

## Linka Preus' Sketches of Iowa

by Gracia Grindal

The pastors who founded Luther College, with the help and support of thousands of Norwegian immigrants in Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois, were cultivated people. They were largely drawn from the Norwegian upper class known as the "conditioned class." Their families had long furnished government officials who had been significant in the history of Norway. They had come to America to minister to the thousands of Norwegian immigrants who had streamed across the ocean in search of free land and opportunities. The clergymen were among the few Norwegian immigrants who had made the trip to the United States for reasons other than the possibility of improving their lot. They had come to serve, in answer to urgent calls from their compatriots in America. Moreover, they came with the reluctant approval and sometimes the outright opposition of the Norwegian church which felt little, if any, responsibility for the immigrants.

When Pastor Vilhelm Koren and his wife, Elisabeth, came to Washington Prairie, Iowa, in 1853 to begin their ministry, they built there a home similar to the typical manse, or *prestegaard*, in Norway. Mrs. Koren had a keen



*Linka Keyser Preus in 1850. (SHSI)*

eye for detail and a youthful interest in the people around her which was well illustrated in her diary. In that diary she wrote of their journey from Kragerø in Norway to Washington Prairie, with an account of their stop in Spring Prairie (now DeForest, Wisconsin), where they stayed with Herman and Linka Preus, also a young Norwegian pastor and his wife. The Preuses had come to this country a year earlier and were soon to become close friends of the Korens. Elisabeth Koren and Linka Preus carried on a vigorous correspondence while their husbands frequently met to discuss the future of the Norwegian Lutheran Synod which they were instrumental in founding and leading for the next fifty years.

The letters of Elisabeth Koren (as well as



those of other pastors' wives) to Linka are now in the archives of the Preus Library at Luther College. They give a vivid and warm picture of the early days in Iowa as seen by the sophisticated and increasingly mature Mrs. Koren. The lively tone of the letters sets in sharp relief the sober work of the men. The recent discovery of two books of sketches by Linka Preus has given us early scenes in the founding of Luther College as well as amusing and ironic pictures of such places as McGregor, Washington Prairie, and Decorah. The sketches date from 1858 to 1866 and each scene is a little moment which tells a story and catches life as early cameras could not do. Those who practiced the art of drawing, usually cultivated ladies, were often able to capture a feel for life which not even a modern camera can accomplish.

The Preus family had first come to Iowa in 1858. Their trip was amply illustrated by Linka, a young mother of two. By that time, the Korens had had time to get the parsonage built and a yard and garden created on Norwegian

models. Mrs. Koren was an avid horticulturist, collecting seeds from the surrounding prairie as well as from her father in Norway and Linka. The drawing of the Little Iowa parsonage, as Koren's parish was called at the time, is from the west, where the church stood. (See figure 1.) The Little Iowa parish was an enormous one stretching from Clermont in the south to the Turkey River to the west, to Rushford, Minnesota, to the north, and was said to include at first over eight thousand souls. Both Koren and Preus were frequently gone for long periods of time ministering to their far-flung congregations. Mrs. Koren and Linka, having been left alone, with no companions to talk to except the children and the help, often longed to visit each other. Such trips were, for Linka, the fulfilment of a dream, and from her drawings, one can see that she enjoyed every minute of them. The stick figures walking toward the house are very likely the Preus family, Herman and Linka, with their children, Christian Key-

