away from the seed. Father also experimented with timothy grass, but it could not thrive in the new soil. On the other hand, his introduction of systematic manuring of the soil was a decided success despite the neighbors' skepticism. He, a forest-keeper's son, also became a tree-planting pioneer. Already in 1873 he founded a nursery from which in the course of a few years were supplied 100,000 box elder, and ash trees to small plantations around the area.

Thus have I rather thoroughly described the pioneer era's

peculiar tribulations with the purpose of giving the present generation a complete picture of them, since the plagues of those days are now as good as overcome in America. In the meantime, in order to be able to give an entirely clear picture of the pioneers' living conditions, I must now call attention to a few of the bright sides which would show that the settlers' daily life was not all desperation and grief. Despite the rough struggle, they were still, in accordance with their own modest demands, not so wretchedly off.

With the exception of the grasshopper years, the pioneers never suffered lack of food. They always had bread grain, meat, milk products, eggs, potatoes, and garden products in abundance—enough for serving good, solid Danish fare which pioneer women knew how to cook so superbly. Good-tasting and nutritious bread was baked from wheat and rye. Corn porridge and milk were, of course, much eaten there, and skimmed milk played an important part—especially among Jutlanders. The old Danish housewives were masters in cheese-making—their *Knapost* [a small buttermilk cheese with caraway seeds], savory cheese (*Appetitost*), skim milk cheese, and whole milk cheese stand out the most among what is now found in the market. As in Denmark, we had gruel and soup, meat soup, cabbage and kale soup, *øllebrød* [a dish made with bread and non-alcoholic beer] (made from home-brewed beer), and for social occasions sago soup, *sølsuppe* [a dish made of sago with fruit syrup, raisins, and prunes], and the incomparable Danish chicken soup with baked biscuits. During hog butchering in the fall, Mother saw to it that all the byproducts were used. There were prepared black puddings, *Medisterpølser* [a kind of pork sausage similar to German sausage (*Mettwurst*)], headcheese, and there was chopped *Plukkemad* [a kind of hash], leaf fat (*Flommen*) melted to fat; the shoulder and ham were smoked in order that we had supplies until the next butchering. There were enough eggs, so that boiled and fried eggs, scrambled eggs or omelets were never lacking. The Danish housewives preserved beets, large cucumbers, and tomatoes; and they prepared some of the most delicate jams that can be imagined from pie melons and lemon melons [cantaloupe?]. Naturally there was also a surfeit of pumpkins, squash, and the different kinds of melons. For the good reason that it could not be afforded, cake and other fine

baked goods were enjoyed only seldom, except at festive occasions.

The house utensils naturally stood in harmony with the simplicity of the hut. The pieces of furniture were the old ones brought from the east, and what was lacking one prepared oneself. In many huts could be found beds, tables, and benches that were made of rough cottonwood boards.

The same was true of clothes—they were as plain as one could imagine. But they were sufficient, and the pioneers were freed from the rules of dandyism and flapperism. Clothes should thus come from the soil; that is to say, one got the cloth at the store in exchange for butter and eggs. There was no other currency, and its buying power was paltry enough, with eggs from five to fifteen cents and butter from seven to seventeen while the prevailing clothing materials, calico and overall, cost thirty cents per yard. The only cloth that was needed during the first years was of this material: tunics and trousers for the menfolk, and dresses and bonnets for the women; they were all sewed at home by the housewives. Thus free from the tyranny of stylish folly, one's own "city clothes" could last many years; they were used so seldom. Some of the older people had brought along enough homespun and linsey-woolsey from Denmark to last the rest of their lives. A man's footwear during the winter were top boots (galoshes were not known) and "plough shoes" in summer. Most Danes also wore wooden shoes, but most often at home. Under garments were a rare luxury; most of the hardy settlers managed to do without. External clothing was quite certainly more of a necessity when wind and cold shrilled in the forty mile long drive (up and back) in an open wagon to the nearest railway station; most had overcoats and coats from an earlier time, but they were worn only in the very coldest weather. I recall only a single fur cap in the entire colony. Stockings, mittens, and neck scarves were knitted at home. All in all, not only in clothes but also in food, one was as good as self-sufficient—as far as the *necessary* things were concerned.

