



HANS REIMER CLAUSSEN

Always the Steadfast Defender of Freedom—
Transplanted from Schleswig to Iowa

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A GERMAN FORTY-EIGHTER IN IOWA

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The former German-American weekly *Der Demokrat*, Davenport, Iowa in its issue for March 22, 1894, speaks of the late Hans Reimer Claussen as "the patriarch of Davenport, the steadfast defender of freedom and justice, and the champion of the people in two worlds." These "two worlds" generally were the liberal Germany of 1848 and the United States of America, more specifically the homeland of Claussen between the North Sea and the Baltic and the state of Iowa.

Ninety years before Claussen had first seen the light of day on the western lowlands of Schleswig, a border province between Denmark and Germany, which since 1326 had been united with Holstein, since then formed something of a political unity under the Danish kings.

The locality of Claussen's boyhood is rich in traditions of popular struggles. Absorbing the spirit of these traditions freely he early became imbued with a sense of the nobility of popular leadership.

As a preparation for a professional career, he attended the gymnasium at Meldorf. Upon his graduation from this institution, he studied law at the University of Kiel; and, in 1830, at the age of twenty-six, he was admitted to the bar.

Cases and clients, however, were not his only interests. Ever alert and ever concerned about the general welfare, he was soon enmeshed in local political affairs; and his countrymen showed their faith in him by electing him a member of the newly created provincial assembly. He served in this capacity until his expulsion from his home province in 1851.

This fortunate or unfortunate event, according to the way one may look at it, was the result not only of Clausen's participation in the surging political affairs of his home province, but also in the revolutionary movements of the "roaring" thirties and forties of the nineteenth century which shook all of Germany. A liberal and democratic Germany seemed to be in the making. Through such means as song, story, oratory, music, and gymnastic societies patriotic Germans were to be fused into a union of hearts, which, it was hoped, would result in a political union of all the German states. The matter of a new all-German constitution was broached, and a constitutional convention was called, which met at Frankfort in 1848. But it failed to provide a workable basic law for the proposed union of the German states.

Claussen had represented Schleswig-Holstein at the Frankfort convention. Under his and other revolutionaries' leadership, the Schleswig-Holsteiners had been in the very forefront of the forces battling for democratic governments. They were among the first to demand the abolition of the special privileges of the nobles, and for a united and democratic German fatherland.

DENMARK RESISTED SCHLESWIG SEPARATION

The Schleswig-Holsteiners also had special local demands. Schleswig, a Danish province, though united permanently with Holstein, which was a part of the German Confederation, was to be separated completely from Denmark; and both provinces were to be absolved from their allegiance to the Danish king, and to form an autonomous state in the proposed new German fatherland.

When Denmark protested vigorously the Schleswig-Holsteiners prepared to make their demands good by force of arms. With the aid of German and especially Prussian auxiliaries, obtained through the efforts of Claussen, the Schleswig-Holsteiners fought a spirited war lasting three years against Denmark, where there had now developed a strong popular demand for uniting Schleswig more closely with Denmark, and for weakening or breaking up its connection with Holstein.

Claussen himself did not take the field, but his son, Ernst, though a mere boy of only sixteen, is said to have participated in all the battles of the three years war.

When Prussia withdrew her troops, one of the main supports of the projected state of Schleswig-Holstein collapsed, and her ardent defenders were left to be dealt with as "traitors" by the Danish government.

In this matter the Danish government had to proceed with caution. The vanquished had influential friends throughout Germany, and the Danes were fully aware of this. After some deliberation, the Danish government in 1852 granted the former "rebels" a general amnesty, with the exception of certain of the leaders. Among these were Claussen and Theodore Olshausen, both of whom emigrated to Iowa.

Anticipating the decree of banishment, Claussen and his family had already left his home province in 1851 on the way to the United States. They landed in New Orleans and proceeded by boat up the Mississippi. On the way the son Ernst secured employment in St. Louis. The parents settled in Davenport, Iowa.

At an age when the former revolutionist had passed the median of a life of more than four score and ten, he was faced with the task of hewing out a new career for himself in a new country. If in this success came to him quickly, as it did, it was due to his ingrained habits of industry, his university training, his knowledge of German law, and not the least the presence in Davenport and Scott county of a large number of his closest countrymen, the Schleswig-Holsteiners. Among these he soon had, and he continued to have the rest of his life, a host of warm friends and admirers.

In a relatively short time he acquired a working knowledge of the English language, and at the same time, also undertook a study of American law. A by-product of these studies appeared in a translation of Iowa laws into German. Two years after his coming to Iowa, he was admitted to the bar.