FIGURE 1 Rølvaag Collection





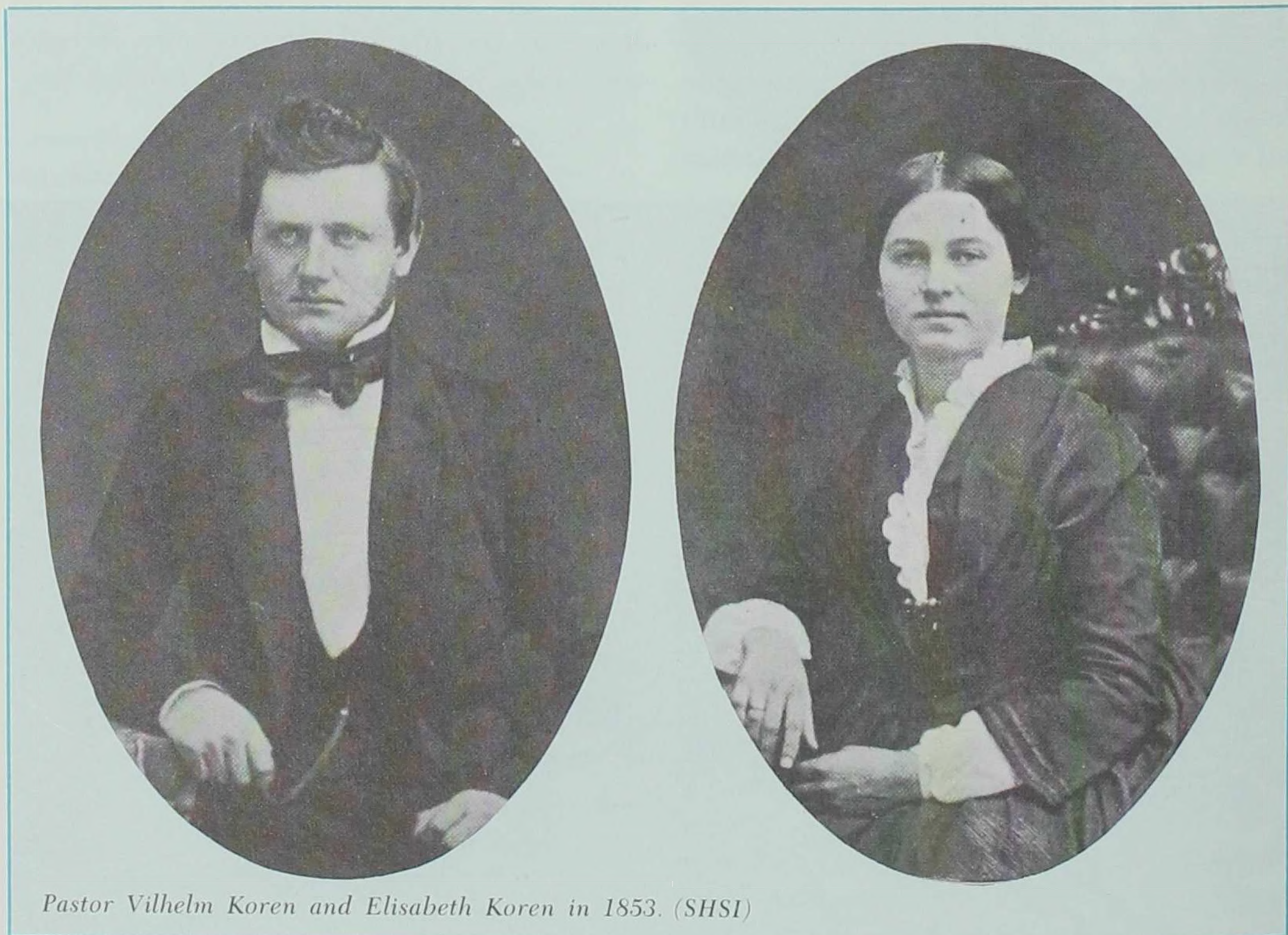
ser (who grew up to be the second president of Luther College) and Rosina.

The picture of the Korens' parlor shows three young couples and their children having coffee and reading letters. (See figure 2.) Mrs. Koren is probably the woman serving. Herman is the man on the left with the long pipe, a trademark of his, and Koren is probably the one seated on the right. The woman next to him is either Linka or Diderikke Brandt, wife of Pastor Nils Brandt who is facing the viewer. The Brandts lived at Rock River, Wisconsin, at the time and had accompanied the Preuses on their trip west for the dedication of Coon Prairie Church near Westby, Wisconsin. They moved to Decorah in 1865, where they would live on the Luther College campus. Diderikke, a woman of considerable education and

energy, devoted herself to the students at Luther College, giving parties, and teaching manners or singing or music or other things future pastors might need to know. Her husband taught at the college in addition to being a pastor in the local community.

A more intimate picture shows Linka using an eyecup to treat Mrs. Koren's eye which is apparently infected. (See figure 3.) While she is doing that, the boisterous Mrs. Brandt has leaped up on the bed in an attempt to appease little Margrethe, her daughter, who is unable to sleep because, as Linka writes on the opposite page, of the terrible mosquitoes, a nuisance for the Norwegian immigrants who were not used to them.

On their way home from the Korens, July 28, 1858, Linka drew a wonderful picture of



*Pastor Vilhelm Koren and Elisabeth Koren in 1853. (SHSI)*





FIGURE 2

Rølvaag Collection

Rølvaag Collection

FIGURE 3





McGregor's Landing on the Mississippi while they were waiting for Nielson's ferry to take them to Prairie du Chien. (See figure 4.) Linka shows herself running rather frantically to the outhouse which, she noted, was on a barrel in the water. "McGregor is a curious town," she wrote beside the drawing, "built in a very narrow valley, there is no space for more than a street. They had to dig the limestone and sandy ridge of hills to make enough room for the houses. They are 3 to 4 stories tall. The various necessary outhouses lie above the hills. We counted 174 steps from the flats to the hill. There are different 'establishments' built upon large barrels out in the river. The ferry boat waits on the dock and we take it over to Prairie du Chien." This sketch is illustrative of Linka's self-deprecating humor. The woman on the boat is pointing to her as though she were quite the spectacle. Herman is following behind with Christian dragging along beside him. The date on the bottom right foreground indicates that Linka finished this drawing on her next trip through McGregor on April 24, 1859.

In another sketch, Linka draws a flatboat, complete with women and children, noting "it is fun to meet these houseboats when one sails the Mississippi. The men stand still and peacefully by their oars; in the middle of the raft

there is a little house for the stove; there is smoke in the stove pipe. A wife with some children and a dog sit by the house." (See figure 5.)