Tilling the soil was the pioneers' daily work—the goal of their coming was to transform the primordial plain into cultivated fields. The breaking of the prairie was so easily and rapidly done—compared to the slow clearing of the forest in Wisconsin—that the pioneers each year had even greater

acreage to cultivate and harvest. And since most must manage with their own labor power, there was incessant toil and drudgery. But that did not quite make them into toiling slaves for *action* was their passion. But all was not all sheer drudgery and no fun. The Danish pioneers at Dannebrog knew how to enjoy themselves, when the need for amusement asserted its claim. As far as recreations were concerned, one had to rely on homemade ones and these worked splendidly. Just as small children of that day found more bliss in five cents worth of stick candy than the spoiled offspring of the present day get from a roomful of costly toys, so the people of that age enjoyed themselves better with their simple unaffected social events than we do with our more fashionable and dissipated amusements. They were indeed all the same sort of people; they felt like brothers and sisters, members of a single family, something which also lay in the nature of the situation which made them so dependent on one another. No one thought himself better than anybody else; there was nothing of class differences nor the slightest hint of the later race to excel in wealth. Unaffected and open-hearted as children, they enjoyed themselves together.

There were mostly small get-togethers. A family invited two or three other families one Sunday or evening, sometimes on the host's birthday. One conversed by visiting fields or informing each other of any news from the neighborhood. Generally that went on over cards; one mostly played *Sjervendsel*,<sup>17</sup> sometimes a *Hanrej*,<sup>18</sup> or a "66." The really big get-togethers and sprees were the so-called topping-out ceremonies. It was the custom to invite the entire settlement to a great feast and dance once one had finished building a new, larger sod house with a board floor inside. At these occasions everyone really made merry. Naturally abundant food was served, two or three times in the course of the night. Yes, in those days one could eat. In the meantime, liquid refreshment flowed: schnapps, perhaps homemade wine, sometimes beer. At midnight the rum punch came out, while dancing was broken off for an hour, and toast songs were sung and speeches made, and the fiddler got his snack. Dancing lasted until dawn, and sometimes til sunup. These were the old Danish round dances with swing and speed in them: *svejtrit*,<sup>19</sup> triangle (*Trekant*), *Galop*,<sup>20</sup> tyrol waltz, Vienna waltz, polka, *Hopsa*,<sup>21</sup> mazurka,



*These Danish immigrants include Marian Hansen and Andrew Hansen (standing) and Mr. and Mrs. Nels Hansen and Hans Andersen (seated). This photo was taken in a sod house at Dannebrog, Howard County, Nebraska.*

# STJERNEN



8de Udgang. Dannebrog, Howard County, Nebraska, Torsdagen den 28de December, 1898. Nr. 52.

*Peter Ebbesen, from 1886 to 1896, published and edited the Danish language newspaper STJERNEN (THE STAR) in Dannebrog.*

varsovienne, and others. It all went on with energy and leaps and bounds, not like the modern wriggling on corns and shuffling [that passes for dancing].

But the settlers also had the need for gatherings of a more spiritual sort. From the very beginning the Constitution Day festival (June 5),<sup>22</sup> the 4th of July festival, and sometimes a harvest festival were held every summer in one or another part of the forest along the river, most often in Dannebrog. At these more graceful festivals there were decorations with American and Danish flags. Several speeches, interchanged with song and music, were held in honor of the occasion. In those days a good speaker could hold the entire assembly spellbound a whole hour or longer. There was sport and different competitions as well—foot races, sack races, boat races in tubs, and sometimes horse races.

In spite of, or perhaps because of their scanty material conditions, deep spiritual forces stirred in the Dannebrog pioneers. That is what it took to carry them through the transition period. . . . The Danish pioneers were all baptised, instructed, and confirmed in the Danish state church. But there were some who had lost interest in Lutheran services here in the new land. Some of the orthodox branded them as atheists, but I would sooner believe it was denial of the state church which afflicted them and that they had transferred their prejudices to the Lutheran clergy here in America. Generally it would be wrong to say that the Danish clergy did play some kind of upperclass role. Had they been so disposed they would in truth not have come so willingly and generously to stand shoulder to shoulder with the pioneer farmers through times of trial.