However, he did not at once settle down to a regular and exclusive law practice. Business was good in the

early eighteen fifties. During the Crimean war (1854-1856) wheat sold at fabulous prices and other products of the soil accordingly. Claussen thought he would try his hand at milling. In 1855 he built a grist mill in Lyons, Clinton county. The next year the war closed and prices slumped. The lawyer-miller was broke.

He returned to Davenport and to his law practice; and as formerly, with eminent success as a practitioner at the bar. In 1871 he retired permanently from law practice, but the business he had built up was continued by his son Ernst. The latter's son Alfred was later taken into partnership, and thus the law firm originated by the elder Claussen continued for three generations.

SUPPORTED LINCOLN AND THE WAR

After his return to Davenport, Claussen and other German Forty-eighters were drawn into the swirl of national politics by their desire to stand guard for their immigrant compatriots. The opposition of the Democrats to a liberal homestead law threw the Forty-eighters, first into the ranks of the Free Soilers and later into the arms of the Republicans. Naturally they were also alarmed at the growth of the Know Nothing party, the strength of which was such in Massachusetts that its legislature passed a constitutional amendment extending the probationary period for foreigners desiring citizenship by two years. In a public letter Claussen at once sounded the sentiments of the Republicans by asking the Republican candidate for congress from his district some very direct and blunt questions. He received satisfactory responses and the amendment was denounced by Republican leaders, but the Forty-eighters and their friends were again put on their mettle by the growing strength of the candidacy for president in 1860 of the Missourian, Edward Bates. He was known to have decided Know Nothing leanings and the Forty-eighters lost no time in preparing to obstruct his presidential boom. At a mass meeting in Davenport, of which it seems that Claussen was the principal promoter, resolutions were drawn up preceded by numerous "whereases" declaring in part that Bates could not be

regarded as a true and safe Republican. These resolutions were circulated by the German-American press and pricked the presidential boom of Bates while promoting that of Seward whose defeat at the Chicago convention made the nomination and election of Abraham Lincoln possible.

The German-Americans of the Republican Party accepted the consequences of the election of 1860 cheerfully and none more enthusiastically than the Schleswig-Holsteiners in Scott county. They were among the very first to enlist from Iowa. Ernst Claussen again shouldered a musket, and his experiences on the battlefields of Europe proved a valuable asset in the struggle for the preservation of the Union.

Public office also came to Hans Claussen shortly after his return to Davenport from Lyons. The voters of Davenport elected him justice of the peace in 1858, and re-elected him two years later. In 1869 the voters of Scott county elected him, together with Robert Lowry, to represent them in the state senate. As a senator he supported vigorously the policy of encouraging immigration to Iowa from other states and from the northern European countries. Iowa pursued this policy from 1860 to 1884. Claussen was also one of those who advocated the codification of the laws of the state in 1873.

VIGOROUSLY OPPOSED PROHIBITION

But no other legislative matter aroused the interest and ire of the Forty-eighter as did the issue of prohibition. The prohibitory laws of Iowa were very obnoxious to the German immigrants, because they looked upon them as an intrusion upon the sacred ground of personal freedom, over which the Forty-eighters considered their special duty to stand guard. And their proud spirits smarted under the imputations which their unyielding opposition evoked from the extreme prohibitionists. The law of 1884 (Clark law) seemed especially "infamous" not the least because its enforcement caused severe losses to the brewers, many of whom were German immigrants.

Claussen had been foremost in the fight against prohibition almost from the day of his arrival in Davenport. He it was who fired the first gun in the anti-temperance fight at a meeting in Davenport on February 18, 1852. At this meeting he made a ringing speech in support of what he considered the cause of "personal freedom" against "hypocrisy," drawing his inspiration no doubt not a little from the happy consciousness of again being a leader of his people, though being now in "another world."

When the prohibitory amendment to the state constitution had been passed by the General Assembly and approved by the people, it was Claussen who discovered that it had not been passed by both houses in the same identical form. Great was therefore his feeling of triumph when the state supreme court, after a test case had been brought on in Davenport, declared the obnoxious amendment unconstitutional.

Opposition to prohibition was general among the German immigrants all over the state. Even so religious a group as the Germans of the Amana colonies voted against prohibition.

But nowhere was the opposition so intense as among the Schleswig-Holsteiners in Scott county. In this contest they fought what they called the "despotism" and "overpowering hypocrisy" of Iowa with the same spirit that they had formerly fought the "tyranny" of Denmark in their attempt to establish the free and independent state of Schleswig-Holstein. Some wag sneered that in such a matter as prohibition the "free and independent state of Scott county" would tolerate no interference from the "foreign" government in Des Moines.