The Preuses made the trip west more and more frequently as Koren had persuaded Preus and the rest of the church members that they should build their school in Iowa as the population was moving west and Decorah would be a central location for students from both the east and west. Koren also argued that Decorah was easy to get to, something that failed to be true after the railroads passed it by. The Preus family had just been to Washington Prairie for a visit in October 1860 when Linka drew the picture of Christian and Sina throwing stones into the Mississippi by moonlight while waiting for the ferry. (See figure 6.) On that visit, Preus had gone with Koren to view the land north of Decorah which Koren thought would be a great place for a school, with its high bluff overlooking the Upper Iowa River. Preus had agreed and soon Koren paid down earnest money in the amount of \$1,500 for it.

In June 1864, the Preuses once again came through McGregor, this time on their way to the cornerstone laying of the new school

FIGURE 4 Rølvaag Collection





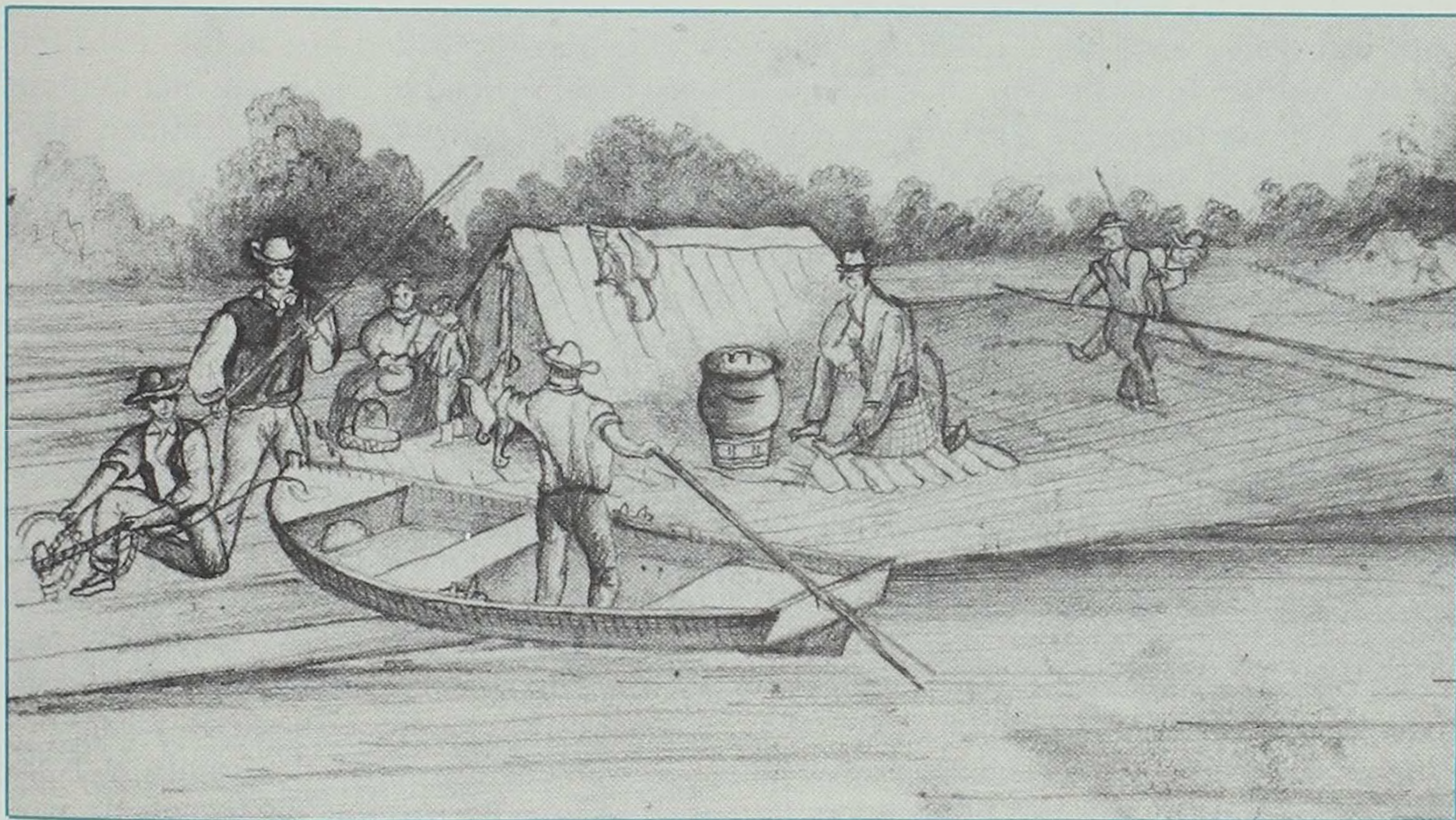


FIGURE 5

Rølvaag Collection

Rølvaag Collection

FIGURE 6





which, despite the Civil War and raging inflation, was finally underway. Linka explained the two pictures from this trip. (See figures 7 and 8.) "On our trip to Iowa last summer, we met Ottesen's whole family in McGregor. It was a surprise. We were all traveling in order to take part in the cornerstone laying of our school building in Decorah. The German theologians, Professor Walther and Cramer did us the honor of sharing our journey and participating in our celebration. Koren had promised to meet Walther and Cramer and us with a horse and wagon, but Ottesen told no one about his coming. They had to go in a crowded stage. June 29 was a very hot day and there they sat, 28 passengers in the stage. . . .

