

## Church and School

Perhaps the most noticeable Scandinavian contribution to American society has come through the Lutheran church. This church, established by and for the immigrants a century ago, was a rural church. When the immigrant stream veered toward America's cities during the later decades of the nineteenth century, the church followed, but, according to one historian of Lutheranism, it did not absorb even a quarter of the new immigrants. Nevertheless, the Scandinavian Lutheran church in America, through an intense and vigorous brand of Lutheranism, maintained itself firmly, leaving its imprint on the rural and town society of mid-America. The largest of the church bodies whose roots lie in Scandinavian soil is, both nationally and in Iowa, the Evangelical Lutheran Church founded by Norwegians. Well over 90 per cent of Iowa's Lutherans with Norwegian antecedents belong to this body, which has 78,000 members in more than 160 congregations in the state.

### *Varieties of Faith*

The early immigrants were religious people, steeped in the traditions of the Norwegian state church. Yet, quite a few had inculcated the pious



and somewhat rebellious spirit of the Haugean movement, which was strong in western and southwestern Norway where the "emigration fever" struck first. Free to do what they wished on American soil, the early settlers set up their own form of Lutheran worship, or they fell under the spell of Methodist and Adventist preachers.

To orthodox Lutherans these "sectarians," as non-Lutherans and even Lutherans of a more liberal bent were called, were a troublesome lot. They appeared on the scene frequently in Winneshie County in the '50's and disrupted, at least temporarily, the progress of conservative Lutheranism. Andrew Berdahl, who spent some childhood years in a settlement there, remembered this: "The Free Methodists had gained quite a following in this community, but they did not succeed so very long." Devotional services, led by one of the settlers, "did much to hold the people to the Lutheran faith" until a pastor came in 1857.

Nevertheless, not all the immigrants in Winneshie County held to the faith. A one-time Norwegian sailor, O. P. Petersen, who had been converted to Methodism, was sent as a missionary to Iowa in 1851. In the following year he organized a congregation in the midst of the Lutherans at Washington Prairie. That the Methodists held their own is evident in the fact that in 1867 a new church building was completed and dedicated.

In Winnebago County where the American his-



torian, Laurence M. Larson, spent his boyhood, church conditions in the 1870's were chaotic. Describing the situation, he wrote:

Methodism with its joyous and virile religion appealed powerfully to many of the immigrants. A Norwegian Methodist society had already been established in Forest City; the first church building in the county was erected by this organization. The Baptists followed close behind and had considerable success, especially among the Swedes who lived in the neighborhood of Forest City. The Norwegian dissenters took less kindly to the Baptist system; they preferred Methodism, in which they seemed to recognize certain characteristics of the Haugean movement. The Adventists carried on a vigorous propaganda in the middle seventies, the chief result of which was a notable secession from the young Baptist church to the standards of the Battle Creek group.

In other counties, too, a few Norwegians trickled into the Methodist and Baptist streams, often joining with Danes and/or Swedes to organize congregations. The practice of uniting the Scandinavians was common in both the Baptist and Methodist churches, the Danes and Norwegians, particularly, co-operating. In April, 1956, the Rev. Odd Hagen, bishop of the Methodist Church in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland preached in the South Marion church near Stratford in Webster County and at Lake Mills in Worth County. Despite some connections with the Baptists and Methodists, the Norwegians form but a minor element in this group in Iowa.

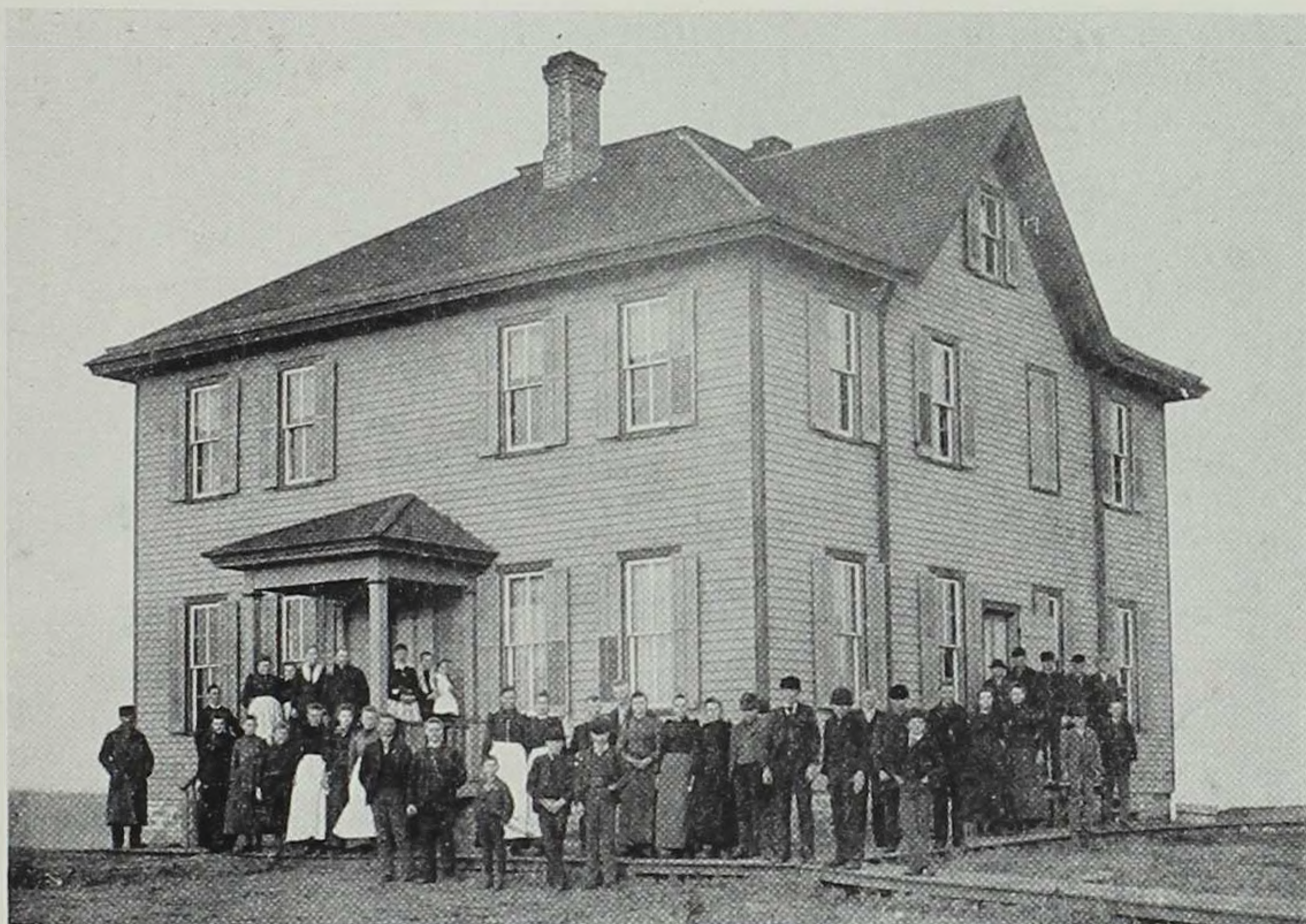


Another small but historically important denomination among the Norwegian Americans is the Society of Friends, and, interestingly enough, Iowa occupies a unique place in its background, for Marshall County became the center of Norwegian Quakerism in America. As we have already seen, there were a number of Quakers at Sugar Creek. There, in 1842, they erected a meeting house, the first place of worship built by Norwegians of any faith in the wilderness of the new west. When the colony disintegrated, they filtered northwestward into Henry, Mahaska, Benton, and, with the arrival there in 1859 of Søren Oleson, into Marshall County. He had come to Le Grand from Sugar Creek via the Friends community of Salem in Henry County. During the next decade many families came directly from Norway, or from Illinois and Wisconsin to this community, named Stavanger after their home in Norway.

