The Danish-Language Press in America

By the time Sophus F. Neble, a journeyman printer from Stubbekøbing, Denmark, emigrated in 1883 to seek his fortune in the farmlands of the American Midwest, there was already a rudimentary Danish press tradition in the United States. But at that point in his life, Neble little cared or even knew much about it. He had thrown over his years of apprenticeship in the printing trade for a dream of becoming a successful American dairy farmer in order to win the hand of the young woman he loved.

Fate, however, had other plans, and Neble was to become one of the most influential Danish immigrant editors, whose newspaper, *Den Danske Pioneer* of Omaha, Nebraska, reached an estimated peak circulation of nearly 40,000 just prior to World War I.¹

The Danes who emigrated to America in the mid-nineteenth century took the first small steps toward establishing a press tradition. This stage in the pre-Civil War period was one in which Danes combined efforts with Norwegians and sometimes Swedes to publish small religious, political, or general newspapers for their countrymen in New York City, Chicago, or in the de-
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dveloping Scandinavian settlements of the Middle West, particularly in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

The founding of Den Danske Pioneer in 1872, in Omaha, marks the start of a second stage or “pioneer era” in Danish-American press history. This newspaper and those to follow were written in Danish, by Danes, for Danish Americans. During the two decades at the end of the nineteenth century, when Scandinavian immigration was at its high point, newspapers and magazines for Danes in the cities of New York, Chicago, Minneapolis, and San Francisco, and in many rural communities — especially in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, Iowa, and California — sprang up quickly. Many lasted only a few issues, but all that survived into the twentieth century and the two remaining today, Bien of San Francisco and Den Danske Pioneer, were founded in this era.

The Danish-language press passed through a third stage during the era of 1900 to World War I. This was a time of rising circulation for the dozen or so successful newspapers and a few magazines. It was also a time of increased concern over Danish-American identity and patriotism, sharpened by nativist pressures which increased during the war.

Following World War I, the press entered its last or “Americanization” stage. Old and admired editors died; newspapers merged or disappeared. Circulations dipped sharply after 1920 as production costs rose; quotas cut down the supply of new immigrants, and the Danish Americans began to be outnumbered by their second- and third-generation offspring. During this time the newspapers covered less world and national news and expressed concern for the group’s loss of the Danish language and for its contribution to American culture. The surviving papers became ethnic community publications uniting the Danish-American communities in a loosely
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knit communications network across the nation from lodge and church groups to other organizations and individuals interested in the Danish heritage.

The main thrust of the Danish experience in America has been toward rapid acculturation and assimilation. Loss of the mother tongue by the second generation, intermarriage into other groups, division within the Lutheran church, plus several other church affiliations that attracted Danish Americans, a tendency to spread out widely rather than to form compact settlements, and the small size of the group — all contributed to the disappearance of most Danes into mainstream American culture. Compared to nearly 1.3 million Swedes and some 850,000 Norwegians, the 360,000 Danes who immigrated to America in the 150 years after 1820 is a relatively small group.

Despite their numbers, the Danes had a vigorous immigrant press and started nearly a hundred publications in their language in America, including several religious papers and a few magazines. They served to inform the newcomers — as did all immigrant publications — about the new country, its life, laws, and customs; they also helped soften the cultural shock of uprooting by keeping alive the immigrants’ cultural ties to the homeland and to the Danish language. In 1910 almost a third of the Danish-born in America subscribed to one of the seven major Danish-American weekly papers, and by 1930 one fifth were still subscribers. Today the figure is only about a tenth of the Danish-born taking the two remaining papers with a combined circulation of about 7,000.\(^2\)

The evolutionary character of the Danish-American press can be seen in all the publications that have lasted over several decades, but the largest and most influential, *Den Danske Pioneer*, serves as an excellent example.

