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EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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Norwegians Found the College

Luther College is the oldest college in this country founded by people of Norwegian descent. It began with a total enrollment of sixteen. Today, in its centennial year, it has an enrollment almost one hundred times greater. Its first building was a parsonage that had stood vacant for two years in Halfway Creek, thirteen miles north of La Crosse, Wisconsin. Today, in Decorah it has ten major buildings, all but two of fireproof construction and all but four built in the last thirteen years; it also has a dozen residences and minor structures, besides the usual World War II war surplus buildings, some of which will be torn down this year. Its campus, one of the most beautiful in the state, is a park-like area on a bluff in northwest Decorah. Expanses of lawn dotted with native oaks and elms overlook the valley of the Upper Iowa (Oneota) River to the west and slope gently toward the town to the east. In this lovely natural setting of woodland, meadow, bluffs, and river, the college owns almost 600 acres of land.

How did it happen that the early Norwegian settlers insisted on having a college of their own? And how did they come to locate it in northeastern Iowa?

The Norwegian immigrant brought with him the background of the Lutheran faith in which he had been reared. Despite many kindnesses shown him by honest friends and neighbors in his newly-adopted land, he knew that he was not yet quite one of them. He found himself more at home among his own, where there was a language familiar from childhood and where he was sure to be understood.

Although there were kindly efforts to interest him in churches already existing in his new country, he longed for the rites of the faith with which he was familiar. He longed to hear the old truths in the language which was nearest his heart — truths he had learned at his mother's knee, and golden Bible passages he had memorized as he prepared for confirmation. So when the first pastors of Norwegian extraction appeared on the scene, they were welcomed with open arms. People flocked from far and near to attend services in rude cabins, or sometimes in barns, or during summer months under great oak trees in the open air. Here the assemblage heard the old gospel proclaimed in the language they loved and understood.

There was another aspect of this loyalty to the

Lutheran faith of the fathers which must not be overlooked. The early Norwegian immigrants, like all other non-English-speaking newcomers, met with many difficulties because of their ignorance of the English language and because they were unacquainted with the customs and usages of the land to which they had come. They were met on the pier in the port of entry by agents seeking to sell them transportation to their destination. Often they fell into unscrupulous hands. Later they were besieged by promoters eager to sell them land.

Again they often were the victims of sharp practices. Here in the Middle West they encountered a climate with extremes of heat and cold far different from what they had known in the mother country. Failing to make the adjustments needed in their living habits, or being unable to do so, they fell victims in great numbers to malaria and ague; even cholera for a time found its way among them.

For example, Ole Rynning, son of a well-known pastor in Norway, in 1837 led a party of fifty emigrants to Beaver Creek, seventy miles south of Chicago. In midsummer the ground was dry; the newcomers were persuaded by land agents that here was a good place to settle. They built their rude cabins and spent the winter. In the spring most of the land proved to be marshy and was under water. Malarial fever broke out. Some few, abandoning their cabins and losing al-

most all their possessions, fled the settlement and moved elsewhere. Most of the remainder died, including the beloved Ole Rynning. In a rude coffin hollowed from an oak tree by the one well man in the settlement, he was buried on the prairie. His grave is unmarked and unknown.

Another example may be found in the fate of the *Atlantic*, a passenger boat carrying immigrants, which was rammed and sunk on Lake Erie in 1852. The official reports criticized those in charge. Of the more than 300 drowned, almost a fourth were Norwegians. News of such disasters traveled far and wide among Norwegian immigrants.

Moreover, in all the new settlements ague, malaria, and dysentery were found. In 1849, 1850, and 1852 cholera raged in many Mississippi Valley settlements. Whole families died. One prominent historian sums it up by saying: "The immigrants had sickness, fraud, and poverty as traveling companions."

Beset by these unforeseen problems, the immigrants were perplexed. Whom were they to trust? To whom were they to turn in their difficulties? They knew they could rely on each other, for most of them were neighbors or old and tried acquaintances from the homeland. They also had some strong lay spiritual leaders who served them well. Later, when a few clergymen, mindful of the spiritual needs of their emigrated countrymen, came

from Norway, the colonists sensed that here were disinterested friends, men dedicated to a calling. These were leaders they could trust, and they turned to them.