The first pioneer clergyman was Pastor H. Hansen.<sup>23</sup> As early as 1872, he came monthly from Omaha and imparted to Dannebrog's inhabitants spiritual services in accordance with the Mother Church's forms. As already noted, Dannebrog received its first resident clergyman, Pastor A. M. Andersen, at the end of 1874. Both these pioneer clergymen were pathbreakers of national significance; for it was they who a few years later became pioneer founders of the religious community: "The United church."<sup>24</sup> After the course of a couple of years, Pastor Andersen left for the other Danish settlement in Hamilton County, Nebraska where he had been called. It was

he who planted the seed from which grew Trinity Seminary and Dana College in Blair, Nebraska.<sup>25</sup> After that came Pastor S. H. Madsen<sup>26</sup> from the "Grundtvigian church";<sup>27</sup> he later left for Nysted and founded the congregation there. His successor Pastor C. J. Skovgaard<sup>28</sup> founded the folk high school in 1888.<sup>29</sup> Customarily, services were held in the more or less primitive school house of that day, and sixteen years passed before the first church (the one in Nysted) was built. Often religious meetings were held in one or another settler's sod hut. Missionaries and other confessions, especially Adventists and Baptists, operated in the neighborhood and won some converts. My parents retained their Lutheran faith throughout their entire life, and their Christian faith and goals were expressed in their daily action. Seldom did we miss services, although in miserable weather it was difficult enough to drive the four miles in the wagon. . . .

Co-operative work lies in the blood of Danes. Dannebrog's pioneers implemented the first little successful experiment of the kind a dozen years before the movement was born in the homeland. That was the already mentioned sorghum boiler which was established in 1874 with a share capital of 100 dollars scraped together by twenty settlers. It was set up on our homestead, and my mother both boiled the syrup and looked after the operation. After the beginning of the second decade, more capital-strong co-operative ventures were launched. The first co-operative dairy and likewise the lumberyard in Dannebrog failed, primarily because of ignorance; some learning dues had to be paid. But otherwise all the common ventures of the Danes have proved themselves a decided success. The Nysted mutual insurance society, co-operative grain storage, the different associations for cattle and hog sales have all long since reached their age of maturity and in many ways confirmed the power of co-operation and its monetary benefit.

The pioneers displayed at the outset a lively interest in politics and public affairs. My father, and, as it were, all the others regarded themselves as Republicans, as long as they did not know anything more than that this was the glorious party of freedom which had abolished Negro slavery. But as soon as it dawned on them what irregularities the Republican county and state government was carrying out under that noble

name, their inborn sense of right and independent capacity for thought and action led them early into the different reform movements. They became the backbone in the local chapters of the Farmers' Alliance, Anti-Monopolist, and Populist Party. Collaboration with the Democrats began first in 1894 when Wm. J. Bryan forced this party into a progressive course. The active part which the Danes have played in public affairs right from pioneer times had as a result that they have continuously been strongly represented in county and local offices and duties.

From the close of the seventies until 1893 there was smooth and steady progress in the pioneers' condition. The cultivated acreage was extended, the Danes added more land—some up to 2[00]-300 acres—and wheat growing made great strides. . . . The railroad from Grand Island to St. Paul was completed at the end of 1880, whereby the long route to the marketing point for wheat was cut in half. Later, in 1885, the route's length was halved again with the extension to Dannebrog. Though the actual pioneer period can be regarded as closed with the expiration of the eighties, the period of time from 1892 to the commencement of the new century was burdened with economic crisis and crop failure; so many of the hardships and privations of the settlement era must be lived again. The low point was reached in 1894 when the worst drought in the entire history of the West completely destroyed the crops. And when the year 1896 finally brought a normal yield of both corn and wheat, the market prices were at the same low point as now in 1932.

After 1901 the economic boom period began. There was a gradual rise in the market value of all agricultural products, which in combination with equivalent crops brought prosperity to the Danish farmers who understood how to use the favorable conjuncture which they so patiently had anticipated. A delight for the eye, and an inspiration for every Danish heart are the large, solid farm buildings and well-cultivated fields, which distinguish the Danish settlements at Dannebrog, Nysted, and Dannevirke. . . .