A veteran of Denmark’s war with Prussia in 1864, and
in America a mule driver, carpenter, house builder, grocer, and politician, Mark Hansen founded *Den Danske Pioneer* in the frontier town of Omaha, Nebraska, in 1872. It was to rival the newly emerged Republican paper for Danes, *Nebraska Skandinav*. Hansen bought out the opposition publication within a few months and went on to build a reputation for *Pioneer’en* — as it was most often called — as a scrappy, liberal weekly, sometimes tinged with socialism in its early days. This was a characterization that was based on Hansen’s printing articles by Danish socialists and the paper’s early admiration of Louis Pio, founder of the Socialist party in Denmark. Located as it was in the heart of the Midwest settlement of Danish farmers and craftsmen, the paper rapidly attracted readers, some of whom said they read it despite its support of the Democrats on the editorial page.

Sophus Neble came to work for Hansen after a brief and unsuccessful fling at farmwork in Wisconsin. His energy and business sense brought order and efficiency to what was a typical frontier print shop that was often at the mercy of itinerant printers with a love for liquor. In Mark Hansen, Neble found a friend and champion. Hansen pushed Neble into taking charge of the shop, financed his house and furnishings, and advanced him a ticket for his future bride. Then in 1887, Hansen sold Neble the entire operation, thus putting the young couple into debt for several years.

Although Neble was burdened with debts throughout the 1880s and 1890s, he, his wife, and later his brothers, devoted tireless energy and enthusiasm to the *Pioneer*. Circulation grew and so did the prestige of the editor. His voice was that of a trusted friend to many Danish newcomers. In his immigrant novel, *Take All to Nebraska*, Sophus K. Winther aptly caught the influence of Neble and many other pioneer immigrant editors. He
Marion Marzolf wrote of a character in his book: “Sophus Neble in The Danish Pioneer had written about a large Danish settlement at this town and had encouraged new settlers to come there. That was all Peter Grimson had to guide him.”

That guidance sustained the Grimson family on the long ocean and rail journey to Nebraska in America’s heartland. The same duality that marked the immigrants who came to settle and make their impact on this new land without losing their love and fondness for the land of their birth characterized the early Danish-American newspapers. Emphasis was divided between Danish and American news. Advertisements for Danish products and professional services ran next to those for American goods and services. Of special interest in each paper was the news of small Danish communities in the area — and elsewhere in the country.

During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, thirty-four Danish and twenty-four Dano-Norwegian newspapers were started, but only fifteen remained as the new century began. The Pioneer held its early leadership against competition from a string of papers in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Chicago, and Racine published by a Jutlander named Christian Rasmussen, and from the two Lutheran church-affiliated newspapers, Dannevirke and Danskeren, and from local papers such as Bien in San Francisco, Revyen in Chicago, and Nordlyset in New York City.

The urban Danish-American papers more quickly became community-oriented than did the rural papers. A survey of the contents of the papers in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco shows a strong community orientation by the turn of the century, whereas it was a post-World War I development for the rural press. Urbanites, of course, could obtain general news from the popular and cheap mass newspapers, whereas the
farmers were more isolated and needed their foreign-language publication longer as a primary source of information and news. In the “pioneer” era all these newspapers kept closely in touch with events in Denmark, but only the Pioneer was such a sharp critic of the conservative rule in late nineteenth-century Denmark that it got into trouble. From their vantage point in America, Hansen and Neble trumpeted the glory of individual liberty and freedom of speech which they enjoyed in America and saw being eroded by Prime Minister Estrup and his cabinet. When the Danish parliament was sent home in 1885 and Estrup began “provisional rule,” the Pioneer let fly with some of its most acid commentary on the issues of 1885 and 1886. As a result, the Danish government banned the Pioneer from Denmark, effective September, 1886. The ban lasted until 1898.

Editorials in the Pioneer lambasted the King and Estrup for destroying the old, liberal Danish Constitution of 1849 and for constructing defense works around the city of Copenhagen that the parliament had expressly forbidden. The Pioneer said Denmark was headed back to absolute monarchy. In a signed editorial in February, 1886, Neble suggested that the people could no longer avoid revolution; indeed, “the government had started it already.” The paper urged the Danes to bring justice back to their country. Apparently, articles similar to this got the paper banned, but the issues of the Pioneer containing them are not to be found today in the government files on the case.