With this dual motivation, then, a yearning for the consolations of the faith they had been reared in and a willingness to put their trust in consecrated leaders of their own flesh and blood, the Norwegian immigrants rallied to their pastors. Under their leadership they organized congregations and founded synodical groups.

From the beginning there had been two church tendencies among the immigrants. One, which in large part grew out of the work of the great reformer Hans Nielsen Hauge in Norway, stressed low-church practices and was loosely organized. The other, which was a direct heir of the established Lutheran state church, stressed doctrine, and was firmly organized. The latter group, led by "university men" (graduates of Oslo University), organized the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (usually referred to as the Norwegian Synod) in 1853. This rapidly became a strong and compact synodical body. This was the group which founded Luther College.

The pioneer pastors traveled far and wide organizing congregations. But where was the manpower to be found to serve them? As the stream of immigration broadened and deepened the problem became more and more acute. A few men

came from Norway to augment the clerical forces already here, but not enough by far to meet the demand for pastors. In this as in other matters, the pioneers soon found that they must rely on their own efforts. So they decided to educate their own men.

One of the strongest motives in organizing a college, therefore, was the desire to train young men for entrance, after a three-year seminary course, into the ministry. Only thus, it was felt, could the need for pastors be met. A second strong motive, especially among the laity, was the desire for a school where the "young people" of the church might receive higher training. Whatever the prime motive, all were agreed that a school should be started; such a movement the pioneers were prepared to support.

In 1857 the first convention of the young Norwegian Synod was held west of the Mississippi, at Washington Prairie, Pastor U. V. Koren's charge, six miles southeast of Decorah. Seven pastors and twenty-nine lay delegates, representing eighteen congregations, were present. Two pastors were unable to come. The average age of the nine clergymen was thirty-four years. On October 10 the convention resolved that the church should establish its own institution of learning and that a "University Fund" for this purpose should be gathered forthwith.

The same resolution provided that until the ac-

tual construction of a physical plant, the interest on the funds raised should be used to establish a "Norwegian theological professorship" at Concordia College and Seminary, St. Louis, then the chief institution of the Missouri Synod, and to aid such Norwegian students as might be sent there for training. The Norwegian Synod pastors had been impressed by the strength of the Missouri Synod and the quality of the instruction at their seminary. Three Norwegian students entered Concordia Seminary in 1858. Laur. Larsen, later first president of Luther College, was appointed the Norwegian theological professor and entered on his duties in 1859. But when the Civil War broke out and disturbances occurred in St. Louis, he and the Norwegian students returned home.

It is of some significance that the decision to found a school was taken when the Norwegian Synod met at Washington Prairie where the 31-year-old U. V. Koren was pastor. Koren was a man of firm convictions, clear insight, and practical ability. Four years later, when Larsen and his scholars returned from St. Louis, Koren realized, as did most of the leaders, that the time had come to establish a school up north. He had already raised large sums for the school — more than any other pastor up to that time. He now characteristically faced up to practical realities. If there was to be a school, it would have to be located somewhere. He wanted it among his congregations,

which at that time were spread over much of Winneshiek, Allamakee, and parts of Clayton, Fayette, and Chickasaw counties, as well as southern Minnesota.

Koren accordingly obtained an option on thirty-two acres of land, on a bluff overlooking the Upper Iowa River in northwest Decorah, and went to the church convention in June to present the claim of Decorah as a site for the college. Building materials, it was said, were readily available in Decorah; the city had a pleasant and healthful situation; it was west of the Mississippi and would be almost a central point amidst the growing Norwegian population; and, with the coming of the railroad, it would be easily accessible. So, over the rival claims of La Crosse, Madison, and Janesville, Wisconsin, Decorah was selected.

