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MORMON MISSIONARIES

and Minnesota SCANDINAVIANS

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MINNESOTANS of today are familiar with the young Mormon missionaries who walk about our streets in pairs, engaging people in conversation and patiently explaining the tenets of their religion. Smartly dressed—commonly in matching suits and hats—and seemingly never discouraged, they go from house to house, from town to town, on mission in a service that they accept as part of the demands of their church, which recognizes no priesthood apart from its members. To the historian of nineteenth-century America, these missionaries, speaking excellent English and in their every gesture revealing an easy identification with American life, contrast strikingly with their predecessors of an earlier date—men whose appearance and actions revealed both their poverty and sense of insecurity, and whose English, when they spoke it, was marked by the accents and intonations of the Scandinavian countries.

The missionaries of the 1870s and 1880s, for example, were chosen because of the Mormon interest in emigrants from the northern lands of Europe and because they were capable of meeting the common folk of Minnesota. In addition to knowing the Scandinavian languages, they were familiar with English after having lived for a number of years in Utah. Of humble origin,

they could understand and find common ground with people who enjoyed few of the goods of this world. On the other hand, they were frequently ill-informed about American life—in which they seem oddly out of place—and apparently they were not very successful in making converts, except among persons who had been previously won over to Mormonism or had been strongly influenced by it in the homeland. Their experiences, hurriedly recounted in letters to friends and editors in Zion, tell a story of courage and frustration that is often touching, reveal the mentality of the immigrant missionary, and offer a distinctly proletarian view of Minnesota at a time when the state was firmly shaping its life and institutions from its American and European resources.

MORMON evangelists began at an early date to work among the Scandinavian immigrants settling in the Upper Midwest. The chaotic social and religious conditions of the region in the 1830s and 1840s had guaranteed the proselytizers a measure of success, especially in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. When the temple at Nauvoo was erected, Scandinavians aided notably in its construction, and when the original Mormon company crossed the

plains and mountains on their way to the Great Salt Lake in 1847, a Dane, a Swede, and a Norwegian were counted in its train.¹

After 1847, new adherents to the religion of the Latter-day Saints came largely from abroad, and a large percentage of these were the fruits of the British and Scandinavian missions. The British mission, started in 1830, flourished even before the great trek westward to Utah, but its Scandinavian counterpart was the outgrowth of a conference of the Saints held in Salt Lake City in October, 1849, when it was decided that missionaries should be sent to England, France, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, and the Society Islands.

The Scandinavian mission was founded at Copenhagen in the summer of 1850, and its activities quickly extended over all of Denmark, into southern Sweden and Norway, and eventually to Finland, Iceland, and the northern part of the Scandinavian Peninsula. Direct migration to Utah, encouraged and guided by church officials, began in 1852 and took a total of something over thirty thousand Scandinavians to Utah by the turn of the century. Mormon writers refer on various occasions to Utah's "Anglo-Scandinavian" population of the nineteenth century, and Danish-language Mormon newspapers frequently estimated the state's Scandinavian population at forty per cent.²

It was inevitable that so large a group of Scandinavians, playing a vital part in the building of Mormon's "kingdom"—a unique religious and social experiment that drew no distinction between temporal and spiritual matters—would in time look to their countrymen who had settled in the Middle West as likely recruits to Mormonism. In doing so, they were motivated as a covenant folk whose thoughts were expressed in Old Testament phrases and whose zeal was fired by visions of eternity. Simple people who accepted the teachings of their new church with a literalism that is striking today, the missionaries who jour-

neyed eastward to Minnesota and Nebraska carried with them a deep sense of responsibility for their gentile countrymen in America, and gave expression to a specie of Scandinavianism that was partly the product of developments in Europe and partly a policy agreed upon by their religious leaders.