"Professor Walther and Cramer with Herman wanted to give their places to Mrs. Ottesen and Miss Norman and themselves to take a work wagon. This was unnecessary for our children were in the lumberwagon and Pastor Koren's three-seated buggy had enough room for 6 adults. So Koren took the German guests in addition."

Koren, known as a proud man, seems to have

been embarrassed by this situation. Linka, who frequently twitted him in her drawings, once again seemed to be teasing him in these sketches as she shows his obvious dismay. He is driving the wagon in the first picture and saying to Mrs. Ottesen in the second, "Please let me carry your luggage, Mrs. Ottesen." She is saying, somewhat archly, "It is marvelous to get out of that heat!"

The sketch of the actual cornerstone laying on June 30, 1864, is the only pictorial representation on record of that day. (See figure 9.) The foundation had been dug and the Decorah papers commended the Norwegians for using local stone for the foundation, local sand for the mortar, and local clay for the bricks which they fired on the site at a place which for years afterwards was known as the Brick Yard.

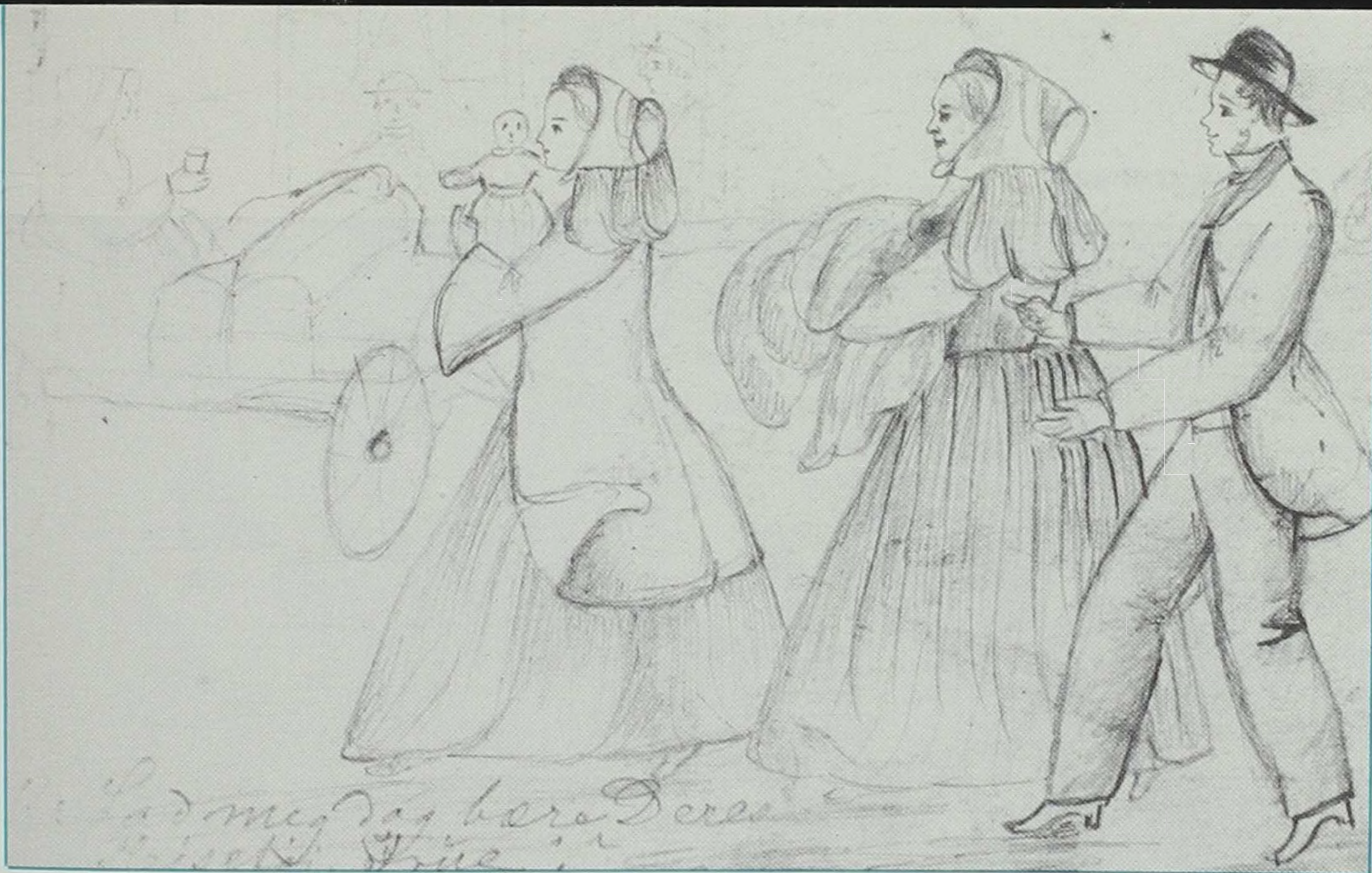
The event attracted thousands of Norwegians from the surrounding farms and towns who were astonished at what the school was setting out to do as they gathered around the foundation and sang songs and listened to