Some thought ten acres of land would be more than sufficient. One suggested the purchase of a large farm so that students, by working there, could become fitted for "practical life." Others thought students could get enough exercise by chopping wood, doing some gardening, and looking after the cattle and horses which would be required. Beyond that they would need their time for studying. Finally, however, Koren was authorized to purchase the 32 acres. His efforts had been crowned with success. More than any other individual, he was responsible for the establishment of Luther on its beautiful Decorah campus.

Once the decision had been made, measures were taken to get the institution under way. But suitable quarters could not be found in Decorah. For two years, however, a parsonage had stood vacant at Halfway Creek, about thirteen miles north of La Crosse, waiting for the pastor whom the young Synod had been unable to supply. It was felt that Laur. Larsen, who had been named president of the school, and Friedrich A. Schmidt, his colleague, could serve the congregations which had built the parsonage at the same time as they conducted the college. It was therefore decided that the school should be located temporarily at Halfway Creek. Here instruction began on Wednesday, September 4, 1861.

In his carefully kept record of the first school year, Larsen distinguished between "old" and "new" students. The old students were those he had had at Concordia College and Seminary and who now continued their education under him. The new students were those enrolled for the first time. The young men were from sixteen to twenty-six years old and averaged twenty years. The older ones formed the equivalent of the freshman year in college, the new ones a combined junior and senior year in high school. The subjects were Latin, Greek, German, Norwegian, English, history, religion, algebra, penmanship, singing, arithmetic, and geography. The day began at 5:30 a.m. and ended for all at 10 p.m.

Conditions were primitive and crowded that first year. The parsonage housed the Larsens and their two children; the Schmidts and their one child; Christian Nilsen, who was the steward, with his wife, one child, and Mrs. Nilsen's mother; and eleven students — in all twenty-two persons. There were home-made benches and tables. "Breakfast was served to the assembled household in the kitchen, where morning devotions were also held. But in the morning washing took place, of necessity, outside under the open sky." Yet, in retrospect, several students later spoke of these early days as some of the happiest in their lives.

In the summer of 1862 the college was moved to Decorah. Bag and baggage, the belongings of the college and the two professors were loaded in ten lumber wagons and hauled to La Crosse. There the travelers boarded a Mississippi steamboat to Lansing, Iowa. On July 31, after another trip in lumber wagons, the party reached Decorah.

Here they found temporary quarters in a building later known as the St. Cloud Hotel, opposite the court house in the heart of downtown Decorah. Once more the school was crowded, for the enrollment more than doubled. The college carried on downtown until 1865. In October of that year it moved to the new campus, where it had constructed its own building, a four-story and basement structure 126 feet long. The main section was 52 feet wide and a north wing, 44 feet.

A south wing was added nine years later, in 1874.

A small bakery and a brick stable were also erected; four large cisterns were constructed; a well was dug; and a hydraulic ram was installed to raise water from a spring to a reservoir next to the kitchen. There was grading, leveling, and seeding yet to be done. Such was the college plant when the first Main Building was dedicated on October 14, 1865. A long procession paraded from town to the site of the new structure; the American and Norwegian flags headed the march and were also displayed from the building. The occasion drew the largest crowd of Norwegians to meet in one spot in this country at that time.

The speakers sketched the trials of those who had led the undertaking, outlined the course to be followed by the institution, and voiced fervent hopes for the future. "While a terrible Civil War was raging in our land," said one, "while our people were afflicted in many places by crop failure, high prices, and heavy burdens, means were procured, often in a marvelous manner, and foot by foot this building rose. Now . . . it stands here before our eyes. We must say indeed: A wondrous event has come to pass; truly, 'the Lord hath done great things for us.' " The work of the college, this speaker continued, was to go forward "with positive contempt and aversion for all superficial knowledge, all sham culture, all coveting of praise and honor before men."

Another said that those who united in establishing the school would find that "their children and children's children, throughout generations to come, may derive the most momentous benefit . . . through the service of men who have been trained here." President Larsen, looking forward to greatly superior facilities after the early years in crowded, cramped, and primitive quarters, admonished the students to "guard the right spirit; guard and keep the spirit of humility."

