

A Place Called Dana: the Centennial History of Trinity Seminary and Dana College, 1884-1984

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

"A Place Called Dana: the Centennial History of Trinity Seminary and Dana College, 1884-1984."

The Annals of Iowa 48 (1986), 333-334.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9183>

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Book Reviews

A Place Called Dana: The Centennial History of Trinity Seminary and Dana College, 1884-1984, by Peter L. Petersen. Blair, Nebr.: Dana College, 1984. ix, 231 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$15.00 cloth.

College histories get written at a regular rate, most often to celebrate notable anniversaries. They tend to fall into one of two categories: patriotic accounts designed to promote school spirit, or dry compendiums of institutional history. Since writing a college history generally has low prestige value in the academic community where scholarly publications are judged, serious scholars seldom engage in the writing of such publications. This is unfortunate. There is nothing like the American liberal arts college outside the boundaries of the United States. Our system of independent colleges, most of them founded under the aegis of religious idealism and designed to make upward mobility a real possibility for the sons and daughters of frontier settlers, uniquely reflect the American democratic dream as it took shape in the nineteenth century. As such the histories of such colleges constitute important chapters in American social and intellectual history. In the case of such immigrant groups as the Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians, the examination of the founding and development of schools is one of the best ways to study the ethnic groups themselves. Peter Petersen's account of Dana College is both a scholarly and interesting account of one such college, and also a splendid introduction to the experience of the Danes on American soil.

Danish immigrants came in lower numbers than did Norwegians or Swedes; only half as many Danes as Norwegians settled in America. Yet like the other two groups, the Danes tended to settle in the upper Midwest, with numerous settlements in Iowa and southern Minnesota as well as the surrounding states. The three groups shared a Lutheran background and determined to organize denominations along ethnic lines in their new land. The Norwegians were by all odds the most successful in maintaining their identity. Although more Swedes came than Norwegians, they were notably less successful in holding their people for the Lutheran faith. Least successful were the Danes; the two longterm Danish Lutheran denominations remained very small, as Danish immigrants drifted off in other directions and were assimilated rapidly into mainstream American society. So the Danish Lutheran groups had to fight an uphill battle in their attempts to maintain academies and colleges. The Norwegians, on the other hand, dotted the landscape with schools; no fewer than seven accredited colleges survive in flourishing condition from the frontier years.

Dana College, which early on included a seminary, high school, and college department, remained a tiny school through most of its

history. Its continued existence remained tenuous even in the best of times. On several occasions it looked as though Dana would not make it. Petersen has recorded this precarious story with careful attention to the forces that alternately spelled hope or pessimism. Truly it could be said of Dana, as it once was said of a similar college, that it was "the offspring of horny, handed labor, begotten of faith, reared in love and hope." Not until 1958 did Dana achieve full accreditation, and not until 1960 did it enroll five hundred students in a single year. Then with the rapidly rising costs at private colleges, the failure of Nebraska to authorize tuition grants, and the inability of Iowa students (traditionally a major part of the student body) to bring their tuition grants into Nebraska, Dana began to suffer enrollment declines in the late 1970s. Petersen's account ends in 1984 just before Dana experienced once again a major and almost catastrophic institutional crisis. As so often before, the little school determined to stay alive. It would now appear that Dana's chances of surviving with honor are at least as good as they were in the days of when the college was so hopefully founded.

A Place Called Dana is an exciting story of one college's struggle to keep faith with its founders' aim to promote quality education in a context of high ideals. The book is a model college history of its type. It should, however, be of interest to a far wider audience than Dana alumni or readers interested in church college history. It is, all in all, a very good introduction to one immigrant group's experience of finding its way on the American social scene. As such this book can be enthusiastically recommended to any reader interested in immigrant history. It represents social and institutional history successfully joined together and thereby provides one more chapter in the diversified account of American culture.

LUTHER COLLEGE

LEIGH D. JORDAHL

Public Schools in Hard Times: The Great Depression and Recent Years, by David Tyack, Robert Lowe, and Elisabeth Hansot. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. viii, 267 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$20.00 cloth.

For almost a half century an interpretation set forth by Ellwood P. Cubberley in his influential textbook, *Public Education in the United States* (1919), dominated the historiography of American education. Cubberley, longtime dean of the Stanford University School of Education, celebrated the growth of public schools and their success in enhancing individual opportunity and thus advancing democracy in the United States. This interpretation fulfilled its author's instrumental

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