

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XLVI

ISSUED IN DECEMBER 1965

No. 12

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Historic Beginnings

The rich soil and scenic beauty of northeastern Iowa lured thousands of Norwegians to this colorful wonderland. Frequently referred to as the "Switzerland of Iowa" it might more appropriately be called the "Norway of Iowa." Clustered in and about Decorah, the Norwegians established Luther College in this picturesque center of Wineshiek County. Opened in 1861, it was the first degree granting Norwegian college in America.

Not content with a college of their own, the Norwegians next established a Museum, which in 1967 will have reached its 90th birthday. The history of this unique Museum containing priceless Norwegian artifacts from the Mother Country and America, is a significant chapter in Iowa history.

What the immigrant brought with him to Iowa were first of all the purely utilitarian objects, such as anvils, millstones, griddles, and great copper kettles. But there were also things of no particular use on the frontier, yet things that kindled life's

dearest memories and warmest feelings. From these precious things the emigrant would not part, and so they had to be laboriously brought along to the new world, useful or not. Yet they had their usefulness just the same. If one could not use them, one could love them — the dolls which children's tear-stained hands had clung to; the bridal crowns and bridal dresses and bridegroom's gloves; the brooches, ornaments, silken articles, and embroideries. Many such articles which soothed the homesick heart of those uprooted from their ancestral homes have been preserved and have found their way to the Museum.

How did the Museum start? And how did it become what it is today? Early beginnings are usually shrouded in obscurity. This is true of the Museum in Decorah. The year assigned for its start is 1877 because President Laur. Larsen of Luther College on February 16, 1877, acknowledged a gift of birds' eggs, including specimens representative of Scandinavian birds, which were to be part of a museum. But in the same communication he apologized for his failure to have acknowledged publicly the receipt of various other artifacts with which a beginning had been made, and he hoped that the museum would be remembered in the future and continue to grow.

No earlier reference to gifts for a museum has been found, but it is evident from Larsen's statement that a beginning had been made earlier and

likewise that among the faculty there was support for a museum as a desirable adjunct to an educational institution.

Little is heard of the collection until 1890. Then the main building of Luther College was rebuilt after the fire of 1889. A small room in the northwest corner on the second floor was set aside for a museum and Professor William Sihler was placed in charge of the modest collection. According to Sihler:

The museum, being a rather insignificant affair, the curatorship was given to the newest member of the faculty, probably because he was a young man. When he was introduced to the room, he found a number of boxes of all sorts filled with objects which had been given by persons to whom a museum was a curiosity shop. Some objects were labeled, but most of them were not. There were also some objects of interest to students of natural history, such as shells, eggs, fossils, etc. All these things were thrown together without order . . . The new curator applied for the small sum of \$50 for cases and cabinets to make it possible to exhibit things. He drew plans for furniture that would fit into the room, and a Danish cabinet-maker, Kulmse, and his son made the necessary articles. The room was the most inaccessible in the building, as it could not be reached except by passing through a classroom.

Professor Sihler, in addition to his museum duties, had a full schedule of classes.

In September 1891, *College Chips*, the student news medium, appealed to the public to aid the

museum. "We have an institution here which bears the proud name of museum," wrote the editor. "It is, however, yet only the nucleus of one, for it is far from being complete enough to be of much practical value." During the next few months several articles were donated, but no continuing interest had yet been awakened. In 1894 the editors of *College Chips* made a new appeal to friends of the college: "Our museum seems to have been forgotten. Prof. W. Sihler, who has charge of it, is doing all he can to improve and enlarge it, but one man can not accomplish much, especially when he is occupied with so many other things, if we do not all help by contributing something."

For some time prior to this there had been a stirring of interest in origins, a desire to know more of those who had pioneered in this relatively new Middle West. This interest and curiosity was present among those of Norwegian ancestry as well as among those of other nationalities. As early as 1886 the Luther College Alumni Association had designated Professor Gisle Bothne the official historian of Luther College. His articles began to appear in *Norden* (a Chicago Norwegian language paper) and attracted attention. Finally, in 1897, they appeared in revised form as a 471-page book, the first full-length history of Luther College.

During approximately this same period Rasmus

B. Anderson was gathering historical materials. In 1895 he published these in book form as *First Chapter of Norwegian Immigration (1821-1840)*, a pioneer work on the history of Norwegian-Americans. His work in turn stimulated others. Apparently, so far as the museum was concerned, the time was ripe for moving ahead.

Certainly the interest of some alumni was stirred, for an announcement was made that at a meeting of the Luther College Alumni Association to be held in Red Wing, Minnesota, on August 16, 1895, the following topics were to be considered for discussion and action: 1. The collection of books, papers, and manuscripts, especially those dealing with the history of Luther College and the history of Norwegians in America. 2. The collection of relics, minerals, plants, etc., for the Luther College Museum. 3. The collection of a library of Scandinavian music for Luther College.

At this meeting Rev. Adolf Bredesen, after leading the discussion, presented a resolution asking the faculty of Luther College to adopt a definite plan for developing the museum and to appoint as curator a member of the faculty who could devote more time to its management. The Association adopted the resolution and also voted sufficient funds to furnish one room for the museum. At the same meeting J. C. M. Hanson, later an internationally known librarian, urged the collection of books, papers, and manuscripts, espe-

cially those relating to the history of Luther College and the Scandinavians in America. C. A. Naeseth, college librarian, was asked to superintend the gathering of such a collection but withdrew later in favor of Haldor Hanson. Ola Solheim urged the collection of a library of Scandinavian music at Luther College and Hanson was elected chairman of a committee to carry out this project.

Torstein Jahr, the editor of *College Chips*, later a cataloger and an expert on Scandinavia in the Library of Congress, commented on the encouraging news that the alumni association of the college had interested itself in the museum. He warned that it was not the purpose of the museum to gather merely curiosities, but things of value for man's enlightenment. Yet things that would be of enduring value for such a collection often are lost because men fail to understand their value and to care for them. Nor do many understand what a difficult and painstaking task it is to hunt up material, to undergo the inconveniences of traveling here and there to assemble it, to persuade owners to part with it, to pack and ship it, and to interest other people in such an undertaking. Moreover, after materials have been assembled, they must be cataloged, classified, and arranged. Eventually, this requires skill and patience of a high order.