With less zeal, but just as unyielding did Claussen and the Forty-eighters fight what they termed "the sickly movement for women's rights"—which, nevertheless, had great vitality in the eighteen seventies when Claussen was state senator. When a joint resolution proposing the enfranchisement of the women of Iowa had passed the senate, Claussen was one of a minority group of senators

who declared the right of suffrage to be "one of expediency" and not a "natural or absolute right." Further the minority group declared that there was no antagonism between the sexes and that the proposed change was "fraught with serious and mischievous results to society."

At the same time the Civil war was fought in America resulting in the liberation of the negro slaves, Schleswig-Holstein was "liberated" by the successful war of the great German powers of Prussia and Austria against little Denmark in 1864. The "liberation" of Schleswig-Holstein did not result in the establishment of a free and independent Schleswig-Holstein, as the Forty-eighters had hoped; but merely in making a province of Prussia.

PERMITTED TO REVISIT HOMELAND

As a result of the war of 1864, too, the decree of banishment against Claussen was revoked, and once more the old champion of sea-girt (*meerumschlungen*) Schleswig-Holstein was free to visit his homeland and view the scenes of his boyhood, youth, and early manhood without fear of expulsion.

This he did in the early seventies. Germany was then aflame with a spirit of youth, of exuberance—aye, of over-confidence because of the recent victories in France. Naturally the ardent nature of Claussen, too, was touched. He rejoiced that the German language and national heritage were now secure in Schleswig, and not the least also because there had been economic improvement in the life of the common people there, whose welfare he had always at heart.

But seemingly he did not understand that the Germans were now making the same mistake in North Schleswig that the Danes had formerly made in Middle Schleswig, in trying to force the language of the rulers on an unwilling people.¹

Nor did he seem to sense that the newly established German Empire rested upon a shaky foundation of militarism

¹North Schleswig by plebiscite in 1920 was returned to Denmark after the Treaty of Versailles, and is still a part of Denmark, though Denmark is now occupied by the Nazis.

tic bravado, and not upon the noble aspirations of the delegates to the Frankfort Parliament. In the late war with France Alsace-Lorraine had been torn from France and here a similar system of forced nationalization was being introduced as in Schleswig. While visiting in Berlin he listened with apparent satisfaction to a speech by Bismarck in the Imperial Parliament on the administration of Alsace-Lorraine.

Claussen returned from his visit in Germany to his home in Davenport in the "new Schleswig-Holstein" in Scott county, where German social life was safe in the unbayonnetted peace of Iowa, safe behind the strong bulwark of the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States—in spite of sentimental talk about the rights of women and vexatious liquor laws. He continued to make Davenport his home during the rest of his long life, dying in his ninety-first year. A moderate amount of wealth, a loving family, and a wide circle of friends made his declining years comfortable. His wife, Anna Rahbeck, was a niece of the popular Danish poet, Knud Lyne Rahbeck. In the Claussen home there was "no antagonism between the sexes," for a biographer states that she died after fifty-seven years of happy married life. Their only son, Ernst, was mayor of Davenport for six and a half terms, and, it was said, in his time the most popular man in the city. A daughter, Elfriede, married Christian Müller, known among the Germans as the *Turnvater* (father of physical training) of Iowa.

Claussen was born into the Lutheran church. But in later life was not a church member. The explanation may be found in the fact that his spiritual awakening had been national and political. His faith was in humanity; and his creed, the principles of freedom and justice as he understood them. His great ambition was to serve and lead his people "in two worlds," and this he did fearlessly, honestly, and faithfully, actuated no doubt by that subtle but omnipresent desire in forceful personalities for "name and fame." If he lacked buoyancy and humor, perhaps it

was because his life was so much a series of battles until in later manhood, and not an unfolding and development of personality in a congenial environment.

The Forty-eighters in Scott county carried with them from their homeland a fiery, and at times misguided zeal for truth and freedom. Firm in their belief that their motives were pure and their cause just, they brooked no opposition blandly. Like formerly William Lloyd Garrison, they believed in being "as harsh as truth and as uncompromising as justice," and they were.

But it was also that quality of mind which inspired them to sacrifice so freely and so willingly for the preservation of the Union during the Civil war; and it furnished the impulse to conserve much that was really fine and noble in their rich social and cultural heritage, exemplified in the formation of numerous social organizations, a weekly and daily press, and in a rugged allegiance to the spirit of free inquiry, not to forget that exuberant conviviality which helped so much to make the "good old days" of Davenport really good.

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