We stuck with intensive cultivation as long as my parents could stir themselves. . . . The most luxuriant and promising crop of wheat, oats, and corn covered our fields in the summer of 1883. Early in July the wheat had begun to turn golden, as

we were ready with binding twine, etc. to collect the crown harvest, as Father called it. But then on July 11 came a catastrophe just as unexpected as the grasshopper plague nine years previously—a violent hailstorm in the shape of lemon halves which completely devastated the whole lot. . . .

But providence also helps the provident or him who thinks himself such. One lovely day a banker came from St. Paul to buy up the hailstruck farm at a cut-rate price. He offered 2,500 dollars cash for the farm which was 1,000 dollars less than what we regarded its real worth. Cultivated land still had no recognized market value. But both Father and Mother were now at the end point of their physical strength after the years of toilsome labor at cultivation. . . . And I, who for four years now had carried out the teacher's calling in the district school, the number of pupils of which had risen to fifty-four, and simultaneously done field work when I could find time for it—spring and fall—was also headed for premature exhaustion. No farm could pay for hired help. Hence there was no other choice; we accepted the terms, and our pioneer life thus ended in a hailstorm just as it had also begun in storms—of ground fleas, worms, and grasshoppers. We had a total capital of 3,000 dollars after the sale of the livestock, so the monetary returns of the toilsome decade were scanty enough. But the contribution that had been made to further the colony's development was a source of satisfaction for my parents. Our farm was at that time the best cultivated and planted with trees, and its buildings were as good as any in the Nysted-Dannebrog district. Actually it was Mother who provided the name that year for the established Nysted post-office; since people could not agree on a name, she exclaimed: "Now is that anything to quarrel about? Why not call it Nysted after our old market town!" And there the matter rested.

Towards winter Father was attacked by an illness so severe and lasting that it was July, 1884, before the crisis abated enough that we could take him to St. Paul in a wagon outfitted with bed clothes, which strikingly reminded us of the prairie schooner. In September he was well enough that I could travel to Denmark and in Father's place visit his parents, and our numerous kin as well, on both of my parents' behalf. But I had to suddenly break off the pleasant stay in Denmark, for at New Year's I received news that Father had become

dangerously ill again. His strong constitution helped him, however, through the crisis, but the old, incurable leg wound, which in spite of all medical attention often caused him much pain, tied him down to a sedentary existence the greater part of his last twenty-four years. But he was never bored, for he was a tireless reader and retained to the last his lively interest for everything going on in the secular as well as the spiritual domain.

Herewith our pioneer history is actually concluded. But perhaps it is appropriate to add a little about my parents' twilight days and our last years together. Unmarried, as I remained, I continued to dwell with Father and Mother and they with me. Our first home in St. Paul was modest; in Dannebrog it was in the rear quarters of my print shop, but from 1904 we were owners of a dwelling of two stories and nine rooms in St. Paul with adjacent park grounds, whose upkeep gave me almost as much work as a little farm. For Mother the home was too splendid, but Father felt himself right in his element. I took up several things, dabbled in various widely different things without becoming master of any of them. The only thing I myself felt I had carried to success was my administration of the County Treasurer's office which I held for four years and freed from political favoritism by putting public finances on a correct business-like basis. In the farm machine business, which I first became involved with, I had almost lost all our capital, but pulled out soon enough to avoid outright bankruptcy. I was then persuaded to agree to the editing of a Danish weekly "Stjernen" (*The Star*). My Danish was very deficient, and too late I discovered that my companion, who had printed *Kirkebladet* (*Church Gazette*) for the Blair Society,<sup>30</sup> was no better equipped. But, just as I had conferred English schooling on myself by performing as a teacher for others, so I set to work and did the best I could. Full proficiency I never attained, but in the course of the following nine years I, as the sole owner, struggled with *Stjernen* and I acquired a Danish that could pass in our circle. English came easier to me, so it was natural enough that I also took up the editing of two American weeklies, each at a different time. As an agitator for the reform party, I naturally entered a very active and eventually exhausting political involvement.

When I finally withdrew from the newspaper business, I

entered a partnership with Judge Paul Anderson in an insurance and loan business, but after eleven years passed I gave up all business to give all my time to Mother. Her worn-out body became more and more weakened, and in her last three years I had to tend to her like a child; I had always been both her boy and girl, so quite naturally I was the only one who could console and comfort her until she, in her 85th year, April 9, 1916, passed away to that rest she so much needed. That was seven to eight years after Father's demise which occurred on November 12, 1908, in his 77th year. My parents never managed to see Denmark again. . . .