After the ban, the Pioneer responded with an open letter to Estrup telling “Danes with courage in their hearts to rise up and fight like old Danish heroes for what was theirs” and offered the Pioneer’s help in bringing down this “whole terrible rubbish to its knees.”

Neble, who had officially become the Pioneer’s editor
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and publisher, after the paper had been banned, carried on the battle. He succeeded in smuggling his newspapers into Denmark inside envelopes, slipped into other newspapers, or by means of a variety of new nameplates. His Danish circulation actually grew during the 12-year ban, Neble said. When the furor died down, liberal government emerged, and Neble set about clearing the paper's name. With the aid of a lawyer in Denmark, the case was re-examined and the ban lifted. It had apparently been illegal, anyway, as the later interpretation was that only named issues should have been banned.¹³ In the meantime a new press law had been introduced.

During the period of strife with Denmark, two common themes emerged in Neble's editorials: American freedom and the dual love of Danish Americans for their former and present homelands.

"We have taken part in the political movement [in Denmark] with all the eagerness that benefits sons of a common mother," Neble wrote. "We tried to make it clear to our countrymen here what the political strife in the fatherland is all about, with the result that we have claimed that the Danish government was an enemy of the people. In asserting this truth, we have been suppressed . . . silenced . . . banned . . . but Danes in America who have been scorned by some of the 'greats' in Denmark and labeled escaped criminals and adventurers are in reality some of Denmark's finest, some of whom were driven away to free and happy societies because Denmark denied that to them. Now, they watch in sorrow and fear the goings on at home and the abridgment of free speech in Denmark," and prize all the more highly the freedom of speech in America.¹⁴

The Pioneer, although banned, continued to cover Danish affairs, and Neble himself clipped items from newspapers for inclusion in his Denmark column. A lockout of union laborers from Danish factories in 1899 was a story that especially interested the Pioneer editor.
Readers raised over $9,000 to send to families that were out of work for about four months. Neble published all the names and contributions and often pointed out the sacrifices made by ordinary Danish Americans of little income in order to send a quarter or fifty cents to help out.15

World affairs and American news shared the Pioneer's front page in the 1890s and news from the homeland was added during World War I.16 Editorials, however, always emphasized American and world politics. Only occasionally did they deal with Danish or Danish-American topics in the 1890s or thereafter.17 Politically the Pioneer backed William Jennings Bryan and Woodrow Wilson and criticized McKinley and Republican big business generally. By the end of the century, the paper contained eight pages each week; the front page usually filled five to six columns of American news and two to three columns of world news. Items from Denmark filled a page inside and editorials covered four to five columns. Danish-American settlement news sent in by correspondents occupied the second page. The remainder of the paper carried additional foreign news, letters, obituaries, local news, and a continued story. Advertising required only about 18 percent of the total space; about half of the ads were for Danish or Danish-American goods and services.18

The Pioneer secured a new press — a demonstration model — at the Chicago Exposition in 1893, and Neble kept two linotypes and a staff of ten men busy thereafter.19 Circulation reached about 20,000 by the end of the century; three fourths of the papers went to farmers. Neble claimed circulation in every state and territory, and Chicago was its largest urban delivery area.20

The newspaper considered itself a friend of the common man, and during the 1894 drought collected enough money to sustain 300 Danish families in Nebraska, Kan-
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sas, Colorado, and South Dakota. Its columns offered advice to newcomers on housing, land, and politics. Defending America and Danish Americans was a recurrent theme in the Pioneer. Danish newspapers and visitors still occasionally referred to emigrants as uncultivated cast-offs and characterized America as the place for them. Neble’s reply was that Danes should not send their “spoiled sons expecting to get rich overnight to America, but rather send the hard-working men who could achieve what they never could in Denmark.” In America a farm worker could earn $25 a month, he said, whether he spoke English or not. In a few years he would be able to rent or buy his own farm. Danes owned thousands of acres of well-cultivated land, he declared, and nine out of ten of them had been poor farm workers in Denmark, where a decade of work would still have given them nothing to show for it.

