

THE PALIMPSEST

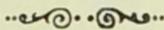
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VOL. XIII

ISSUED IN JULY 1932

No. 7

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Who Was Nagelsen

One of the features of by-gone days that gave memorable thrills to the flaxen-haired hopefuls of the Norwegian community in the southeastern part of Hamilton County were the interesting transient individuals that appeared as regularly as migratory birds. Erik Kjyten was one of them. He could mend anything from a watch to a leaky coffee pot, and could make a tousle-headed prairie urchin look as slick as the chromo on the wall. His songs and stories enraptured us.

Another casual visitor was the Tin Peddler whose tinkling mystery-wagon stopped at everyman's door to offer the most beautiful articles in trade for just common, every-day butter and eggs. As we stood on tiptoe gazing wide-eyed at the gorgeous display within the wonderful man's little house-vehicle, we could not understand the

reluctance with which mother parted with her butter and eggs in exchange for his shiny wares. Verily he all but stole our hearts from mother. Was he not kind to us? Did he not tell us stories of strange things and happenings, and was he not anxious that we should have as many of the pretty things as possible, while mother seemed to want as little as possible? Perched on his high seat with a word to the horses and a jolly good-bye, the tinkling was resumed down the road, and we had much to talk about for many, many days.

When the Pump Peddler came on his annual tour with his wagon load of green-painted pumps beautifully decorated with yellow stripes, and very willing to replace the old oaken bucket or the long hooked pole and pail with one of his up-to-date pumps, we were in ecstasy. This was not so much because we hoped father would buy, for he had a way of not buying what he could get along without, but we felt sure "Pump Lars" would stop over night with us and then we could stand and look at the pumps a long time and, if mother would let us stay up beyond our usual bed time, we could listen to him tell of his experiences in the wild west where there were buffalo and other big game, and lots of Indians.

Perhaps the prettiest sight was when the Fanning Mill Peddler hove into view with his long

load of fanning mills all painted red and trimmed with green. That such a man was one of the greatest among men was surely evident to all. If any one among the neighborhood boys who have since attained positions of public trust and honor ever day-dreamed of being exalted to the driver's seat on such a wagon, he never confided it to his companions, and wisely so. The telling of such unreasonable ambitions would have been resented as were the dreams of Joseph.

Yet towering above such satellites of the prairie and being also a cubit wider, physically and intellectually, was NILS REINHARDT NAGELSEN.

Who was Nagelsen? I have asked the question from one end of Story County to the other end of Hamilton County; I have interviewed many who "knew him well" yet, after all, did not know who he was. Though I cannot to my own satisfaction say who he was, I can tell something of what he was as we observed the huge hulk of a man on his periodic journeys through our settlement and, at close range, when he called at our home.

A trustworthy man told me that Nagelsen was seven feet, four inches tall and weighed five hundred pounds. Another equally trustworthy man, whom I interviewed, said he was six feet four and weighed four hundred pounds. A truthful

woman could assure me that her own father had himself weighed Nagelsen and found his weight to be three hundred pounds, "but", she added, "that was before he got so fat." When he first came to our settlement, in the sixties, he was tall and lank.

The following incident has some value as circumstantial evidence in the question at hand. W. D. Gandrup's drug store was one of the regular haunts of Mr. Nagelsen when in Story City. He was a privileged character in the store. On his previous trip he had left a pair of surplus trousers hanging in the room back of the prescription counter. Seeing the voluminous garment there, one of the drug clerks conceived the idea that won him first prize at the masquerade ball a few evenings later. In preparation for the party the clerk secured a five-gallon keg of Pabst's best. To this he attached a strap to fit over his neck so that he could conveniently carry the keg where every normal Milwaukee front was carried. Next he donned Nagelsen's trousers which fitted loosely over the keg and all. When the face mask was in place and other details of his costume attended to, he was ready for the ball and the prize. The purpose of recording this incident is to help establish the size of the man who owned the trousers, and that being accomplished

questions as to the probable fate of the brew thus surreptitiously brought into the ball room may be dismissed as irrelevant.