The closing prayer was warm and appealing:

Hitherto Thou hast so mercifully helped us when we called upon Thee — helped us even beyond what we could ask or understand. Oh, do Thou so help us still! Should we be sluggish in prayer for this school, then wake Thou us, wake us ever more and more to zeal and loyalty; shouldst Thou send hard times and heavy trials which might cripple our labors, then help Thou, as Thou hast helped hitherto in such times of need; and let them ever be put to shame who would rejoice over our misfortune. And now, O God, we entrust ourselves to Thee; save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance; nourish and exalt it from age to age, and let Thy loving kindness be over us even in such measure as we trust in Thee. . . . Hear our prayers today; hear us always when we pray that Thy truth may be preserved for us and for our children, and that the work of this school may honor it.

The culmination of years of discussion and effort had been reached. From its humble beginnings in an overcrowded parsonage, the college began its fifth year in an educational plant that

was much better than average, with an enrollment of eighty-one, divided among four classes in the college and two in the preparatory department.

The college was well under way, but it had not surmounted all its difficulties. The tremendous inflation of the Civil War had caused the cost of the undertaking to soar far beyond original estimates. Instead of the estimated \$30,000, the plant had cost \$87,000. The college faced its first financial crisis. In 1865-66 it had been necessary to borrow money at interest as high as 18 per cent. In 1867 the president of the Synod wrote: "The University Fund is a bottomless pit. Last year we owed \$25,000. This year \$13,000 was received in addition to the sale of the old building [downtown], yet we owe \$30,000." There was a constant struggle extending into the '70s to raise funds. But the steady increase in attendance to 229 in 1874 assured the college of a widening base of support; the debt was retired. Moreover, graduates of the school, beginning in 1866, began to go out in increasing numbers.

Life in the early college was different from that of today. Students were all of the male sex, no women being admitted until 75 years later. Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota were still largely frontier states, or just emerging from pioneer conditions. Decorah had been founded in 1849, only thirteen years before the college moved there. The town had grade schools, but no high school — a

condition common in a large part of the tri-state area. Early colleges, therefore, had to take students at the scholastic level on which they found them. The very young mingled with older, mature men seeking an education. Preparatory departments were the rule rather than the exception. Thus, the University of Wisconsin maintained its preparatory department from its foundation in 1849 until 1879. Luther College was no exception.

In general the school followed the pattern of Concordia College in St. Louis, which in turn was modeled on the German *gymnasium*, in which a six-year course leading to the A. B. degree, prepared the student for professional study in the university. This pattern was substantially the same as that of the Latin school of Norway. But President Larsen early pointed out that the demands here were greater than in the mother country, for all students had to master two basic languages, English and Norwegian, instead of only Norwegian, as in Norway. Beginning with the first year there were also requirements in music not found in the mother country. Substantially, however, the curriculum was that of the Latin school, with strong emphasis on the classical languages . . . on Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament; on German, the language of the Lutheran Reformation theologians; on Norwegian, the mother tongue of the Norwegian immigrant;

and on English, the language of his adopted country.

The instruction was thorough; the faculty of young men insisted on high standards. Larsen, himself, had been trained under one of Norway's leading Hebrew scholars. Schmidt was a brilliant young man, who later became a powerful force in the church. Brandt, Landmark, and Siewers were graduates of the University in Oslo, as were others of the early men who served on the faculty. They founded two magazines, one in English, one in Norwegian. In the latter was published the first novel of Norwegian-American pioneer life (Severin Hassel's *Alf Brage, or the Schoolteacher in Minnesota*). They ably supported their young president who stated that it was his "aim that the instruction be thorough; that there be no show or humbug; that everything be pure gold — or, to use a common expression, that it be 'all wool and a yard wide.' "

Although English was used among the students, Norwegian predominated for many years as the medium of instruction. According to A. A. Veblen, who taught at Luther before taking up his duties at the State University of Iowa, English and Norwegian were used in 1877 to about an equal extent among the boys on campus. But baseball was taking hold at Luther and baseball could hardly be played except in English. Veblen, therefore, credits the gradual Americanization of

the college partly to the influence of the national game. He states that by 1881 English had practically displaced Norwegian as the language of the campus except among those of the faculty who had been educated in Norway.