How true it is, though, that men's early aspirations and mode of operation shape their later character. Pioneering was a labor of sacrifice—my parents were prepared to sacrifice—Mother with her personal charity, and Father with his solid contribution to the agriculture of the era of settlement.

## NOTES

Permission for republishing Peter Ebbesen's recollections has been granted by Det Berlingske Hus, Copenhagen, Denmark.

1. For a short biographical sketch see *Danske i Amerika*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis and Chicago: C. Rasmussen, 1908-1916), I, 304-305.

2. For an account, written by a later settler, which focuses mostly on the 20th century see Alfred C. Nielsen, *Life in an American Denmark* (Des Moines: Grand View College, 1962).

3. For details of his life see the obituary in St. Paul *Phonograph*, March 18, 1942.

4. Nielsen, *Life in an American Denmark*, 62.

5. See especially "Historisk Omrids af Danske Kolonier i Howard County, Nebr.," in *Danske i Amerika*, II, 78-100; "Brief Historical Sketch of the Danish Colonies and Pioneers of Howard County," St. Paul *Phonograph*, June 18, July 2, 1924; "Dannebrog Pionerer," *Dansk Almanak*, 21 (1941), 34-48.

6. Peter Ebbesen, "Nybyggerliv i Nebraska," in Anton Kvist, ed., *Den gamle Pioner fortællere: Danskfødte Amerikaneres Oplevelser i det uopdyrkede Vesten* (Copenhagen: Berlingske Forlag, 1935), 151-179.

7. One of the principal islands of Denmark.

8. For another account of the 1873 blizzard and the ordeal of Emma Cooper see Ellen Kiechel Partsch, *Howard County, The First 100 Years* (n.p., n.d.), 10-11.

9. Hansen founded *Den danske Pioner* (The Danish Pioneer), published in Omaha between 1872 and 1958.

10. Laerke Sørensen (1845-1887) was born in Stubberup, Lolland (the same town as the author). After emigrating to the United States and briefly residing in Chicago and Lemont, Illinois, he moved to Grand Island in May, 1871. He and Lars Hannibal were the first settlers of the Dannebrog colony. Sørensen was the builder of the first sod house in the area, and later the town of Nysted was built on his land. Ebbesen, "Danske Kolonier," 90-91.

11. Peter Hannibal (1849-1939) was the son of Lars Hannibal and himself played a notable role in the early life of the Dannebrog community. A gifted linguist, he attend-

ed the University of Nebraska and served as the town's first school teacher. Hannibal played a leading role in local Lutheran church affairs and was a well-known temperance advocate. He was the author of such tracts as *Protect Our Schools* (Dannebrog; author, 1901) and *Uncle Sam's Cabin* (Dannebrog; author, 1910) as well as the semi-autobiographical *Thrice a Pioneer* (Dannebrog; Lutheran Publishing House, 1901). *Dannebrog News*, March 2, 1939; *St. Paul Phonograph*, March 4, 1939; *Dansk Almanak*, 19 (1939): 132-135.

12. Here the author uses the term *Tomme* which, while translated as "inch" is actually 2.615 centimeters and thus slightly larger than an inch (2.540 cm.).

13. Mads Anderson (1851-1932) was born on the island of Funen in Denmark, emigrated to the US and settled in Dannebrog in 1872. Here he became established as a prosperous farmer and wholesale grocer. In 1908 he invented a land roller based on similar machinery used in his old homeland. In 1912 he moved to Hastings where he subsequently established the Western Land Roller Company which remains in the Anderson family business today and has expanded into the production of other lines of agricultural machinery. Ebbesen, "Danske Kolonier," 94-95; Dorothy Weyer Creigh, *Adams County: The People 1872-1972* (Hastings: Adams County Centennial Commission, 1971), 6; *Adams County: The Story, 1872-1972* (Hastings: Adams County Centennial Commission, 1972), 828-830.

14. This primarily Indian concoction is spelled a variety of ways. The *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico* describes it as "an Indian preparation of tobacco, sumac leaves, and the inner bark of a species of dogwood, used for smoking by the Indians, old settlers, and hunters of the West." Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of Ethnology, *Bulletin 30: Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1912), part I, 692.