THE WORK of Lutheran and other pastors after 1850 among the Scandinavians who had settled in Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota substantially reduced the religious anarchy that had given Mormonism an early advantage among the immigrants. Furthermore, the crystallizing of institutions, as Midwestern society slowly matured, built strong defenses against the sects generally. As a consequence, missionary work met with strong resistance and was, on the whole, ineffectual in what is now called the Upper Midwest. Although speaking of Minnesota in particular, *Bikuben* ("The Beehive"), the leading Danish-Norwegian newspaper published in Salt Lake City, might have been describing the whole region in 1877 when it included this statement: "There people know little about Mormonism except many preacher and newspaper lies; it is a hard and barren field."³

Nevertheless, Scandinavian Mormon missionaries were tireless in the struggle to make converts among their countrymen in

¹ For the story of early Mormon conquests among the Scandinavians in America, see William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion; the Mormon Migration from Scandinavia*, 7-13 (Minneapolis, 1957); Mulder, "Norwegian Forerunners among the Early Mormons," in *Norwegian-American Studies and Records*, 19:46-61 (Northfield, 1956); and Kenneth O. Bjork, *West of the Great Divide; Norwegian Migration to the Pacific Coast, 1847-1893*, 74-134 (Northfield, 1958).

² On the Scandinavian mission and the early life of immigrants in Utah, see Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 18-273, and Bjork, *West of the Great Divide*, 75-134, 223-273.

³ *Bikuben*, August 2, 1877. A complete file of this paper, which began publication in 1876, is in the historian's office of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

All passages quoted from Scandinavian-language sources have been translated by the author. *Ed.*

287

continued to return to the Scandinavian communities of the Midwest. As the immigrants moved into Minnesota in ever-increasing numbers, they tended to shift their emphasis to that state. August Svendsen and Nils Hendriksen were in Minnesota in 1876, and B. P. Wulffenstein was active in Isanti and Anoka counties the following summer. Wulffenstein, in a letter to *Bikuben*, wrote that the pastors of the traditional churches visited his meetings, were given an opportunity to speak, but "modestly excused themselves." According to him, they conceded that the Mormons "were right if they would leave off talking about new prophets and celestial marriage." At the time of writing, Wulffenstein had walked forty-one hundred miles in Minnesota, had conducted three hundred meetings, and had admitted forty adults and thirty children into the Mormon community. Seven grown persons and eight children had recently emigrated to Zion. Speaking also of the activities of Svendsen and Hendriksen, Wulffenstein summed up the work accomplished in 1877 in these words: "Things go well with us and we rejoice in our mission," but economically times were bad. At a later date he wrote that he was returning to Utah, by way of Minneapolis, traveling with a company of emigrants.⁵

Hendriksen was perhaps typical of the Mormon missionaries to Minnesota. "It is now seven and a half months," he wrote on October 6, 1877, "since I left Salt Lake City. For five and a half months I wandered about in Minnesota in the company of A. Svendsen of Spanish Fork, Utah. Together we covered eighteen hundred miles on foot, held thirty-eight gatherings, and baptized a few persons. We also discovered that the so-called Christians who live there are not very liberal. We had to suffer many insults and persecutions; we were also very hungry at times. Since Brother Svendsen returned home, two months ago, I have traveled around alone, have conducted some meetings, and baptized five persons; the

prospects for future work in Minnesota are now better."⁶

Elder A. E. Anderson, who was in Minnesota on a mission in 1878, also traveled extensively and conducted many meetings, but apparently baptized very few. He believed, however, that he had made many friends and hoped that the fruits of his labor might be harvested at a later date. His work was carried on, after his departure, by C. S. Winge and John Larsen. C. N. Lund, together with S. P. Henrichsen, went to Minnesota in May, 1879, to work in Brown and surrounding counties. "Our meetings," Lund wrote from Linden in October, "have generally been well attended and no disturbance has ever taken place. I can say that God has blessed my work, so it has not been entirely fruitless. Many have been aroused to seek after truth, and a few have entered into a covenant with the Lord through baptism. . . . There are several good and loyal Saints here who have been in the church several years but who have not yet migrated because they have not been able to dispose of their property."