After worshipping for a time with the American Friends at the Le Grand Monthly Meeting, the Norwegians received permission to organize their own meeting, thus becoming the only Norwegian-speaking meeting in the United States. Until the 1880's the Norwegian language was used exclusively, but as the older generation passed from the scene English came into the meeting house and gradually supplanted Norwegian.

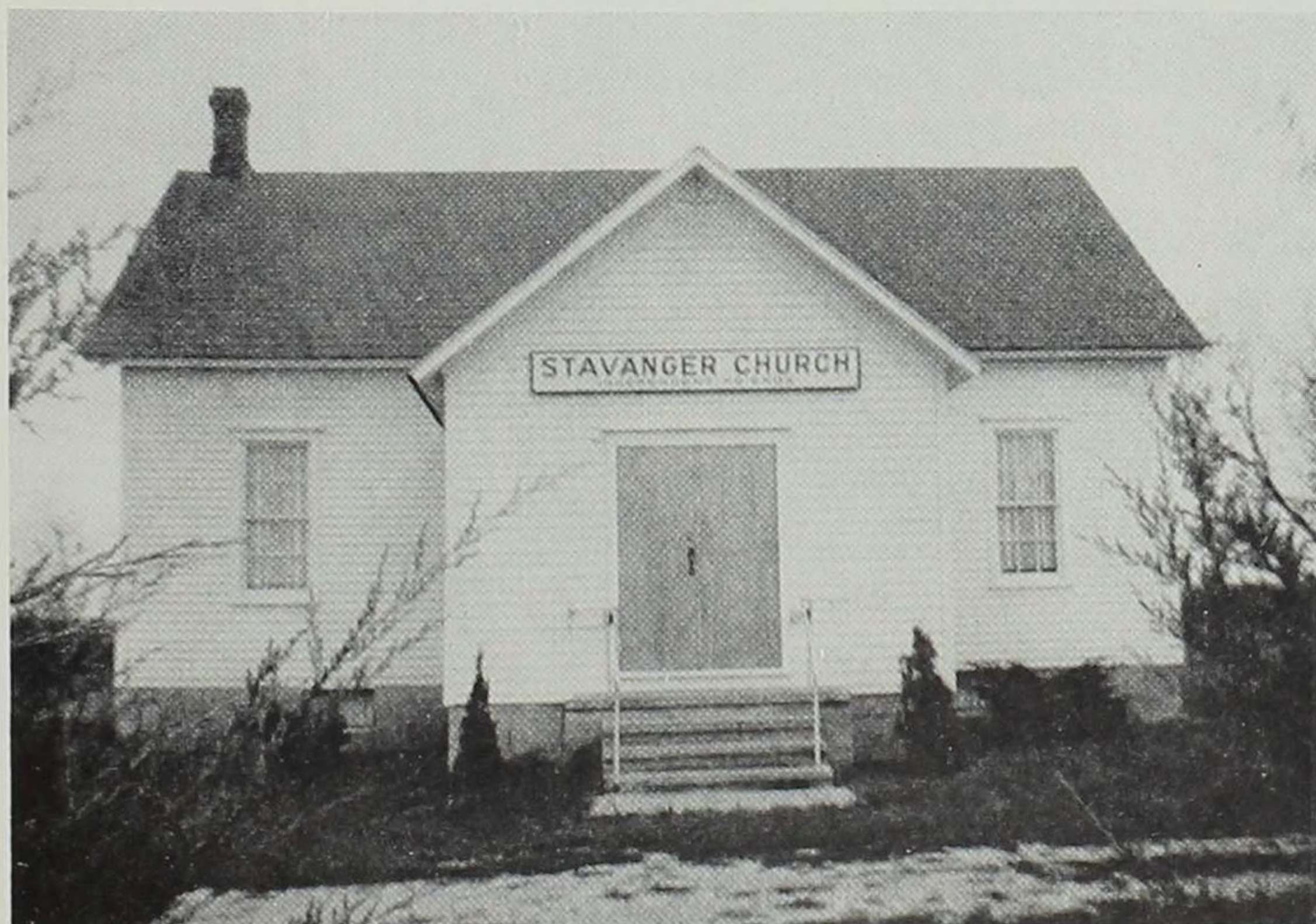
The Norwegian character of the community





*Courtesy of H. Bryngelson*

Stavanger Boarding School, established 1891 for Quaker youth. Discontinued in 1914.



Present day Stavanger Church on site of old Boarding School.



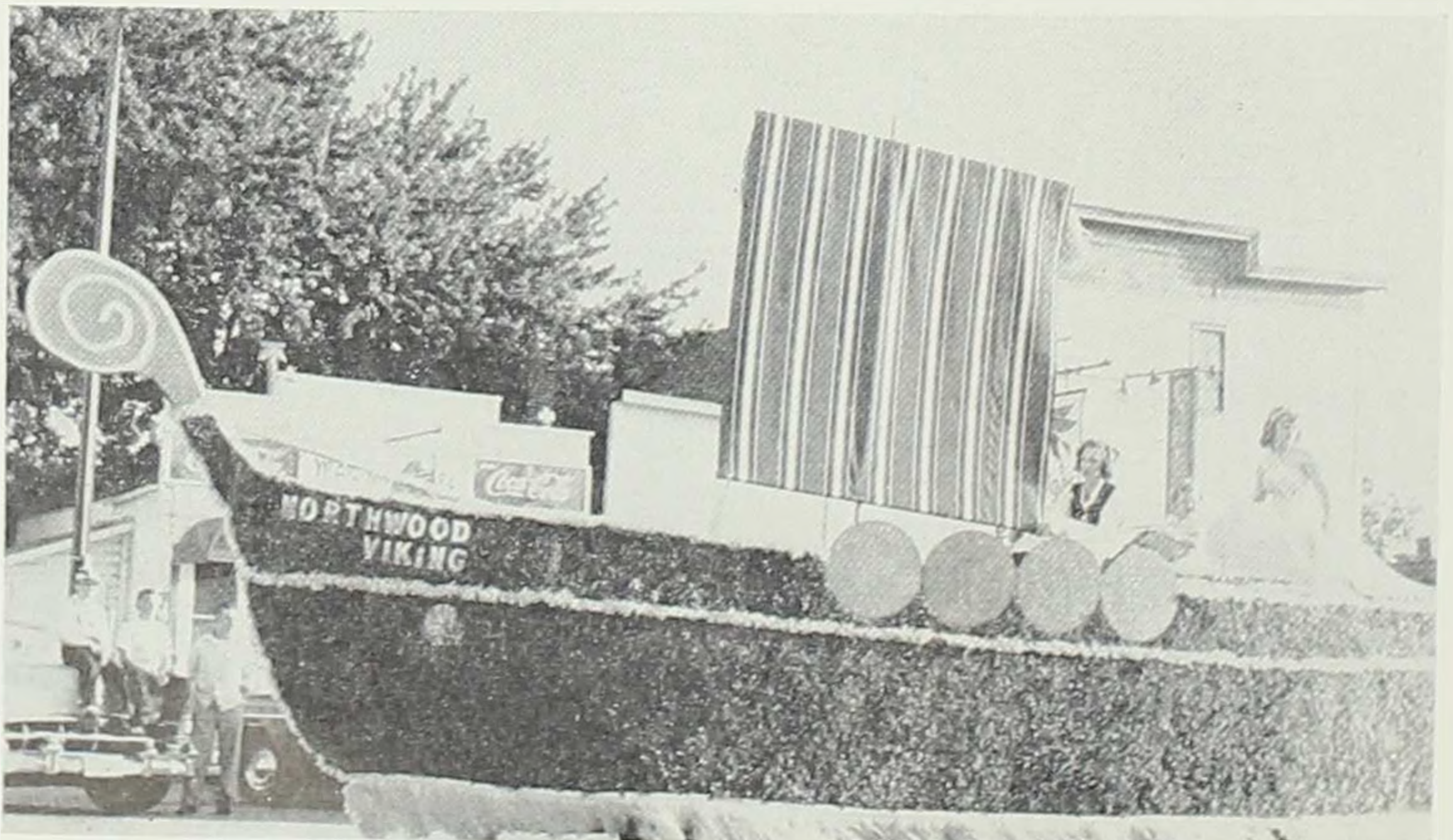
## NORTHWOOD'S



This area in Worth County is the center of a large Norwegian population. Viking Days, a 3-day annual celebration, was first held in June, 1954. Thousands of people from northern Iowa and southern Minnesota, many of Norwegian extraction, attend. Festivities feature Old World customs, parades, athletic contests, a band festival, street dancing, and a Viking Queen.

