

Interview of Clayton Nielsen by H.B. Simonsen
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Input filename

Clayton Nielsen, Elkhorn_hbs.srt

[SPEAKER_02]: I think we're ready now, so... Your full name, please.

[SPEAKER_01]: I'm retired pastor W. Clayton Nielsen, living in Elkhorn, Iowa, and I have served parishes in Denmark, Kansas, Withee Wisconsin, Omaha, Nebraska, among the Danish, and then I've done interim work at Solvang, California.

[SPEAKER_01]: Okay.

[SPEAKER_01]: When and where were you born?

[SPEAKER_01]: I was born in Lake Benton, Minnesota,

[SPEAKER_01]: which was a small Danish-American colony just west of Tyler, founded just about the same time.

[SPEAKER_01]: And we got together with Tyler somewhat, but Tyler was more Danish than we were.

[SPEAKER_01]: We had Grundtvigian pastors.

[SPEAKER_01]: The pastor who named me was born in Viborg, South Dakota, grew up in Denmark, and then came back here.

[SPEAKER_01]: His name was Harold Ibsen.

[SPEAKER_01]: And I remember in my youth, and I think this would probably be Grundtvigian, he would have a whole lecture series at the parish hall in the evenings and invite the people and cultural and historical things.

[SPEAKER_01]: He was well read and a lot of his people were well educated.

[SPEAKER_02]: Where would that be?

[SPEAKER_02]: Where was that?

[SPEAKER_01]: That was at Diamond Lake, on Lake Benton.

[SPEAKER_02]: Okay, okay.

[SPEAKER_02]: So your family background, what was that?

[SPEAKER_01]: Family background, my father was a son of immigrants, Nielsen and Nielsen, they were born in Gjesing (?) down in southern Denmark.

[SPEAKER_01]: My grandmother came from the same area.

[SPEAKER_01]: My mother's parents, I don't know exactly, but they spent a little time in Norway, but primarily they were Danish.

[SPEAKER_01]: They were immigrants as well.

[SPEAKER_01]: My father met my mother at Albert Lee.

[SPEAKER_01]: My grandparents came over in about 1890 and they retired about 1917, moved to Albert Lee because they had friends there.

[SPEAKER_01]: My father had got a job down there and had a friend who had a girlfriend who was my mother's sister.

[SPEAKER_01]: I have some notes that you see in the

[SPEAKER_01]: Forenede Kirke and the others.

[SPEAKER_01]: So I was sort of a hybrid.

[SPEAKER_01]: I can gain entrée to those people who were a little suspicious of the Grundtvigians when I mentioned that my mother's sister's husband was a son of P.S.

[SPEAKER_01]: Vig.

[SPEAKER_01]: And P.S.

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[SPEAKER_01]: Vig was one of the leaders of the old UELC.
[SPEAKER_01]: You see, this gets me in both bloods.
[SPEAKER_01]: So I grew up in Minnesota.
[SPEAKER_01]: My father was a farmer, raised purebred hogs and cattle, was a member of the state legislature before he was killed in an auto accident, and very active in just about everything in the community, a very progressive farmer.
[SPEAKER_01]: My mother had been a teacher before she was married.
[SPEAKER_01]: After my father was killed, she became a teacher again, and she was active, she put some translating work from Mathis Anderson's book, Canadian Haven in Diamond Lake,
[SPEAKER_01]: And I think that copy got down to the museum.
[SPEAKER_01]: I'm not sure.
[SPEAKER_01]: We got about 25 of my books recently.
[SPEAKER_01]: The archive's down there.
[SPEAKER_02]: How did it come about that they moved to Diamond Lake area, your parents?
[SPEAKER_01]: Well, my grandfather had a friend named...
[SPEAKER_01]: Anyway, he went out and he got my farm started for my grandfather before my grandfather came out here.
[SPEAKER_01]: And so my grandfather came to Diamond Lake and they had relatives up there too.
[SPEAKER_01]: Old Mathis Anderson was a cousin and he was one of the pioneer farmers up there, or farmers and his son was a beekeeper.
[SPEAKER_01]: But they came to Diamond Lake and
[SPEAKER_01]: When my father, my father was married, they moved up, moved back to Danville.
[SPEAKER_01]: They took my mother away from Albert Lee from parents.
[SPEAKER_01]: My vacations, our vacation as a child was to go to Albert Lee a couple times a year.
[SPEAKER_01]: It was a 200 mile trip to visit my grandparents.
[SPEAKER_01]: So we kept in touch there.
[SPEAKER_02]: What about your childhood?
[SPEAKER_02]: Did you have any siblings?
[SPEAKER_01]: All right.
[SPEAKER_01]: I have three brothers.
[SPEAKER_01]: a sister.
[SPEAKER_01]: One brother who died when I was just a baby died of complications of scarlet fever.
[SPEAKER_01]: I had a young brother two years younger than I named Wayne who became a realtor out in Los Angeles, California.
[SPEAKER_01]: My sister married a local boy, a non-Dane, who was a research physicist and chemist, worked for Eastland State Standard Oil.
[SPEAKER_01]: She died early of cancer.
[SPEAKER_01]: I had a, my youngest brother Everett is, was ordained later and he was working on his second book when the, when he had a stroke.
[SPEAKER_01]: He's still living down in Southern California.
[SPEAKER_01]: But he was in

[SPEAKER_01]: He served in both Connecticut and California and was a bishop's assistant for a number of years.