In the very early years sports were simple: running, jumping (forward and backward), wrestling, weight lifting, finger pulling, skating, skiing, and some few exercises on a horizontal bar. Exercise at stated times came from sawing wood. The rooms were heated by stoves and wood had to be sawed for this purpose. At the opening of each school year the students elected a "superintendent of woodcutters." He appointed a foreman for each day of the week and assigned students to work under each foreman. The usual assignment required one hour a week from each student. "We were not given a chance to become dainty or fastidious," writes one alumnus. "We had to saw wood for ourselves and for our teachers, keep our rooms in order, scour knives and forks, and do other minor chores."

President Larsen was concerned lest his charges should fail to get the needed exercise and fresh air. Most of them came from farms, were used to manual labor, and were unaccustomed to habits of study and sedentary life. Larsen stipulated that during leisure hours students should not read or study but should get outside. "Don't become humped over like a question mark," he admonished.

Once a month the buildings were thoroughly cleaned and scrubbed. On this day the boys were given a holiday. In smaller or larger groups, they would set out after breakfast to explore the surrounding country, carrying light provisions with them; would seek out farms where they knew they would be given a warm welcome; and here would have dinner around roaring campfires. These events were so popular that the boys never allowed a month to go by without asking for their holiday.

In 1865-66 a military company was formed to serve in the event of an Indian outbreak. P. S. Reque, one of eleven students who had served in the Civil War, became captain of the company. In 1877 the "Luther College Phalanx" was organized; it had muzzle-loading muskets, belts, cartridges, and cap pouches, and was led by officers with regulation dress swords and belts. It flourished for four years.

A strict timetable of classes, study hours, and recreation periods was observed. There were few deviations from this schedule and few social events to distract the student from his studies. Conditions of travel imposed definite restrictions. For example, not a few students in the very earliest years, after crossing the Mississippi by ferry from Prairie du Chien to McGregor, walked the remaining distance to Decorah. Walking was not yet a lost art. R. J. Wisnaes, who immigrated in

1871, relates in his memoirs how he and other students resorted to the "apostles' horses" to reach places twenty-five miles distant from Decorah.

Many students who had come from a distance, therefore, remained in Decorah during the Christmas holidays; or, if fortunate enough to be invited, they would journey to some fellow student's home in the neighborhood to spend the holidays there. For those who remained at the college, there were always parties arranged by the wives of the faculty members, who also saw to it that some little gift was under the tree for each young man in the group.

Some of the faculty wives, like Mrs. Diderikke Brandt, were especially active in arranging little gatherings, such as Sunday afternoon coffees, at which the boys shyly wore off some of their bashfulness and were made aware of some of the niceties of decorum. Mrs. Brandt's name is also associated with the "Comitia Dumriana" (the assemblage of the silly fair, as they were humorously called). This was a group of nine young women, daughters of pastors and professors, who had their headquarters at the Brandt home on the campus in 1873-74 and were instructed during the year by several of the college teachers.

Peer Strømme, perhaps the foremost Norwegian-American humorist, commented on the nine in *Halvor*, his delightful novel of his years at Luther College (translated from the Norwegian by

Inga Bredeesen Norstog and David T. Nelson in 1960). He stated that

all these young ladies were so pleasant and attractive that they made poor Halvor's heart ache. When this bevy of girls, or Comitia Dumriana, as they were called, strolled down the road, he could not keep his eyes off them. It was not that he was especially concerned over any one member in particular; but collectively — taken all together — they were irresistible.

Apparently they did not have the same attraction for those directing the college's destiny as they did for Halvor. For Luther College all but forgot them and continued on its way as a college for men, much too preoccupied with the pressing tasks before it to give thought at this time to the education of women.