15. Carl Otto Schlytern (1823-1894) was born in Mauritsberg, Ostergotland in Sweden, and after building a sawmill and lumber business in the north of his homeland, came to Dannebrog in the fall of 1871. Subsequently he was instrumental in encouraging the migration of other countrymen who settled on the southern fringe of the Danish colony. More well-to-do than many of the earliest settlers, he ran a sizeable farm and also founded in 1885 a bank in Dannebrog. Ebbesen, "Danske Kolonier," 93; *St. Paul Phonograph*, June 18, 1924.

16. Anton Marius Andersen, who was born in Jutland in 1847, came to the United States in 1872. He served as pastor at Dannebrog from 1874-1876 and later at Argo (1879-1883), Blair (1884-1890), and Hampton (1890-1895). The principal founder of Trinity Seminary, he was president of this institution between 1884 and 1887 and later a professor of theology (1895-1897). In addition, he edited both secular and religious newspapers and was also the author of Danish language books on Danes in America and religious subjects. He died in Oakland, California in 1941. Nebraska State Historical Society, Archives, P. S. Vig Papers, Box 7, folder 3. This collection (Box 7, folder 6) also includes Andersen's unpublished memoirs (pp. 3-9) dealing specifically with his ministry in Dannebrog.

17. A card game in which the four jacks, the black queens, and sevens are trumps.

18. A card game, usually played by children, with two or more players, in which the last person holding a card loses and becomes a *hanrej*, a word which normally means "cuckold."

19. From German *Zweitritt*: two-step. An old folk round dance.

20. A rapid, springing dance for partners.

21. A round dance in 3/4 time with waltz step but involving hopping from one foot to another.

22. In commemoration of the sanction of the first Danish constitution on June 5, 1849, a date which marked the formal end of absolute monarchy and the beginning of a constitutional and parliamentary government in Denmark.

23. Hans Hansen (1848-1923) was a pastor in Omaha from 1874 to 1880. Nebraska

State Historical Society, Archives, Vig Papers, Box 7, folder 3.

24. The United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was founded in 1896 with headquarters in Blair.

25. The beginnings of Dana College and Trinity Seminary date from classes first held in 1884 at Pastor Andersen's home in Blair. After 1957 Trinity Seminary was transferred to Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque. William E. Christensen, *Saga of the Tower: A History of Dana College and Trinity Seminary* (Blair, Nebraska: Lutheran Publishing House, 1959), 10ff.

26. Soren Hamborg Madsen (1842-1911) served in Dannebrog between 1879 and 1885. Nebraska State Historical Society, Archives, Vig Papers, Box 7, folder 2.

27. Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872), one of the most influential figures in the history of Denmark, stood at the forefront of the religious and patriotic revival which gripped his country during the 19th century. As a theologian he tended to stress the primacy of the Apostolic Creed and the spirit and practice of the living church over Biblical literalism, a belief which generated considerable controversy, not only in Denmark but also among Danish Lutherans in the United States. Enok Mortensen, *The Danish Lutheran Church in America* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Church in America, 1967), 9-15.

28. C. Jensen Skovgaard (1855-1930) served at Nysted between 1886 and 1890. Nebraska State Historical Society, Archives, Vig Papers, Box 7, folder 2.

29. The folk high school movement which began in Denmark during the first half of the 19th century, largely under the inspiration of Grundtvig, had as its aim adult education, free from the rote learning characteristic of traditional schooling, which would foster Christian values and national identity. Much the same spirit also imbued the half dozen institutions established by Danish immigrants in the United States. For a history and description of the Nysted folk high school see Enok Mortensen, *Schools for Life* (Solvang, California: Danish-American Heritage Society, 1977), 56-74; Nielsen, *Life in an American Denmark*, 25ff, 112-121.

30. Ebbesen is referring here to the *Dansk Luthersk Kirkeblad* (Danish Lutheran Church Gazette) which was founded in Wisconsin in 1877 by the "Inner Mission" faction of the Danish-American Lutheran church noted for its more Biblical orientation and hostility to Grundtvigianism. A. M. Andersen was its first editor, and during the 1880s he continued to publish it out of his home in Blair. Mortensen, *Danish Lutheran Church*, 60-61; Christensen, *Saga of the Tower*, 4-5, 10.