[SPEAKER_01]: So some of his experiences go into the writing of that book.

[SPEAKER_01]: So you grew up on the farm.

[SPEAKER_01]: Grew up on the farm.

[SPEAKER_01]: Enjoyed being a Foyt Club member, country school.

[SPEAKER_01]: I was fortunate in having an excellent teacher in my first years.

[SPEAKER_01]: at least average education, I finished my eighth grades in six years.

[SPEAKER_01]: Which was fine, except when I got to high school, education I was doing fine, but emotionally, psychologically, I was too young.

[SPEAKER_01]: But there were advantages and disadvantages.

[SPEAKER_01]: And my father died when I was a senior in high school, so I stayed out a year before college.

[SPEAKER_01]: And my father was very good to allow me

[SPEAKER_01]: to learn by experience in farming.

[SPEAKER_01]: I learned to drive a tractor very young.

[SPEAKER_01]: I learned the breeding stock of the hogs so that when my father died I could still carry on in the purebred pull and shine olive business.

[SPEAKER_01]: But by that time I was ready to go on to college and seminary.

[SPEAKER_01]: I decided by confirmation age that I wanted to be a pastor.

[SPEAKER_01]: I had parental encouragement along this line.

[SPEAKER_01]: My father and mother loved to sing, and they would sing duets, not so much in the Lutheran Church, but they would sing for the Baptists and the Methodists.

[SPEAKER_01]: And I have some very interesting experiences having gone along with them.

[SPEAKER_01]: We had an old one-armed Baptist pastor named G.R.

[SPEAKER_01]: Spiller who moved out of South Dakota, and my folks would go out to visit him once a year.

[SPEAKER_01]: I can remember the old pastor introducing my parents and saying they're 24-hour-a-day, seven-day Christians.

[SPEAKER_01]: I remember my father saying on the way home he was too good to us.

[SPEAKER_01]: But as my father died, my mother remarried a local man who was something related.

[SPEAKER_01]: And this man's sister married Thorvald Kjær(?), who was a pastor in Lyø(?).

[SPEAKER_01]: for a while.

[SPEAKER_01]: He's been my dad on the island.

[SPEAKER_01]: His son, he's done some writing.

[SPEAKER_01]: He may have been or may not.

[SPEAKER_01]: K-J-A-E-R, care.

[SPEAKER_02]: Not sort of right away, is it?

[SPEAKER_02]: Well, you know.

[SPEAKER_02]: Why did you go to, you went to college first?

[SPEAKER_01]: Well, I got high school in Lake Benton four years.

[SPEAKER_01]: Got my degree there.

[SPEAKER_01]: Stayed out a year.

[SPEAKER_01]: and was really planning to go to Dana.

[SPEAKER_01]: I suppose on the matter of my mother's family, and Grandview was just a junior college, and you know, in that case, was that good enough education?

[SPEAKER_01]: Well, my pastor said, if you're going to the ministry, you really ought to go to Grandview.

[SPEAKER_01]: So I went to Grandview.

[SPEAKER_02]: He was of the Grundtvigian tradition, so that was obvious for him to say that.

[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_02]: His influence.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: I had a good relationship with him and his wife through the years.

[SPEAKER_01]: That was Ibsen.

[SPEAKER_01]: When Ibsen left Diamond Lake and went to Edmonton, he moved to Kimballton, where he met my wife.

[SPEAKER_01]: She was the young woman.

[SPEAKER_01]: When we were dating, we went to everybody's cabin up Lake Okemochi.

[SPEAKER_01]: And through the years, we had good relationships.

[SPEAKER_01]: I had his funeral, I had her funeral.

[SPEAKER_01]: We had good relationships through the years.

[SPEAKER_01]: So you went to Grandview?

[SPEAKER_01]: I went to Grandview two years, and then to St.

[SPEAKER_01]: Olaf College to get my bachelor's degree, and back to Grandview.

[SPEAKER_01]: I graduated from St.

[SPEAKER_01]: Olaf on a Sunday afternoon and go to the seminary, the Grandview Seminary, on Monday morning after an overnight train ride, one week late.

[SPEAKER_01]: This was during the war.

[SPEAKER_01]: Oh, yeah?

[SPEAKER_01]: And we had an accelerated program.

[SPEAKER_01]: at summer school, the first summer.

[SPEAKER_01]: So I spent three years at Grandview.

[SPEAKER_01]: Seminary.

[SPEAKER_01]: In the seminary.

[SPEAKER_01]: Together with Thorvald Hansen, by the way.

[SPEAKER_02]: What?

[SPEAKER_02]: Together with Thorvald Hansen.

[SPEAKER_02]: Together with Hansen.