Photos courtesy of  
*Northwood Anchor*

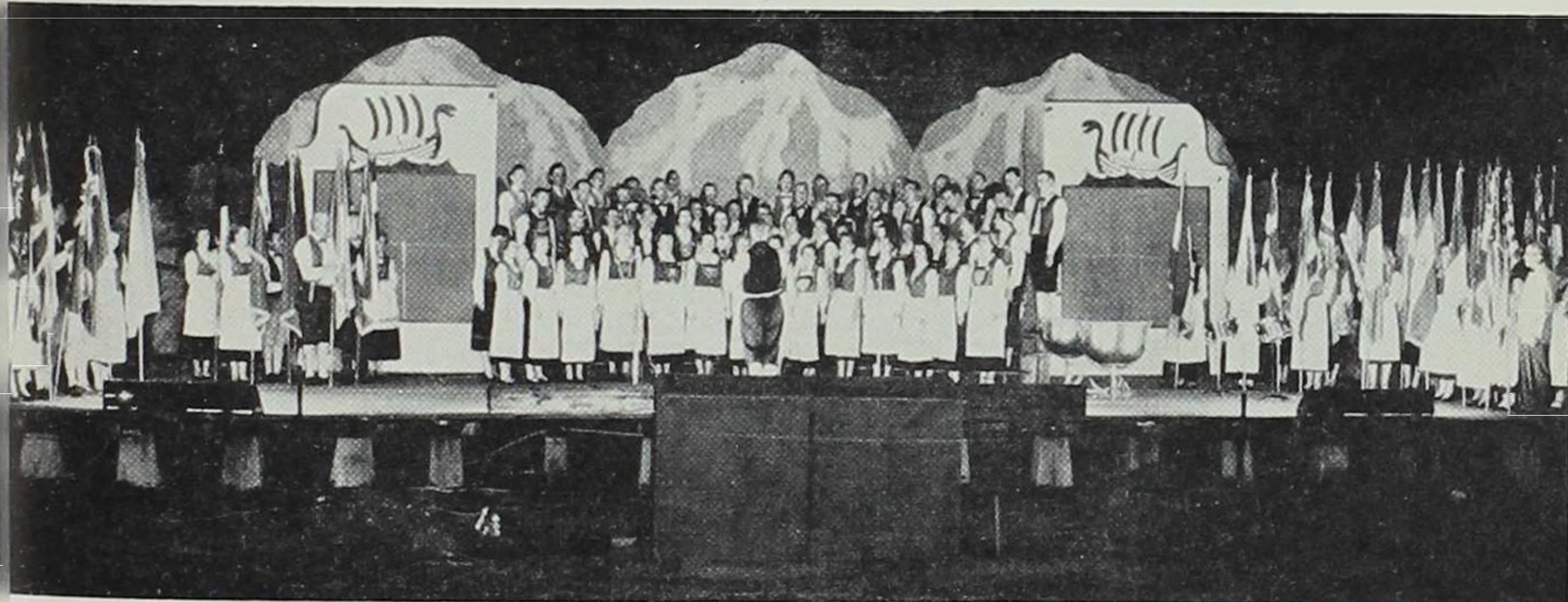
Authentic Norwegian Costumes



Viking Float and Queen



## VIKING DAYS



Viking Chorus sings the Norwegian national anthem, "Yes, we love this land of ours," and Grieg's "Landsighting," the original poems by B. Bjornson, who visited Northwood in 1881.



Norwegian Dances



Coffee Hour





*Photo courtesy Decorah Newspapers*

### The Luren Singing Society, Decorah

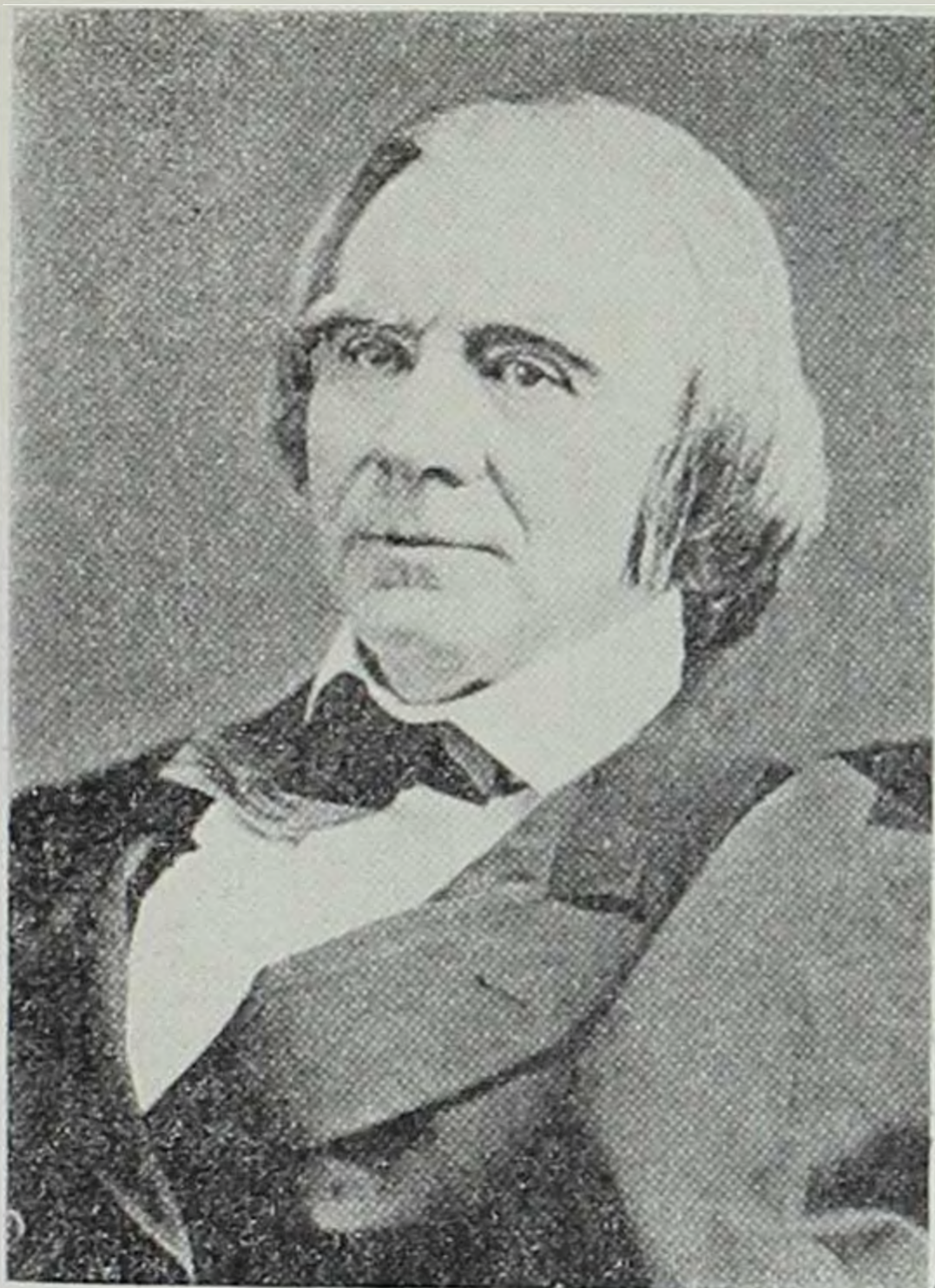
Male choruses are a popular tradition among Norwegian Americans. The Luren Singing Society of Decorah, oldest Norwegian male chorus in America, organized in 1868, is still active. In Fort Dodge the Grieg Mandskor was founded in 1891 by O. M. Oleson, for many years its director and also honorary president of the Norwegian Male Singers Association of America.