FIGURE 7

Rølvaag Collection





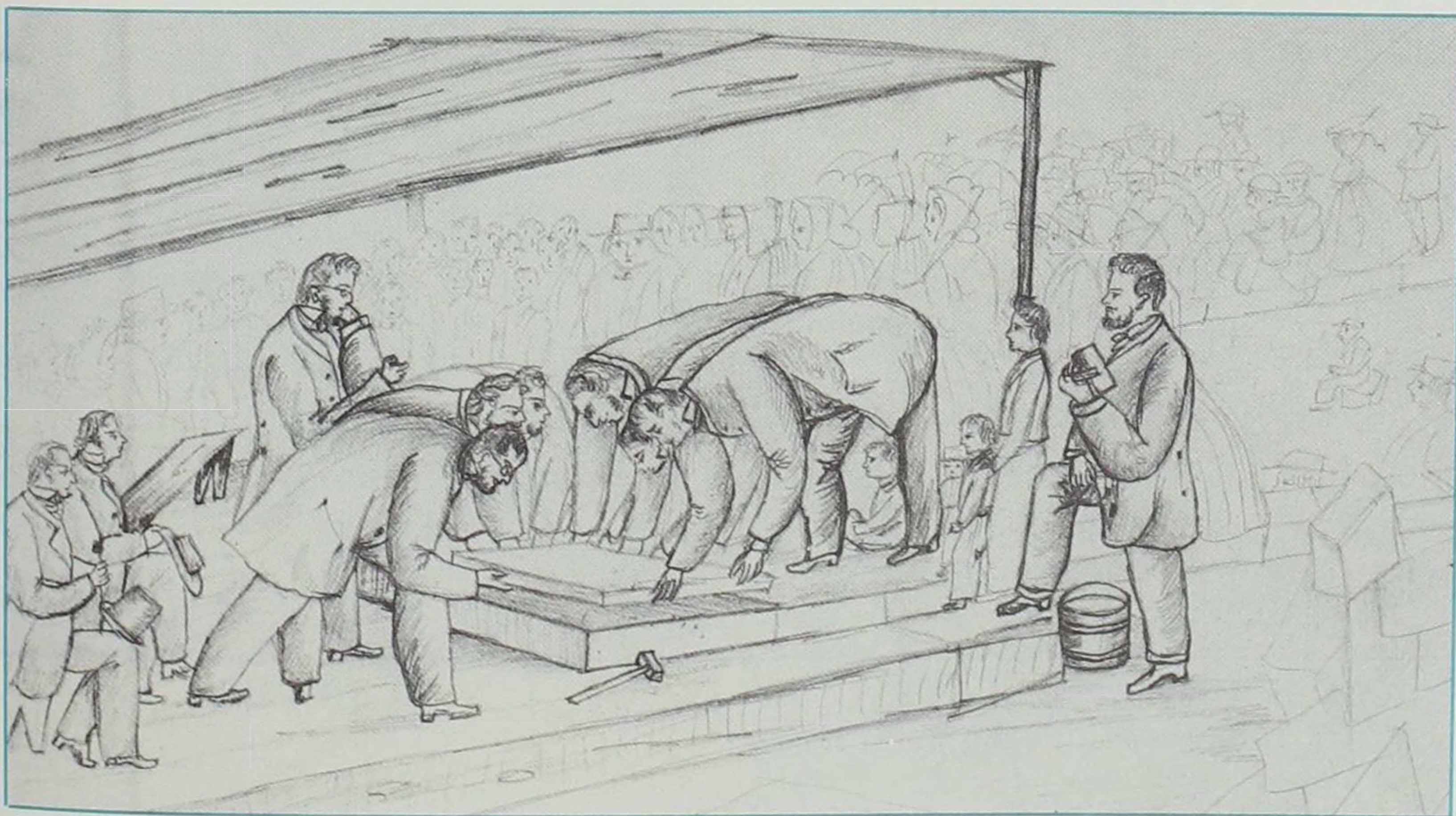


Rølvaag Collection

FIGURE 8

speeches. When the young pastors of the synod bent down to set the cornerstone — literally the ground stone in Norwegian — in place, Cramer and Walther looked on approvingly and the crowd moved off to escape the approaching rain showers. Herman, the newly elected president of the young church body,