Neble found a “very freedom in the air one breathes” in America and frequently commented on this condition and on the ability and energy of Americans, including immigrants. In the same editorials, he often indulged in a sentimental rush of emotion for the old homeland. Danes “did not forget their old land, come what may,” he said, even though America had “given us the bread and freedom that our fatherland denied us.” Two world wars gave Danish Americans the opportunity to show how accurately Neble had characterized them. Their support with funds and political influence on the Slesvig question and during the German occupation of Denmark is well known.

The integrity and personal appeal of an editor like Sophus Neble attracted many readers to his paper and made it great. When Henrik Cavling, correspondent and later editor of Politiken in Copenhagen, toured America in 1895, he praised the Pioneer especially and remarked that the time was long past “when one can look down on these Danish-American papers and their editors who ac-
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complish their civilizing work under difficult conditions."

During the early years of the twentieth century, in the third or hyphenated phase, Neble and other immigrant leaders began to feel more confident about their own ethnic identity and encouraged cultural exchange between Denmark and America. Established Danish-American papers were doing well in this period, but it was not a good time to begin a new publication. Of the nine Danish-American newspapers founded during the first two decades of the century, most died within a year. Older papers were thriving. The Pioneer led with a circulation of 26,323 in 1901; this rose to 39,913 in 1914. Rasmussen’s combined papers, Ugebladet and its regional editions, claimed a circulation of 22,500. The others ranged from 3,000 to 5,000. Most of the papers cost $1 or $1.50 a year for eight pages, but the Pioneer charged $2.25 for a 12-page edition as of 1903.

In 1903 the Pioneer moved into its own building. It took sixteen employes to get out the paper and handle job printing. Neble now had time for frequent hunting trips and occasional visits to Denmark. He concentrated on building cultural links between Denmark and America, and his editor took over writing the editorials. Coverage of Danish-American community affairs increased and Danish news nudged out United States news. American politics, on the other hand, still dominated the editorial columns.

Readers occasionally suggested that the paper would serve Danes better if it became impartial politically and just worked to further Danish-American interests. Neble vowed to keep the paper free and to fight for “right and truth,” but he believed in partisan support, based on picking the man and the issues. He would not let his paper bow and scrape before politicians, would fight against block voting by foreigners, and would lend his support to the candidates, usually Democratic, who
Marion Marzolf came closest to his views. This, he believed, served the readers better than a bland, so-called nonpartisan paper. The Pioneer "had conviction of truth and right" behind its words.\textsuperscript{31}

Cultural exchange between Denmark and America grew and was warmly endorsed by Neble. The Danish-American Association was founded in 1905 and promoted speakers, exhibitions, and travel excursions. A group raised funds for a statue of King Christian IX; another collected money to purchase heath land in Jutland, which became Rebild National Park in 1912, dedicated to the honor of Danish-American immigrants. Danes began to look back over their lives and record their cultural group experiences in America and their contributions to American life. Scandinavians founded historical associations and archives. Despite all this cross-cultural sentiment, the Danish Americans were still on the defensive. One visitor from the homeland set off quite a revealing explosion when he reported in Denmark in 1915 that the Danes in America "had lost their culture, were unable to adjust to American society, and longed for Denmark all the time."\textsuperscript{32}

Neble devoted two issues of his paper to the Danish-American response to a survey of some fifty representative immigrants. All but two of those responding disagreed with the Danish critic. "We don’t love Denmark less, but America more," was a common refrain. "We will not forget Denmark . . . but our longing is that of a longing for childhood. . . . Even Danes in Denmark must experience that." As one put it, we could "hardly miss a culture most of us never had in Denmark. . . . America had given them their first understanding of being free, of having independence and freedom." If the Danish critic was right, why, they asked, "weren’t they all flooding back to Denmark?"\textsuperscript{33}

World War I heightened the immigrants’ attention to Europe, and Danish Americans were concerned about
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relatives and friends and the future of the Slesvig-Holstein borderlands. A strong anti-Prussian attitude pervaded many of the editorials in Danish-American papers during the war. On the other hand, the editors defended the value of all immigrant Americans in creating a prosperous nation, and criticized new laws and talk of prohibiting foreign-language use in public places and literacy tests designed to “shut out fine immigrants who had no chance to learn to read in their own countries.”