Lund described the people of Minnesota as "a blending of many nations. A large part of Scandinavia's enterprising sons have found a home here. There are also many Germans with whom unfortunately I am unable to talk in their own language, and the majority of them understand English poorly. With respect to religious confessions, I can perhaps say with truth that they are legion . . . and many change affiliations from time to time. The pastors zealously watch over the people and spare no pains in stirring them up against us, but thus far the Lord has protected us against their malice." Lund expected several new missionaries to arrive during the winter. He proposed that Scandinavians having relatives or friends in Minnesota should send their names and addresses to him; he would

⁵ *Bikuben*, June 15, August 2, 23, October 25, 1877.

⁶ *Bikuben*, October 11, 1877.

"try to visit them if they are not altogether too far away."⁷

Winge testified that "the great majority" of the Scandinavians in Minnesota were "obstinately opposed to the Gospel," and one must conclude that he had little success among them. At the little town of Clitherall in Otter Tail County, he found a community of defected Mormons who had been led out of the church at the time of Joseph Smith's death by a man named Alpheus Cutler. The villagers, most of whom had relatives in Utah, were headed by a bishop, a president, and a patriarch. They had a meetinghouse, lived together co-operatively in a "united order," and believed that Cutler, not Brigham Young, rightly succeeded Joseph Smith.⁸

At times the Mormon missionaries met firm opposition from local authorities in Minnesota. At Orlando in Sherburne County, officials in 1880 called off a meeting scheduled to be held in a school building; as a result, three missionaries were forced to conduct services under the open sky. Nevertheless, Elder Jens Frantzen, returning to Utah in 1882 after a year in Minnesota, reported that he had been happy in his work there and had baptized a total of thirty persons; about an equal number, he said, had migrated to Utah during the year. Despite much unpleasantness, Frantzen thought Minnesota offered good prospects for future years. "The missionaries," he wrote, "have experienced many trials, but have also found many honorable, pious, and hospitable people."⁹

Missionary activity of the 1870s in the Middle West was by no means limited to



C. S. WINGE, a *Mormon missionary*

Wisconsin and Minnesota. Numerous letters appearing in *Bikuben* described the experiences of Mormons in Nebraska and Iowa, especially along the overland route of travel to Zion; at many points along the trail lived Saints, apostates, and partially indoctrinated Scandinavians—the droppings or backwash of a migration that saw a heavy percentage of deserters. When F. F. Hintze of Big Cottonwood, Utah, was sent on a mission to Nebraska and Iowa in 1877 and 1878, he was able to organize a new conference there.¹⁰

Hintze, a Dane, left an interesting record of the Nebraska mission. "We found here," he wrote in 1878, "a people that in a religious sense is enormously deviationist, and often met persons who were once members of our church but who at one time or another left the path of truth and embraced one or another of the apostate 'isms,' of which one finds an oversupply in the vicinity of Omaha and Council Bluffs. Some of these renegades have lulled themselves into a kind of sleep, from which it is to be hoped some will awaken and still seek salvation in Ephraim's mountains." During the meetings conducted by Hintze and his co-workers, the apostates refrained from

⁷ *Bikuben*, October 3, 1878, November 6, 1879.

⁸ *Morgenstjernen* (Salt Lake City), 4:129-141 (September, 1885). This biographical-historical Mormon publication is a valuable record of missionary activity. A complete file is in the historian's office, Salt Lake City. See also Alta Kimber, "The Coming of the Latter Day Saints to Otter Tail County," in *Minnesota History*, 13:385-394 (December, 1932).

⁹ *Bikuben*, March 25, 1880, June 8, 1882.