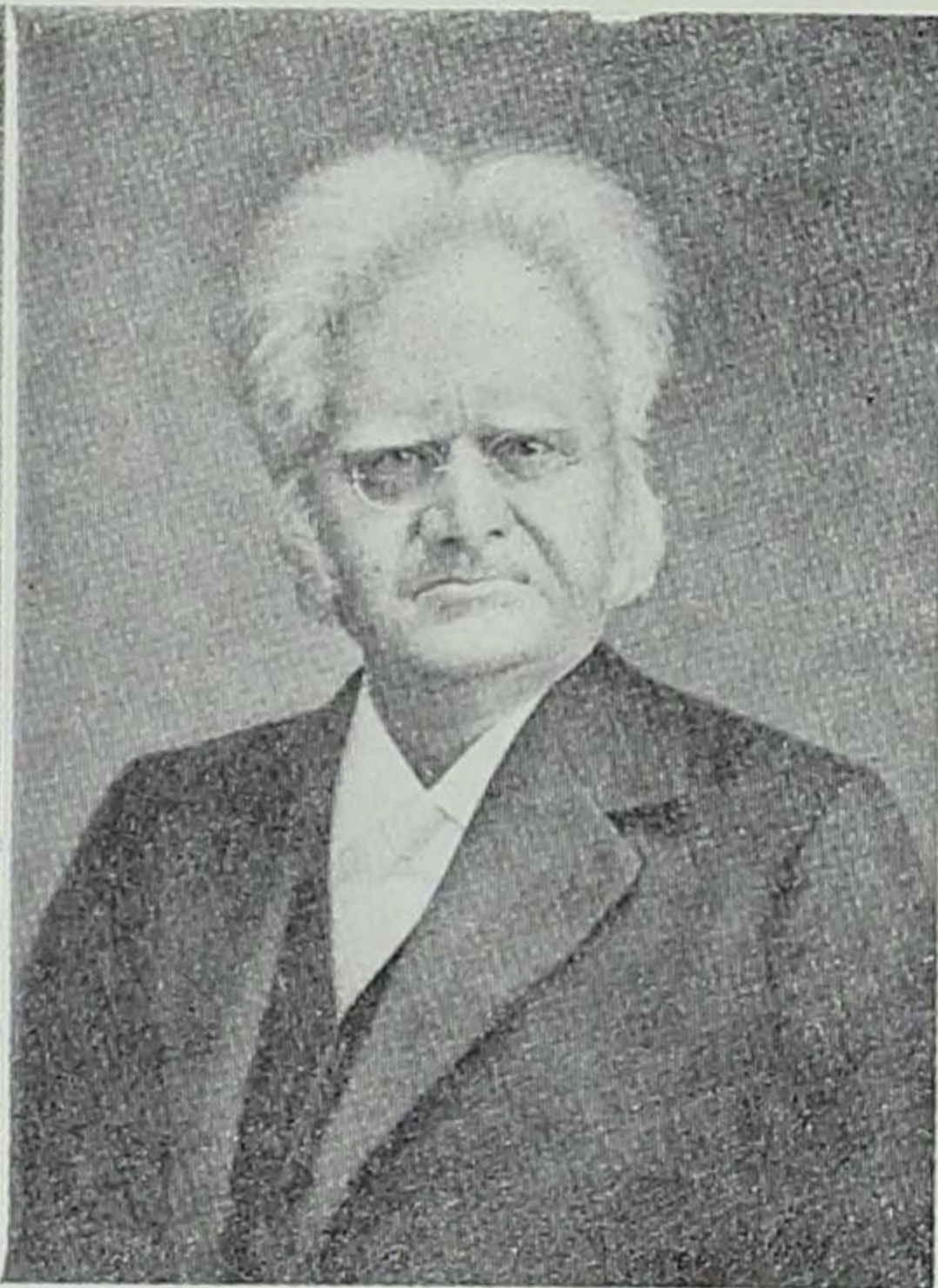
*Photo courtesy A. J. Moe*

### Grieg Male Chorus, Fort Dodge

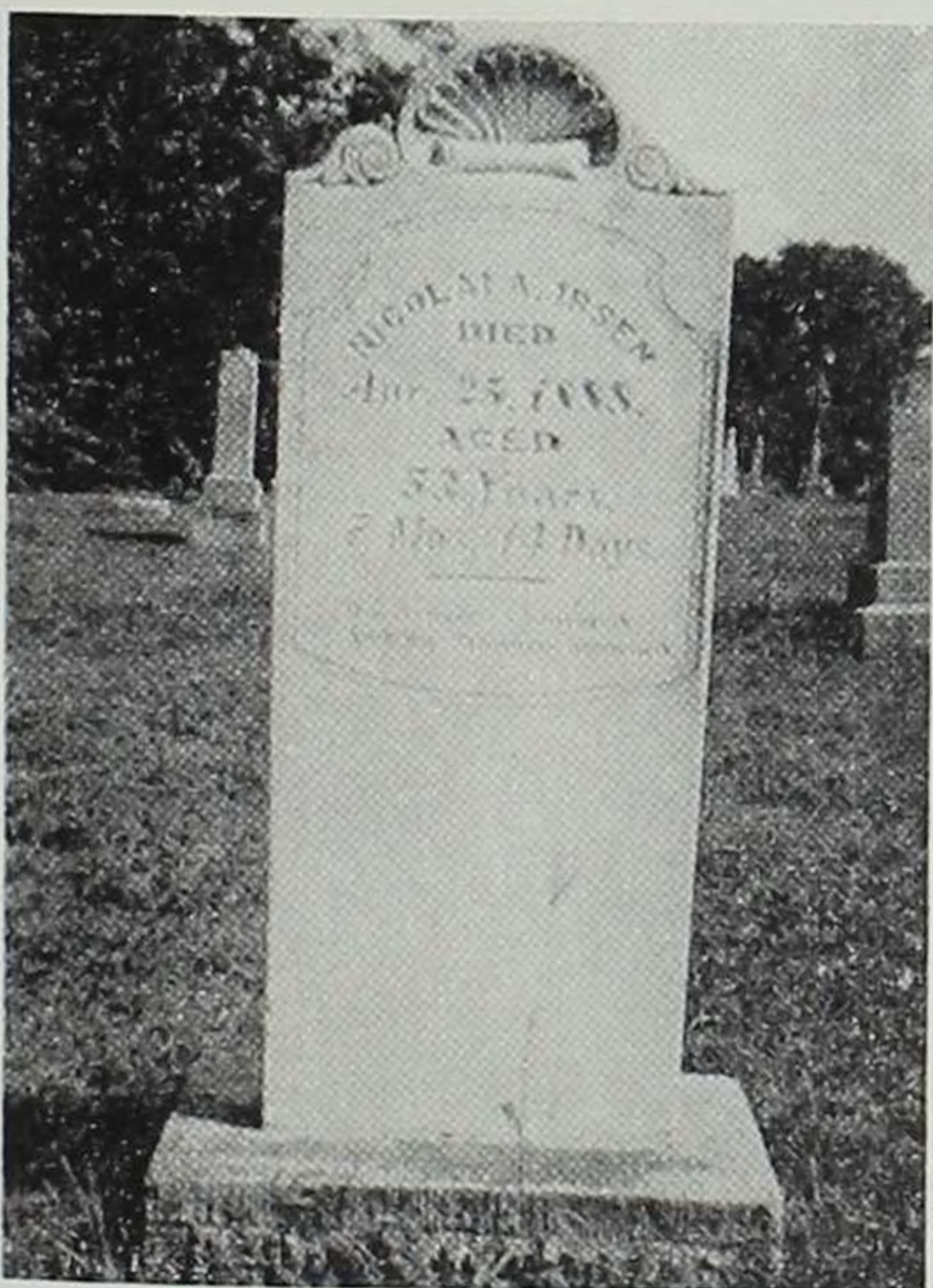




Ole Bull



Bjornstjerne Bjornson



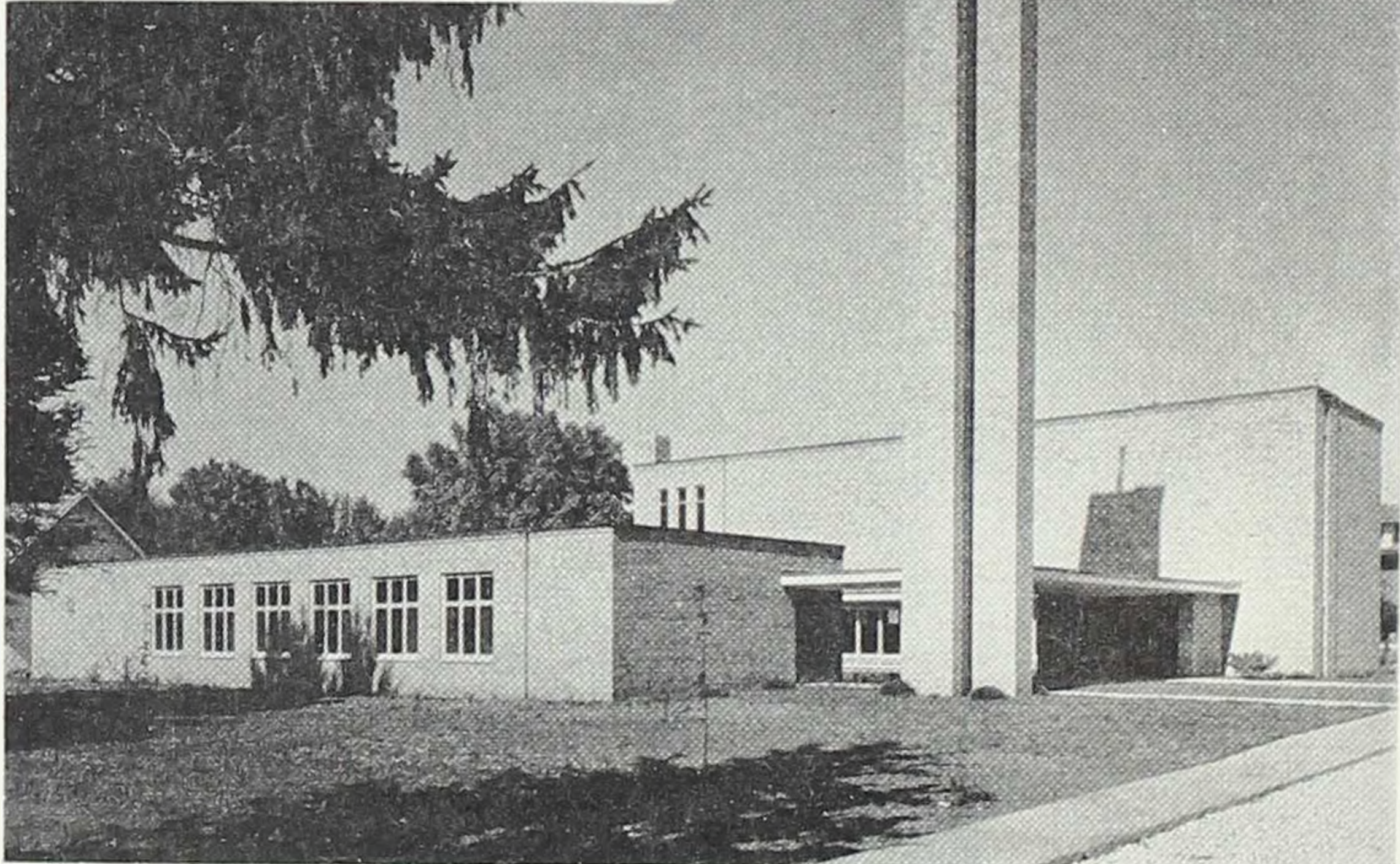
Nicolai Ibsen's grave, Estherville

Ole Bull, famous Norwegian violinist, toured Iowa in 1872 and 1873, attracting enormous crowds. A Norwegian farmer traveled 27 miles on horseback to hear him in Des Moines. When Bull was told the man lacked the \$1 for admission, he ordered "the best seat in the house" for him and an introduction backstage.

Bjornson lectured in Iowa in the winter of 1880-81. Loved as a poet-novelist and attacked for his liberal religious views, he produced an intellectual storm. Clergymen tried to prevent attendance at his lectures, but from far and near people went to Des Moines, Northwood, Decorah to hear him.

Nicolai Ibsen, bachelor brother of the famous dramatist, Henrik Ibsen, was a cowherder for Norwegian families near Estherville in the 1880's. His family in Norway did not know where he was; people in Estherville did not know who he was, until shortly before his death. The epitaph on his tombstone, erected by a farmer who befriended him, reads: "By strangers honored, And by strangers mourned."





*Courtesy Bertha Olson*

(Inset) Norway Lutheran Church, Clayton County, built by pioneers in 1857.

*Photo by Bayard E. Holt*

Trinity Lutheran Church, Ellsworth, dedicated in 1953.



Old Parsonage for the Norway, Marion, and Clermont Lutheran congregations, Clayton County.



receded but did not altogether vanish. For a number of years in the 1920's and '30's Leif Erickson Day was celebrated at an autumn picnic with speeches and band music. Today one hears a slight Norwegian accent in the speech, sees a few Old Country relics in the well-appointed farm homes, Norwegian Bibles, grammars, and diaries. Everyone attends the annual "lepsi" (a variant of *lefse*, seemingly peculiar to this neighborhood) supper given by a nearby Norwegian Lutheran church. Talking to these people, one senses the difference between them and Norwegians in other sections of the state. Their ties are to the Iowa Quaker groups in West Branch and Scattergood, to Oskaloosa and Penn College. They are only vaguely aware of the larger current of Norwegian American life, its institutions, its press; they have no contact with it.

#### *Lutheran Synods*

In matters of religious beliefs the natural course is to tread the parental path, and consequently, more immigrants retained their Lutheran faith than exchanged it for another form of Protestantism. As immigration from every part of Norway steadily increased, the cause of Lutheranism in Iowa was greatly strengthened.