Although Neble was strongly opposed to any pro-German propaganda and criticized any foreign-language papers that engaged in it, he regarded suppression of the languages and licensing of the foreign-language press a serious threat to freedom and an allegation of disloyalty by virtue of foreign birth.

Although the first-generation Danish Americans continued to cherish both their motherland and America, many agreed with Neble in 1918 when he said that “it is impossible to keep the parents’ speech as the primary language beyond the first generation. For our children, English is their native speech.” Many parents actively encouraged their children to learn English and tried to share some of their feelings of affection for Denmark and its history at the same time. This theme was to become increasingly strong in the postwar years as the Danish-American press entered its fourth and last “Americanization” stage.

The 1920s were years of crisis for many Danish-American publications. Costs rose rapidly; circulation declined, as did advertising. Membership in Danish organizations and increased use of English in the churches and publications indicated that Danes were rapidly becoming assimilated. Anxiety over one’s allegiance to America undoubtedly sped up the process as people stopped speaking Danish, because any foreign language was made to seem unpatriotic. After the 1921 and 1924 Quota Acts had passed, 5,970 Danes could be admitted
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per year. As the older generation died, the number of the Danish-born in America shrank from 189,154 in the 1920 census count to 122,180 in 1940 and to 79,619 in 1960.38

“The foreign-language press will exist as long as there are people in America who can read another language more readily than English,” Neble observed. He believed that the second generation would learn English, as would the adopted citizens, and in time most of them would switch to the English-language press. Papers like his would not go on indefinitely.39 To him this trend was a sign of progress, a natural evolution. By 1932, four of the leading Danish-American editors, including Sophus Neble and Christian Rasmussen, had died and their papers were to meet various fates.

In the 1920s, rural isolation began to break down with the introduction of the radio, the automobile, and expanded daily RFD postal service that brought the nearby town’s daily newspaper to the farms. Rural weeklies and foreign-language newspapers both minimized general and emphasized local news in an attempt to serve and hold their readers.40 New editors took over the old Danish-American papers, and they were often motivated by a strong desire to preserve the remaining Danish culture in America. They attempted to attract younger readers with columns in English. Except for the period of World War II, when the papers were enthusiastically received because they carried news of occupied Denmark that did not find its way into the American press, the Danish-American newspapers after 1930 reflect a certain sadness and longing for days that would never return. The Grundtvigians in the audience continued to champion the value of the Danish language and heritage in the group life of Danish Americans. Danes in Chicago and Minneapolis experienced a sense of loss as their community dispersed to the suburbs and other ethnic groups took over long-familiar businesses and housing.
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There were six Danish-American publications in the 1950s, and all too frequently their mail contained letters that said: "Father (or mother) died and no one here can read the paper." 41

After World War II and the recovery years, travel ads and tourist photos appeared in Den Danske Pioneer, but the main focus of the paper was its many columns of social news from the Danish-American settlements. The Neble family decided to close the paper in 1958, but a group of Chicago Danes decided to rescue it and raised the money to buy and move it to Elmwood Park, Illinois. The latest step in the Pioneer's evolution was to make it into a modern tabloid with increased advertising columns and higher subscription rates to cover still-rising printing costs. In 1972 the paper celebrated its hundredth birthday with a lavish centennial edition, a testimonial to the hardiness of ethnicity in America. The paper still circulates to some 4,000 subscribers, who apparently enjoy this 16-page bi-weekly containing news about their activities in church, lodges, and general social life. It is essentially American with an ethnic flavor.