¹⁰ *Scandinavian Jubilee Album, 1850-1900*, 120 (Salt Lake City, 1900).

disorderly behavior, but “their distortions and perversions of the truth were naturally not pleasant to listen to.” Hintze wrote at considerable length about the “heresies” of the Seventh Day Adventists, Kenanites, Josephites, and Campbellites, all of whom apparently had made gains among former Scandinavian Mormons. He had talked with Joseph Smith the Younger, president of the Josephites, who in the presence of others “admitted that the father had never ordained him as his successor.”¹¹

Other missionaries followed in Hintze’s footsteps. They told people that they were God’s servants, ordained by apostles and sent out to bring salvation and new life to fallen mankind. They met opposition but also “good and sincere people almost everywhere.” Mads Jørgensen was typical. He moved on into Iowa from Omaha, found Scandinavians there who had once been Mormons and, in a few instances, missionaries. Some of the apostates had joined the “sects”; others, in a doubting mood, were uncertain about their faith; a few wished to return or to go on to Utah. He also found a number of emigrants who, though they had once planned to travel to Zion, had stopped off in Iowa for one reason or another and were still working there at a variety of occupations. Jørgensen reported a strange uneasiness—not unlike that of Europe in the sixteenth century—among the people he had met, and fear of a great misfortune to come.¹²

MEANWHILE, in August, 1880, Mads Andersen wrote from Monticello, a little town on the Mississippi River in Wright County, that he had then been in Minnesota for four months, had made many house calls, and had held meetings in schoolhouses and other buildings made available to him and his companion from Utah. They had succeeded in breaking down considerable anti-Mormon prejudice, he reported, had exposed many lies against the Saints as a people, and had made many friends. In Minnesota he had met relatives

of persons living in Utah, and he therefore suggested to *Bikuben’s* readers that they write letters as a means of winning converts in the Midwest.¹³

Andersen and a co-worker traveled about Minnesota during 1881 and 1882, apparently making special efforts to visit Danish settlements. Near Colfax they met the stern resistance of a Lutheran clergyman, but they apparently enjoyed some measure of success at Burbank, Roseville, and New London, where special interest was shown in polygamy and where a small number of Latter-day Saints already resided.¹⁴

It would seem almost inevitable that Minneapolis should have become the center of Mormon activity in Minnesota. In September, 1883, twelve missionaries from Utah held a conference there, after first announcing the meeting by means of handbills and advertisements in the newspapers. According to C. M. Nielsen, a few of the city’s leading men “warned us against holding meetings and preaching our doctrines in the city. They said that we would certainly be bombarded with raw eggs and perhaps even be hanged from the Minneapolis bridge. One person let us understand that he was willing to be of assistance in this, despite the fact that he professed to be a Christian.”

Nevertheless, the missionaries gave the city an opportunity to “hear the message that God has sent us out to proclaim before He passes judgment on the ungodly.” The people of Minneapolis in general were “very bitter against” the missionaries, and there were “very few” who visited the public meetings. “I observe from time to time,” Nielsen writes, “that the baseless lies that originate with the *Salt Lake Tribune* are translated and reprinted in the Scandinavian papers here in the States; and they do much to incite the people against us.” Why, he asked, didn’t editors take their

¹¹ *Bikuben*, June 27, 1878.

¹² *Bikuben*, September 5, October 24, 1878.

¹³ *Bikuben*, August 19, 1880.

¹⁴ *Bikuben*, January 19, 1882.

stories from *Bikuben*? From Minneapolis the elders went in pairs to their various fields of work. They took comfort in the fact that between May and September they had baptized ten persons and were interesting others in preparation for church membership. Furthermore, they were "full of life and spirit" in spite of opposition.¹⁵