FIGURE 9



Agnes Preus Collection







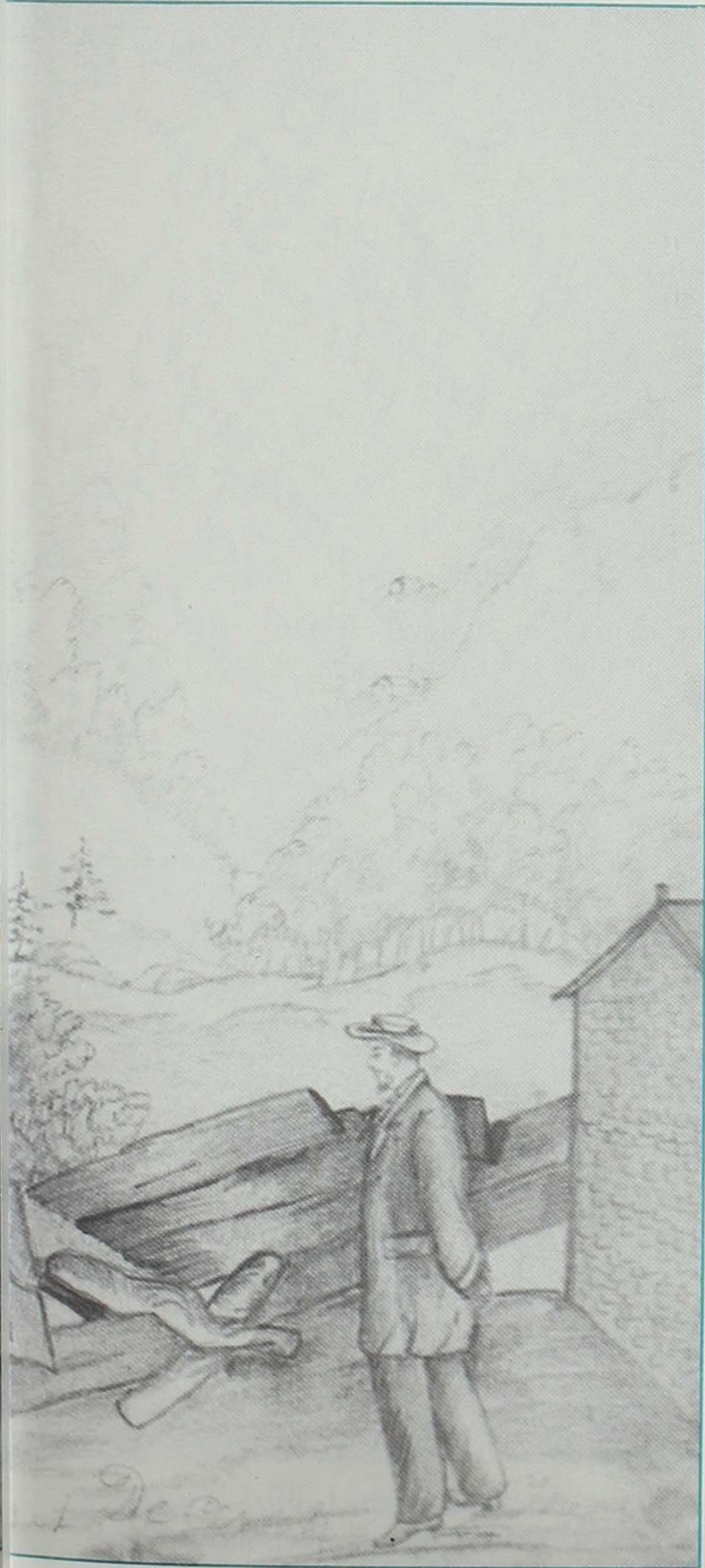


FIGURE 10

had tapped the stone with a hammer three times for the Trinity, and then helped to set the stone in place. Linka's attention to detail shows itself once again. Note the hammer lying beside the stone at Herman's right hand.

Construction proceeded through the summer under the persistent urging of Laur. Larsen, the young president of the school. He taught full-time while overseeing the building project. The work was plagued by the slow delivery of materials, generally sent up the Mississippi, then through Lansing to Decorah. Inflation meant that laborers, dissatisfied with previously agreed to wages, often walked off the job. Larsen's worries seemed endless. He and his wife lived in the St. Cloud Hotel in Decorah with the schoolboys while awaiting the completion of the new building. He wrote the Preuses that summer inviting them to visit. Decorah, he wrote, was big and they had lots of room. Linka picked up on his irony in a picture of Laur. Larsen's guest room No. 8. (See figure 10.) She made the sketch in October 1864.

Laur. Larsen is the man on the right, looking over the woodpile to the Oneota Valley. Young Christian Preus is on the far left, pointing down into the valley, or perhaps across the valley at a tree which had grown into the shape of a cross, a sign from which the young school took much encouragement.