The publisher, Hjalmar Bertelsen, scorned talk in 1969 of the death of the Danish press in America, saying: "Such predictions have been made frequently in the past, but the Danish-American press endures. Bien in San Francisco, with some 3,000 subscribers, and the Pioneer will live, he said, as long as 'Danes' want to read about their affairs. They will pay the increasing prices we have to charge for subscriptions. If not, then we must give up." 42 But early in 1974, in an unusual editorial, Bertelsen asked his readers what the fate of the Pioneer would be. How should it work to attract more readers as printing and postage costs rise? Should there be more columns in English?43 A new debate apparently was beginning in the Pioneer's 102nd year.

The Danish-language press in America has developed
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along with its readers, shifting emphasis from the strong political and religious interests of individual editors in the late nineteenth century to the friendly, harmonious community spirit that serves an audience predominantly American, with just a degree of Danish ethnic affiliation and identity. So long as these papers exist, they announce to the country that Danes in America have not quite yet disappeared without a trace.

NOTES

1 The circulation figures are from N. W. Ayre's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals for the years mentioned.
2 Figures for the foreign-born are taken from the U.S. census reports for 1910–1960.
3 "50 år," in Den Danske Pioneer, December 14, 1922.
6 Sophus K. Winther, Take All to Nebraska, 8 (New York, 1936).
7 Figures compiled by the author.
9 The ban was published in Ugeskrift for retsvæsnet, 1214–1215 (Copenhagen, 1898). Lifting of the ban was noted by Den Danske Pioneer, December 1, 1898. It was also officially published in Official meddelser fra general direktoratet for postvæsnet, 35 (Copenhagen, November 11, 1898).
10 "The Cup Is Full, Part 2," an editorial from Den Danske Pioneer, February 25, 1886, located in the Copenhagen archives of the police department as No. 1540.
11 Correspondence and records covering the surveillance and action against Den Danske Pioneer were located by the author in the files of the National Archives of Denmark, in the records of the ministry of justice, 1 kontor, and in the Copenhagen Landsarkiv, police director's files. For complete coverage, see the author's doctoral dissertation, 58–73.
12 "Open Letter from the Pioneer to Estrup," November 6, 1886, filed in the records of the minister of justice, No. 1529.
13 The Danish ministry of justice, in reviewing the case in 1898, decided that the post office had actually exceeded its authority in enforcing the ban against succeeding issues of the Pioneer. Only the ban on the specific issues named in the case had been confirmed by the court. The provisional law of press responsibility had gone out of force on April 3, 1894; the ban was no longer in effect. See records of the minister of justice, No. 1529.
14 "Open letter."
15 From the archives of the Social Democratic party in Copenhagen.
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18 *Den Danske Pioneer*, April 2, 1896.
19 Interview with E. Vollman, June 20, 1971, Omaha, Nebraska.
22 *Den Danske Pioneer*, May 9, 1901.
23 *Den Danske Pioneer*, May 9, 1901.
24 *Den Danske Pioneer*, May 9, 1901.
26 Henrik Cavling, in *Politiken* (Copenhagen), August 17, 1895.
27 Figures compiled by the author.
28 N. W. Ayre, *Directory of Newspapers*.
29 Interview with D. Vollman.
30 Figures compiled by the author.
31 *Den Danske Pioneer*, November 27, 1900.
32 *Den Danske Pioneer*, April 1, 1915.
33 *Den Danske Pioneer*, April 1, 1915.
35 *Den Danske Pioneer*, June 13, 1918.
36 *Den Danske Pioneer*, October 10, 1918.
37 *Den Danske Pioneer*, December 24, 1922.
38 Compiled from census reports.
39 *Den Danske Pioneer*, February 16, 1922.
41 Berlingske Tidende Billedtjeneste, undated clipping in Neble family papers, probably from 1919 or 1920.
42 Quoted in *Berlingske Tidende*, May 9, 1969.