The history of the first fifty years of the Norwegian Lutheran church in America is one of dissension and passionate devotion to opposing ideals of ecclesiastical organization. These ideals,



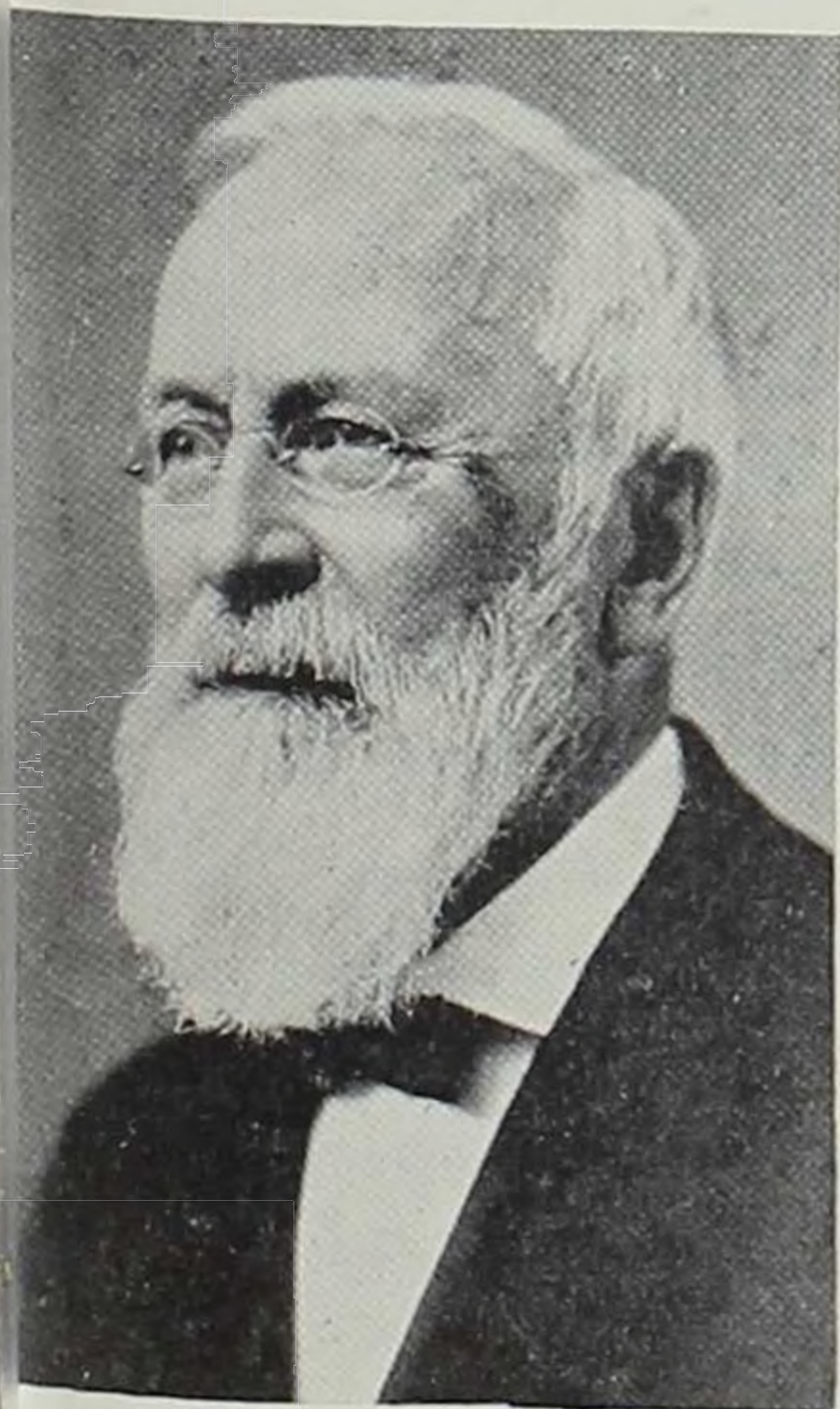
originating in the state church of Norway and in the Haugean movement, took root immediately in the new land. However, things soon became complex. Each camp had its dissenters, and they, readily accepting the American tradition of freedom of worship, founded church groups more to their liking yet within the Lutheran confession. Unlike the Swedish Lutherans who established and remained in one church body, the Norwegians have had as many as fourteen different synods.

The Haugean sympathizers founded a synod in 1846 in Illinois. Practising lay preaching and emphasizing conversion, they were the low church group, eventually to be known as the Hauge Synod. In 1853 in Wisconsin, a few highly trained theologians, who stressed doctrine, the authority of the church, and the ecclesiastical functions of the ministerial office, organized the Norwegian Synod, the high church group. Early in the 1850's too, a third or middle-of-the-road group, made up of Norwegians and Swedes who were influenced by American church leaders formed a synod which, after some reorganization, became the Scandinavian Augustana Synod.

For the first few decades the high church group, the Synod, as it was commonly called, was pre-eminent, forging ahead under the strong leadership of a handful of men educated at the University of Christiania (Oslo). They came from fam-



ilies that had long been in the upper circles of the government and the state church, a class that vigorously opposed emigration. But these men turned their backs on security of position and the comforts of upperclass living for a hard life on the American frontier. They were dedicated men, and they were accustomed to exercising authority. It is not strange, then, that the early history of the Norwegian Lutheran church in America revolves around these figures: J. W. C. Dietrichson, C. L. Clausen, A. C. and H. A. Preus, U. V. Koren, N. O. Brandt, J. A. Ottesen, and Laur. Larsen. Even when the more moderate element in the church, the United Church Synod, rose to dominance in the 1890's, the luster of these names and the prestige of their families in church circles did not diminish.



Laur. Larsen



U. V. Koren



C. L. Clausen

*Courtesy of Luther College*



Although Wisconsin was the birthplace and stronghold of the Synod during its early period, Iowa became the base of operations after the Synod moved its new institution, Luther College, from Wisconsin to Decorah in 1862. For a decade Iowa had been the home of the Synod leaders, C. L. Clausen, of St. Ansgar, and U. V. Koren of Washington Prairie. With the arrival of Laur. Larsen, president of Luther College and one of the leading policy makers of the Synod, Decorah became the headquarters for Synod activities. By this time, too, a majority of the congregations were affiliated with the Synod.

The need for more pastors was ever present. Late in the 1850's the Synod turned for help to the Missouri Synod, an ultra-conservative body of German Lutherans whose seminary was in St. Louis. The Missourians agreed to train Norwegian theological students and to add to their faculty a Norwegian professor. Laur. Larsen was the first professor sent to St. Louis by the Synod. This solution, happy though it seemed at the time, was the seed for much of the controversy that flared up in the Norwegian Lutheran churches of the Middle West. The next three decades — the 1860's through the 1880's — were tempestuous and disruptive, a period during which the smaller synodical groups acquired sufficient strength to challenge the Synod's dominant position.

The first big upheaval came over the issue of



slavery. The ten-year battle that took place has, in retrospect, a quality of shadow boxing in view of the fact that the Norwegian immigrant church was a Northern church. Under the influence of the Missouri Lutherans the Synod leaders took a stand that made them *appear* to condone slavery. Actually they admitted that slavery was an evil, but they argued that it was a "sin in and by itself." This distinction the clergy of the other synods could not swallow, nor did the rank and file Norwegians, who were united in their hatred of slavery. When the Civil War broke out, they volunteered in large numbers, and while they fought on southern battlefields, the clergy fired its guns in the Norwegian American press. Appomattox came long before hostilities ended among the Norwegian Lutherans. During the fray the Synod lost strength. C. L. Clausen, always a spokesman for the people, broke ranks and with a number of followers formed a new church body called the Norwegian-Danish Conference, usually referred to as the Conference.

As the fiery slavery controversy ebbed, an older quarrel, quiescent during the war years, came to the fore again: the American common school versus the Norwegian parochial school. Since its early years the Synod had tried to promote a parochial system of education as a means of keeping the immigrants firmly Lutheran and Norwegian. To them the American common school was



corrupting, godless and inefficient. But from the start the immigrants were grateful that a school, open to everyone, existed in their settlements. Furthermore, they felt that they could not bear the financial burden of supporting both public and parochial schools. So while church and lay leaders argued caustically in the press for two decades, the settlers quietly sent their children to the district school.