Linka's most dramatic picture shows dedication day, October 14, 1865. (See figure 11.) In it Professor Larsen has found a young Irish lad at the picnic stealing cake and he is asking him to leave. One is reminded that there actually was a student rebellion on that day which was

#### Note on Sources

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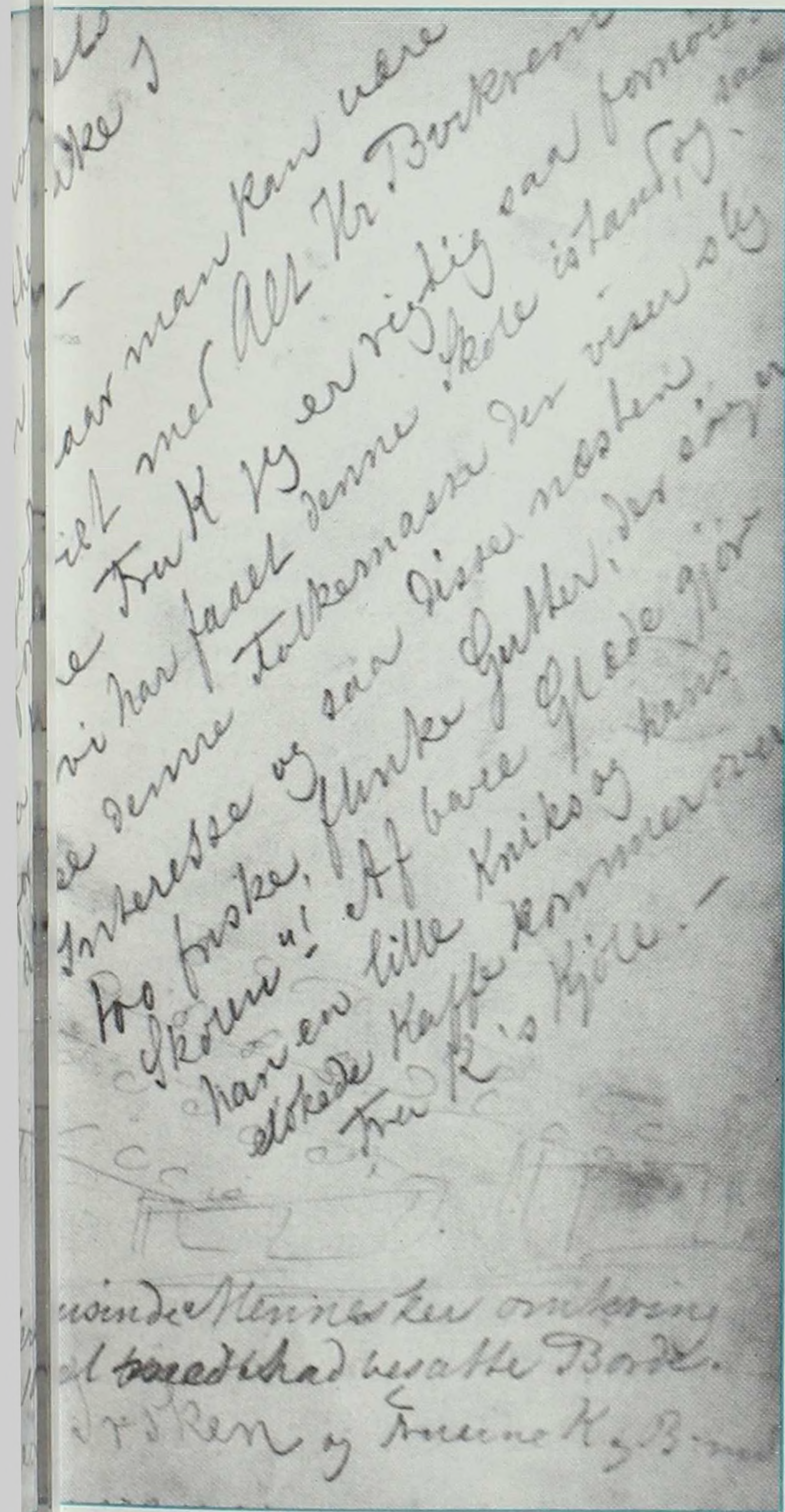
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In this last picture, Diderikke Brandt is on the left, talking to a farm wife about how nice it is to have coffee, as it is a cold day. She is also urging the women to hurry so others can partake of the grand feast which Linka has repre-

sented on the table with names of food — chicken, ham, goose, etc. Christian is playing under the table. To the right, Mrs. Koren is conversing with Mr. Birkrem about the new school and how happy they are that there is at last a place for their students to go to school. He is so excited he spills his coffee on Mrs. Koren's dress, Linka remarks on the side of the drawing. At the bottom of the page Linka wrote, "A scene at the table during the dedication where Larsen scolded an Irish boy and Mrs. Koren and Mrs. Brandt walked around conversing with the people. Several thousand people, around 8-10 at table."

Linka's estimate was too high but the dedication was an impressive event attended by probably six thousand people. Their number included farmers from all around, church leaders, children, students, and even some of the English from Decorah.