It was as colporteur that Nagelsen made the rounds of the Norwegian settlements in central Iowa. His stock in trade consisted of Bibles, hymn books, prayer books, and other Christian literature especially of a devotional character and dear to the settlers through memories of the homes across the ocean.

Ready-made clothing was out of the question for our friend. He could not patronize a regular custom tailor; the prices were prohibitive even if he had had access to one. A certain woman at Ballard's Grove near the present village of Huxley, who was apt with her needle and scissors, became the manufacturer of his clothing. His suits were made of Kentucky jean — that stiff, heavy, almost imperishable material so common in those days.

The coat was made somewhat on the order of a present-day hunting jacket. To us children the huge garment was full of mysterious catacombs or caverns in which wonderful things were secreted. This much we knew, that they contained not only books, some filled with pictures of strange things and scenes, but also wonder-working bottles that could stop toothache, earache, and even

"bellyache" as we irreverently called our most frequent autumn ailment.

Besides his cargo of books and whatever else might be hidden in the folds and recesses of his coat, he always carried a large carpet bag suspended from one shoulder, presumably containing his personal effects. Thus freighted, he navigated the billowing prairie from haven to haven. Wherever he cast anchor a welcome awaited him. Every dog and every child was his friend. Fathers and mothers were always willing to declare a recess and listen to him as he talked interestingly and familiarly not only of persons and events of the present but also of the past. Though selling books was his business and means of livelihood, his main purpose seemed to be to disseminate knowledge based not on theories but on the experiences of the ages and to provoke thinking and the seeking of useful knowledge. He was the pioneer's university.

Was it such universities that gave impetus to the men and women that laid the foundation of our nation and commonwealth? One thing I do know: the possible influence of such men on the course of many lives and of events was incalculable.

It was useless to offer Nagelsen an ordinary chair; he would not jeopardize himself or the

chair. For the same reason an ordinary bed was not for him and, for the same reason again, he always adjusted his great weight as safely as possible by sitting flat on the bottom of the wagon box when offered a ride in a lumber wagon, which, by the way, was the only conveyance on wheels in which he would accept a ride.

In our home his regular seat was a home-made wooden chest built in Norway for my grandfather and by him brought to this country. It was made to withstand all the vicissitudes that such a chest might be subjected to, barring fire, for many generations. Its maker wrought well for his handiwork is now serving the fourth generation and is still as good as new. Even the name of the original owner, Nils Anderson Follinglo, painted in large green letters, is clearly legible on its front side. And, let me tell you further, the original key is still in use and resembles very much the key to the Bastille given to George Washington by Lafayette.

Seated on the old chest, Nagelsen's huge hulk would ever be rocking, elephant like, to and fro. An invitation to partake of a frugal meal was never received with regrets by our friend, but ere he was satisfied the hospitable hostess might be forced to the humiliation of expressing regret that her supply was exhausted.

During one of his visits to our home while sitting on his accustomed seat, rocking back and forth as was his wont, mother served him a luncheon consisting of coffee, bread, butter, and home-made cheese, the cheese being of a certain variety that many native Iowans would immediately have pronounced "rotten" and as quickly rejected. Nagelsen fell to with his usual appetite. Mother warned him to go a little easy on the cheese as it was fresh and had not been proven safe as yet. He responded by calling for more and asserted that she was the only woman in Iowa that could make real "pult ost" — a certain kind of strong Norwegian cheese. It was too bad for him and for mother too that he did not heed her warning. He became deathly sick, and she, greatly dismayed. Fortunately he soon recovered. The next day mother gave us boys the cheese to use as crow poison. It did not take effect on the crows, however. Perhaps their appetites were more moderate.

Nagelsen was interested in boys. If he met one on the road or on a prairie trail going to fetch home the cattle, or on the way to the swimming hole, or to the creek to fish, he must needs stop and talk to him and learn whose boy he was, where he was going, and if his good parents were well. This mammoth man, apparently leaning

backwards that he might not fall forward, standing in conversation with a barefoot boy, looked for all the world like a meeting of the fabled giant and brownie. The brownie never came to grief,



AN ORIGINAL DRAWING BY HELEN WALKER FROM DESCRIPTIONS

WHOSE BOY ARE YOU?

however, but always sped along on his way a little happier for a friendly pat on the head and some kind word to take home.