On December 1 and 2, 1883, the missionaries gathered in conference at Monticello, where the atmosphere apparently was friendlier than in Minneapolis; seventeen elders were present to report on their mission activities. They spoke of walking hundreds of miles out in Dakota Territory during the year, but of baptizing only two people there, of being met by "frightened pastors" armed with *huspostiler* (family devotional books) to be used against the "false prophets," of persons in Minnesota so hostile that it was "often difficult to obtain lodging for the night, because we travel without purse and preach the Gospel without pay," and of missionaries returning to Utah after serving as many as

twenty months without witnessing any result of their labors.¹⁶

It is clear from the reports of another meeting held at Monticello, in April, 1884, that the most successful mission field in the Minnesota conference was actually in the area of La Crosse, Wisconsin, and that the greatest gains in that region were being made by Nielsen, apparently the only elder from Utah working in Wisconsin in 1884. Nielsen, a Norwegian, had been called to go to Wisconsin during the December, 1883, conference in Monticello. He stopped off in Minneapolis en route and visited with members of a family who had been converted in Sweden. In La Crosse he met a Norwegian who had become a Mormon fifteen years earlier in the homeland. Thus encouraged, Nielsen began holding a series of meetings in La Crosse that resulted in bitter opposition as well as a number of baptisms. He discovered that some of the Scandinavians in the area read a Methodist newspaper, *Den christelige talsmand* ("The Christian Advocate"), and thus were familiar with what the paper called the "God of the Mormons."

To the local pastors, Nielsen was a "wolf

¹⁵ *Bikuben*, September 20, 1883.

¹⁶ *Bikuben*, December 13, 1883.

STREET scene in Monticello about 1870



from Utah," and they warned their flocks to stay away from him. Many, however, were overcome by curiosity and went to hear him. "Now," Nielsen reported, "they have changed the name from wolf to prophet." He conducted meetings in English as well as in Norwegian and was optimistic concerning the future of his mission despite the opposition to his work. The La Crosse Norwegian newspaper, *Fædrelandet og emigranten*, spoke of Nielsen as a "gifted man and very industrious, so there is fear that he will be successful in making several conversions. There is considerable commotion in town these days over the matter, and it is not unlikely that the missionary will be forced to leave."

Nielsen's health and courage remained strong after fifteen months in the mission field. Letters from people in Utah, he said, gave him names and addresses of friends and relatives in Wisconsin. The *Deseret News* was a useful tool in his work among English-speaking people, and *Bikuben* was invaluable in dealing with the Scandinavians. But he was forced to conclude: "It is a terrible thing to be a Mormon elder here in the States. In most places doors are locked on us, as soon as people hear that we are elders from Utah. Threats and insults are hurled at us and we must stop at from five to ten houses before we are invited to spend the night." Being pelted with rotten eggs and exposed to physical injury were risks that were part of the job they had assumed. As for the pastors, one had recently told him that Mormons were unwelcome only because of their belief in polygamy. What nonsense, was Nielsen's reply; the Mormons were hounded long before plural marriage was introduced.¹⁷

Meanwhile others, among them N. L. Lund, went to the Midwest in 1884. For him, Minnesota was the first mission field. With a companion he was sent to Dakota, where he had meager results. The Dakota weather being such that the missionaries were unable to travel on foot over the prairie, they returned to Minnesota, at-

tended the conference at Monticello on December 1 and 2, and later worked in Meeker, Blue Earth, Brown, Chippewa, and other Minnesota counties. Lund used strong words in describing the newspapers of Minnesota, but saved his choicest ammunition for *Den christelige talsmand* and Martinus Nelson, a Methodist missionary in Utah—both "apparently zealous in doing the work of their father (the Devil)." He had also found many "good people" in Minnesota, "a large number of whom are Scandinavians, mostly Norwegians." He added that "Many of them became in America what we call freethinkers, and this is not surprising."¹⁸

A SMALL STREAM of Mormon missionaries went to Minnesota in the 1880s and, after completing their labors, returned to their homes in Utah. The experiences in the field were as varied as the missionaries, but most of them, like Mads Andersen on his second mission in 1884, hoped that persons showing a friendly attitude toward the Saints would take the final step and be converted; they noted, too, an increasingly callous spirit among some of the people they met in their travels. Andersen thought it a downright shame that young missionaries of Scandinavian descent often were unable to speak the language of their parents and thus were handicapped in Minnesota.¹⁹

The Minnesota conference met in convention at Rockford on October 11 and 12, 1884, elected Andersen its president, and announced that since the previous conference thirty-nine persons in the Minnesota area had been won over to the Mormon faith. It was noted, too, that during the same period a total of twenty had migrated to Utah from the Upper Midwest. After being in Minnesota for a period of eighteen months, Andersen reported that during this time eighty-five converts had been baptized by the Mormons.²⁰

¹⁷ *Bikuben*, February 7, March 13, July 3, 1884.