The Preuses, Korens, and Brandts attended a party that evening hosted by the Laur. Larsens, aristocrats of gracious mien. Linka has not left us a sketch from that event, but from her drawings of the early life in Washington Prairie and Decorah, we can get the idea that it was a glittering event, attended by a cultivated and charming group.

Linka's two books of sketches include work done through 1866. After the birth of her last child, Paul Arctander, in 1867, Linka's health deteriorated. In 1876, at the age of forty-seven, she suffered a serious stroke which confined her to her home until her death in 1880. Her legacy to the Luther College community went beyond the family she raised, all of whom lived to support the college in their mature years (in one fashion or another). It also included the insightful sketches of life at the college and in the state in the 1850s and 1860s. Those sketches of the early years of the college vivify and make richer our sense of the past. For that she should be remembered warmly and with pride. □



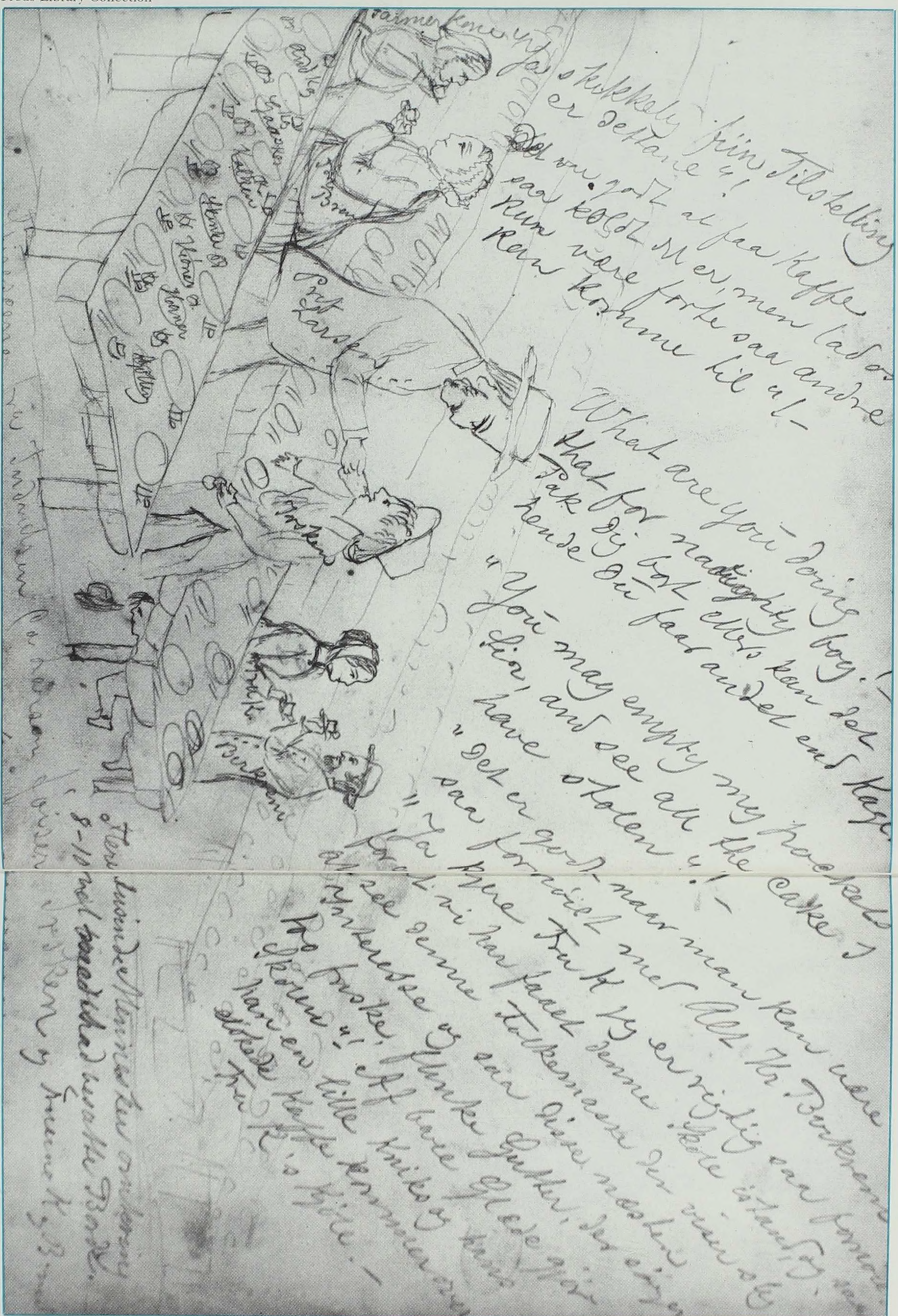


FIGURE 11

rather embarrassing for the college officials. It was led by Rasmus B. Anderson, who was later to become professor of Scandinavian at the University of Wisconsin, and U. S. Minister to Denmark. The college officials summarily dismissed Anderson, but the memory of his

rebellion remained strong for years.

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