Nagelsen was not given to talking of himself. Rather, he studiously avoided doing so. However, during unguarded moments when mingling

with intimate associates, a word would slip which, together with other inadvertent statements, one now and then another over a period of many years, must serve as the warp of this deplorably incomplete biography.

Nagelsen was born in Denmark, presumably Copenhagen, about a hundred years ago. His father was a very wealthy man and his gifted son was slated to become a clergyman. With this in view he was sent to the best preparatory schools and finally to the university. Strained relations with authorities of the State Church developed and the intended career as a clergyman never materialized. Then the father died and an uncle was named as his guardian. Through the maladministration of the guardian, the young man lost his entire inheritance. Nagelsen did not resign himself to hopelessness but immediately sought employment of some kind. He succeeded in being appointed to work in the consular service in Christiania, now Oslo, Norway. Not long afterward he received the offer of a position more to his liking; namely, the editorship of one of the leading newspapers of Copenhagen. He promptly accepted the position and returned to his homeland.

As editor it appears that he was fearless for he dared to criticize a profligate king. As a conse-

quence he was promptly thrown into prison where he languished for some time. When he emerged therefrom, he was a physical and mental wreck, and his relatives, to rid themselves and country of a disgrace, sent him to America, where he quickly regained his strength of body and mind. This tragic experience in his fatherland, no doubt, explains why he did not seek to associate with his countrymen in America. One venerable old Dane told me: "Nagelsen did not like us Danes; I don't know why."

A corrupt royal court and a fearless subject in combat; result: the kingdom loses a splendidly equipped son and the untutored fishermen's sons from Norway, pioneering on the prairies of Iowa, gain the benefits of association with an educated man. Truly, "Ill blows the wind that profits nobody."

To illustrate further what Nagelsen's coming meant to dwellers on the Iowa frontier I append the following related by Chris. Johnson. Lately arrived from Denmark, the little boy Chris and his father happened in one day at Mr. Doolittle's, a new settler from the New England States. Just then Nagelsen was puffing his way up the hill to the Doolittle home. No sooner had the traveler entered than Mr. Doolittle eagerly asked to see his English newspaper. Nagelsen's re-

grets at not having one at hand were profuse but, said he, "I have my German paper, *Die Berliner Zeitung*." And he forthwith read English from the German paper to the amazement and delight of his listener. Then remembering the Danes present, who, as yet, understood very little English, he read the main items to them in their language from the same paper.

Nagelsen spoke the Danish, English, German, and French languages and was a Greek, Latin, and Hebrew scholar. Of his attainments otherwise we know only that he was at one time considered competent to edit a metropolitan newspaper. Such was one of the men at whose feet we had the privilege to sit many an evening in our pioneer home.

Now just one more incident to show what a prodigious memory this man had. Sometime during the eighties the Thorson brothers, John and Gustav, moved into our settlement. John was nearing middle age and wore a full beard. Gustav was younger and let a moustache suffice. They hailed from Christiania, Norway, originally. One day they dropped in at Gandrup's drug store while Nagelsen was there. They could not but notice the unusually large, distinguished looking man and were greatly astonished when he, the stranger, almost immediately addressed them say-

ing: "You must be sons of Johan and Anna Thorson in Christiania."

They answered, "We certainly are, but how do you know it?"

"Easily enough", said he, "I remember you from the time I was there some thirty years ago."

Nagelsen died quite suddenly in the summer of 1891. He was interred in the Palestine cemetery near Huxley, Iowa. The carpenter who built the casket is still living and says he made it eight feet long, three feet wide, and three feet deep. Our fathers who had so much to do in blazing the trail for us should be excused for neglecting to mark the grave before departing. But if we neglect it, how can posterity forgive us?

P. G. TJERNAGEL

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