A gradual distrust of the "Missourians," as the Synod leaders were called, spread through clerical and lay circles, a distrust based partly on honest theological differences, partly on class differences. This heightened to open rebellion when the argument over predestination, the Great Debate of the 1880's, showed clearly that the Synod and the St. Louis German theologians were doctrinally as one. In 1887 fifty-five ministers formed the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood, and with their secession the power of the mighty Synod was broken.

The laity followed the debates in the church periodicals with keen interest, arguing with each other as heatedly as did the clergy. People were identified by the "church" party to which they adhered; conflicting loyalties separated families; congregations dismissed pastors and switched synodical allegiances. Typical of this were three congregations in the Norway-Marion area of Clayton County. They had been served by Sy-



nod pastors for three decades, but when the split over predestination came, all three voted to go with the Anti-Missourians.

In 1890 three middle-of-the-road church bodies merged, becoming the largest of the Norwegian bodies, the United Norwegian Lutheran Synod (United Church). In Iowa 113 congregations belonged to the new body, 47 to the battle-scarred Synod, and 17 to the Hauge Synod. In towns like Eagle Grove it was not uncommon to find two or even three Norwegian Lutheran congregations, each belonging to a different synod, each struggling to maintain its church property, each inadequately supporting a pastor and his family.

Eventually the common national heritage helped to heal old wounds, and in 1917 the three synods united to form the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America. In 1946 this body became the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America; 78,000 of its million members live in Iowa.

### *The Church in Daily Life*

We have been concerned largely with the political side of the church the Norwegians founded on American soil. Its socio-religious importance in day-to-day existence is also part of the story. During the first years on the frontier settlers gathered for services in someone's cabin. They counted themselves lucky when a minister visited the settlement, administered the Lord's Supper, and baptized their children. Itinerant lay preachers passed



through, exciting their fears of hell, their sense of sin in hot-worded sermons.

The first churches were built of logs or stone, the settlers doing much of the labor themselves, fashioning a crude altar, pulpit, and benches. After some years, they built frame churches with high, pointed steeples mounted with a cross. These white churches, a cemetery on one side, a grove of trees and hitching posts on the other, are characteristic landmarks across the northern counties where Iowa's Norwegians have lived for most of a century.

At first the churches were used only for Sunday worship. When, as early as the 1870's in some communities, the women of the congregation organized a *Kvindeforening* (Ladies Aid Society), they met in the homes, but later as the group enlarged they moved to the basement of the church. Most congregations had an *Ungdomsforening* (Young People's Society), and some, particularly in the country churches, a *Pigeforening* (Girls' Society). A more recent development are the men's clubs.

Though their objectives were to advance Christian education, these societies with their oyster suppers and bazaars, also filled social needs. Some older members of the congregations deplored the change that made the church a social center. Speaking of bake sales and bazaars, one of them said to me, "There should be no buying and sel-



ling in the church." Then he shook his head sadly and added, "Children are now allowed to play games in the churchyard, too."

In pioneer days one pastor served numerous congregations simultaneously, travelling almost constantly. During part of the 1860's U. V. Koren, who came to his parish at Washington Prairie on his 27th birthday and died there three days before his 84th birthday, was serving ten congregations at the same time. Later the pattern was that the minister lived in town, served a congregation there and two or so in the country. Not only was the need for pastors greater than the supply, but few congregations could single-handedly support the exuberantly-sized minister's family. His housing, of course, was furnished; the farm folk frequently brought eggs, chickens, and, at butchering time, fresh meat to the preacher's kitchen. Despite limited cash incomes, the pastors' families dressed well; sons and daughters attended the academies and colleges of the church; occasionally a family journeyed to Norway. The pastors bought books, subscribed to periodicals. Many were prolific writers; some were amateur scholars. Often in their declining years they wrote histories of their families, their congregations, or memoirs of pioneer days.

The strength of this once Norwegian Lutheran church lies in towns and rural areas. Sixty-two per cent of its 78,000 members live on farms and



in towns of less than 2,500 inhabitants. During the decade 1944-1954 seven new congregations were organized in Iowa, four of them in villages, the others in Ames, Cedar Rapids, and Des Moines. Whatever traces it has of its Norwegian origin are most noticeable in the rural congregations, where occasional services in the Norwegian language still draw a few older listeners, who always exchange greetings in their native tongue.

In urban areas the Americanization of this church is virtually complete. Among Iowa cities only Sioux City and Mason City have significantly large congregations belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and in their memberships there are many national backgrounds. Trinity Lutheran Church in Mason City has three thousand members, among whom two dozen were born in Norway; nine in Denmark; five in Russia; two each in Sweden, Germany, and Canada, and one each in Czechoslovakia and England.

Old churches are being replaced by strikingly modern structures. The pastors, in the past somewhat aloof from community life, now participate in civic projects. Their parishioners work with fellow Republicans who are Methodist, with Rotarians who are Baptist, with school board members who are Presbyterian; their favorite golf partners may be Catholic and Episcopalian. The old-time self-imposed isolation of the Norwegian Lutherans is a thing of the past.



*Educational Institutions*

Between 1852 and 1903 Norwegians founded ten schools on the high school or college level in Iowa. Today only the first and the last to be founded, Luther College in Decorah and Waldorf (junior) College in Forest City are still operating, both under the aegis of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The rest of them, academies for the most part, existed precariously and briefly. By the end of World War I they had pretty much vanished from the scene.

The academies served a good purpose, however. A few thousand Iowa youth would never have gone beyond country grade school if it had not been for the energy and zeal of the Norwegians who founded and supported these schools, most of which were connected with the Lutheran church. These are the ten schools:

*Augustana College and Seminary*, Beloit, 1881-1890.

*Bode Academy*, Bode, 1887-1903.

*Humboldt College*, Humboldt, 1895-1914.

*Jewell College*, Jewell, 1893-1918.

*Luther College*, Decorah, 1861-

*St. Ansgar Seminary*, St. Ansgar, 1878-1910.

*Salem Seminary*, Springfield, 1876-1878.

*Stavanger Boarding School*, Le Grand, 1891-1914.

*Valder Business College and Normal School*, Decorah, 1888-1923.

*Waldorf College*, Forest City, 1903-

*Luther College*

The presence of Luther College in Decorah has



given Iowa Norwegians a significance far out of proportion to their numbers. Some of the ablest minds among the Norwegian Americans of the 19th century and some of the most dedicated promoters of Norwegian culture in America have been connected with Luther College, or, because of the college, have lived in Decorah. Woven through Norwegian American history are names like Koren, Larsen, Preus, Brandt, Ylvisaker, Ottesen, Reque, Bothne, and Stub — all of whom were linked to this college community. To this campus have come famous visitors from Norway — novelists, statesmen, scholars. The King of Norway has honored many of the community's citizens with knighthood.

Luther College was started in 1861 in the Wisconsin parsonage of Professor Laur. Larsen. U. V. Koren secured a permanent site for the school as well as temporary quarters in Decorah, and in 1862 the college thus came to be located in Iowa. The aim of the college was clearly set forth in a document deposited in the cornerstone of the "Old Main" building in 1863:

Emigrated Norwegians, Lutheran Christians, living in Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois, united in erecting this building to educate teachers of the Church, through whose ministry, by the grace of our Lord, the saving truth of the Gospel in Word and Sacraments might be preserved for their descendants unadulterated according to the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran



Church as set forth in the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. The Lord grant this. Amen.