¹⁸ *Bikuben*, June 26, 1884.

¹⁹ *Bikuben*, September 4, 1884.

An interesting insight into how missionaries got in touch with potential converts among the immigrant Scandinavians can be gleaned from the columns of *Bikuben*. An example is to be found in an article signed by N. Henriksen, a Norwegian living in Utah, who explained in 1884 that seven years earlier he and two youthful friends, obviously influenced by Mormon teachings in the homeland, had been living together in Wisconsin. In the evening hours they had studied the Bible and read the religious literature they had brought with them from Europe. "Often we were drawn into debate with the numerous Methodists and Lutherans among whom we lived," Henriksen wrote, "but we defeated them all and finally no one dared to engage us. I was asked if I really was a Mormon, to which I answered that I had had no opportunity to be one yet, but that I was determined to go to Utah."

Henriksen had indeed gone to Utah and was glad of the change. Some weeks before writing, he had received a letter from the older of his two friends, brothers who in the meantime had moved to Chippewa County in Minnesota. Henriksen reported that "Both say they have an unshakable belief in Mormonism, as a result of which they have met unfriendliness from some of their neighbors and must often engage them in spiritual battle, but they always win the victory." The younger of the brothers, R. V. Johnsen, decided to throw in his lot with the Saints in Utah, and the older, Paul A. Johnsen, intended to go too, but he had to wait until he could sell the farm on which they were living. In the meantime

he was eager to meet an elder on mission. Shortly a letter from Paul posted at Hagan, Chippewa County, appeared in *Bikuben*. He reported that he had seen Henriksen's article and had received a letter from Nielsen, at La Crosse, who would be a welcome visitor on his farm.²¹

From time to time and in almost routine fashion Mormon missionaries told of miracles that took place in the course of their labors. Typical is the experience recounted by F. F. Hintze who addressed a letter to his parents from Sioux City, Iowa, in February, 1880. He felt blessed of God, he said, not so much because he had recently baptized four persons in that city, but because of the effect of baptism on one of these, a man whom he had found lying in bed sick with rheumatism and barely able to get on his feet. Hintze had taken this man to the river (presumably the Missouri), had cut a hole in the foot-thick ice, and had then immersed him in the frigid water. The sick man improved immediately; next day he walked without a cane, and soon appeared to be in excellent health. Shortly thereafter the man's wife and another woman were baptized. The wife, whose health also had been poor, appeared strong after emerging from the water, and that night she slept soundly. Commenting on the miracles, Hintze said, "No one can say that there was any recovery to be had from being baptized under such conditions, unless it was to result from God's command."²²

Hurt, puzzled, and indignant at the criticisms and hostility that they met everywhere, the Mormon missionaries of the 1870s and 1880s never ceased to remark on the fact that everywhere scoffers employed "all their industry to tear us down and tell lies about us as a people," but they were quick to add that others "listened attentively to our witness." People say, one writer summed it all up, "that we are false prophets, but what greater proof of the contrary is there than this—that we are willing to give up everything in Zion in order to go out on mission?"²³

²⁰ *Bikuben*, October 29, 1885.

²¹ *Bikuben*, February 21, 1884.

²² *Bikuben*, February 26, 1880.

²³ *Bikuben*, April 26, 1883.

THE FACSIMILE of *Bikuben* on page 286 and the likeness of Winge on page 289 are published through the courtesy of Mr. Earl E. Olson, librarian in the church historian's office, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. The portrait is reproduced from the frontispiece of *Morgenstjernen*, volume 2, January, 1883.



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