The school was modelled after the Norwegian Latin School and the German *gymnasium*. Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and courses in Christianity, Lutheran doctrine, and church history formed the backbone of the students' education. History courses, general and Scandinavian, and the German language were also in the curriculum. Little attention was paid to mathematics and science. These subjects were gradually included during the 1890's and thereafter, but generally speaking during the forty-year presidency of Laur. Larsen the curriculum remained severely classical.

Throughout the 1860's and 1870's the college was, likewise, thoroughly "Norwegian." President Larsen recruited a small but singularly well-trained faculty, many from Norway. Almost all instruction was conducted in Norwegian, as was general conversation. Among the students, however, English steadily gained ground. When Andrew Veblen came to the campus as a Latin teacher in 1877, he observed that English and Norwegian were both used among the boys, except on the baseball diamond where they spoke English. "It was the chief sport cultivated at L. C." he wrote, "and I believe one is justified in crediting the gradual Americanization of the College partly to . . . this, the national game."

By the 1880's English had practically displaced



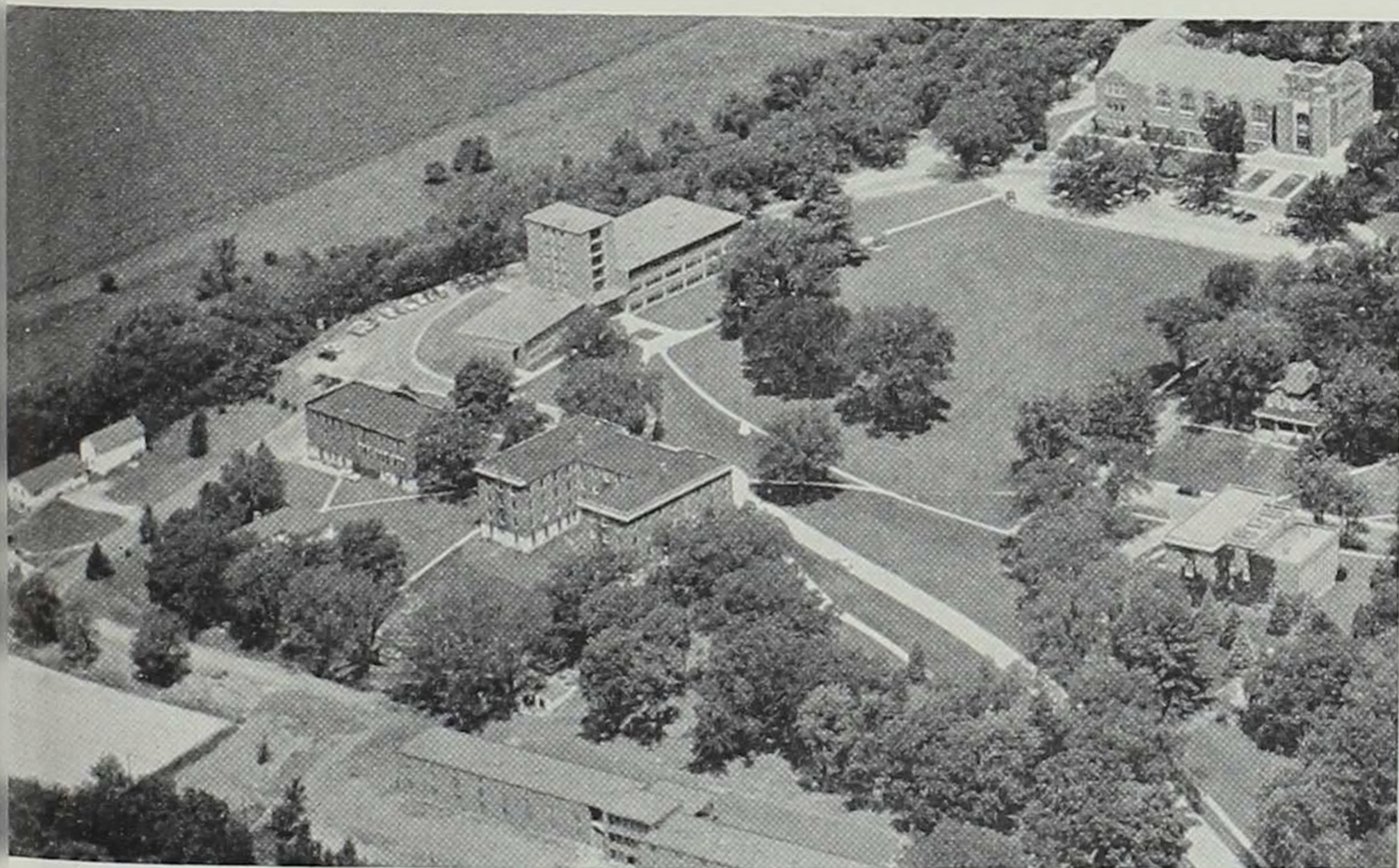
Norwegian. The students made it their official language when they started a college paper in 1884 and declared in its first issue: "English is now unquestionably the reigning language at Luther College. . . . We are citizens of America, and the more Americanized we can become the better."

President Larsen's retirement in 1902 brought no immediate changes. The new president, Christian K. Preus, son of one of the founders of the Norwegian Synod, had absorbed the conservative traditions of the circle of families that had set the tone of the Synod and the college from the beginning. The prevailing educational pattern, however, gradually forced the college to broaden its curriculum, and courses in the sciences, economics, sociology, and psychology were added. Nevertheless, the strength of the institution still lay in the humanistic disciplines.

When President Preus died in 1921, he was succeeded by Dr. Oscar L. Olson, a professor of English literature at the college since 1901. He served until 1932, advocating during his presidency that the college become co-educational to compete more successfully with other institutions. Ove Jacob Hjort Preus, son of C. K. Preus, was Luther's president from 1932 to 1948 during the difficult period of the depression and World War II. To ease financial problems the institution in 1936 became co-educational, a fortunate step in



view of the manless years that were soon to strike all colleges.



Aerial View of Luther College

Alumni, fiercely proud of their alma mater, were dismayed when the doors were opened to the sweater and skirt brigade. Many were the traditions that never could be shared with any but Luther men, be it tales of the "Chicken Coop," their famous Concert Band, or their crackerjack baseball teams. By now the shock has worn off. Luther College is a well-organized co-educational institution. Under the guidance of President J. W. Ylvisaker, the college has a yearly enrollment of about 950 men and women students, over 80



per cent of whom come from Lutheran homes in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

Unlike other American colleges that were founded by Protestant church bodies, Luther College has not loosened its ties with the church. While the strongly religious atmosphere of bygone decades has inevitably been tempered, religion is important in the life of both faculty and students. There is daily chapel, usually devotional in character. Religious organizations are significant in extracurricular activities. Church politics are discussed among the faculty. As in the old days, who is getting what post in the church hierarchy or at the church schools is still "gossip" over afternoon coffee cups. But, as Bach often goes with Bartok, there is also much talk of nuclear physics, modern art and civil rights cases. For now, as in the days of Lincoln and McKinley, the faculty has its full share of intellectuals alert to the issues of the day.

Interlarding all this is a pronounced enthusiasm for things Norwegian, past and present. As early as the 1890's the college began to assemble a museum collection. A few pioneer buildings were moved to the campus and restored. In 1925 the Norwegian American Museum was officially established under the administration of the college. Accredited by the Smithsonian Institution, the museum has the country's "largest and most interesting" collection of relics and materials depicting



Norwegian immigrant culture, according to Tora Bøhn, curator of Trondheim's Kunstindustrimuseum, who in 1949-50 travelled in America assessing evidences of Norwegian folk art. On the campus the Koren Library has extensive collections of Norwegian Americana; particularly valuable are files of the pioneer newspapers.

LEOLA NELSON BERGMANN