[SPEAKER_01]: He was in junior college when I was there, and he was in seminary when I was there.

[SPEAKER_01]: Between my last two years of seminary, I served

[SPEAKER_01]: and then supervised internship down in Denmark and Kansas.

[SPEAKER_01]: It was one of the earlier Danish congregations, very well educated people.

[SPEAKER_01]: The congregation was organized in 1878.

[SPEAKER_01]: The church was quarried out locally, ramp quarried limestone, walls about that thick.

[SPEAKER_01]: The church still stands.

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[SPEAKER_01]: Oh, I never heard about that.

[SPEAKER_01]: I heard about Denmark.

[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah, I heard about the place, but not the church.

[SPEAKER_01]: Well, and then when I finished up there, I was called to go down there.

[SPEAKER_01]: My wife, meantime, meanwhile, had gone to Grand View for a year, and University of Northern Iowa and taught for two years.

[SPEAKER_01]: We were married then after I'd had a few months of bachelor in the parish, and she was a tremendous helper.

[SPEAKER_01]: She was a master teacher, really.

[SPEAKER_02]: Was that in Kansas?

[SPEAKER_01]: In Denmark, Kansas.

[SPEAKER_01]: She'd gone to Denmark, every place that I was a servant of the prairie, she taught.

[SPEAKER_02]: In the local school?

[SPEAKER_02]: The local school.

[SPEAKER_01]: And she had a theory that if something was going well, she'd let it go.

[SPEAKER_01]: But if she needed to start, she'd help it start and then step back and let the people take over.

[SPEAKER_01]: She did well at that.

[SPEAKER_01]: I really didn't realize, honestly,

[SPEAKER_01]: I thought she was a master teacher.

[SPEAKER_01]: She wasn't until after she was gone.

[SPEAKER_01]: We had a night before the funeral where it was just a chance of visiting and singing and people talking.

[SPEAKER_01]: Some of our former students came back and it was tear jerking.

[SPEAKER_01]: Alright, I finished seminary.

[SPEAKER_01]: Well, I was in Denmark, Kansas.

[SPEAKER_01]: I was elected president of the youth group of the church.

[SPEAKER_01]: The president at that time was

[SPEAKER_01]: also sort of the adult leader.

[SPEAKER_01]: So I had sort of a dual position.

[SPEAKER_01]: So I was a leader on that for about seven or eight years.

[SPEAKER_01]: At that time, about that time, that's about the time the Danes published, are you familiar with The World of Song?

[SPEAKER_01]: Oh yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: Because that's, that was a product of the old AELC and the

[SPEAKER_01]: The two people who were most significant in putting it out were NN? Jespersen the pastor's wife, who served here in the Middle West, and Alice Olsen, the wife of Arnold Olsen, who did a lot of post-war work for the United Nations in Germany.

[SPEAKER_01]: So I personally got to know a lot of people.

[SPEAKER_01]: I served in various positions, and the old AELC was not large.

[SPEAKER_01]: Well, we had, my first district was, we called it District 7.

[SPEAKER_01]: It included Kansas, one congregation in Kansas, one in Colorado, one in Texas, one in Louisiana, and several in Nebraska.

[SPEAKER_00]: Okay.

[SPEAKER_01]: It was a big district.

[SPEAKER_01]: I did see.

[SPEAKER_01]: And I visited all, I visited all those congregations.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_02]: And that, go ahead.

[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah, they were small.

[SPEAKER_02]: They were small.

[SPEAKER_02]: And of Grundtvigian background.

[SPEAKER_02]: That's right.

[SPEAKER_02]: How would that be shown?

[SPEAKER_01]: Well, how would that be shown?

[SPEAKER_01]: I suppose the interest in the cultural things.

[SPEAKER_01]: For instance, I grew up in a rather conservative home where dancing was sort of frowned upon.

[SPEAKER_01]: I've taught folk dancing all over the United States.

[SPEAKER_01]: In these congregations?

[SPEAKER_01]: In these congregations.

[SPEAKER_01]: I teach folk dancing in Solvang every year for the folk meeting.

[SPEAKER_01]: You do that still?

[SPEAKER_01]: I still do it.

[SPEAKER_01]: Oh, good.

[SPEAKER_01]: But the first summer in Denmark, Kansas, on Wednesday nights, as we were doing the war, the young people were home, had nothing to do, they couldn't go anyplace.

[SPEAKER_01]: So we'd have a week, an evening of folk dancing.

[SPEAKER_01]: So it was the cultural aspect of the Grundtvigian heritage.

[SPEAKER_01]: I was back there ten years ago, and there were still licks of folk dancing.

[SPEAKER_01]: Well, there were.

[SPEAKER_02]: That's interesting.

[SPEAKER_02]: So that's one of the characteristics.

[SPEAKER_02]: Singing would be another.

[SPEAKER_02]: And the lecturing you were talking about also, you said that there was Harald Ibsen.

[SPEAKER_01]: Harald Ibsen lectured at Diamond Lake.

[SPEAKER_01]: And this was common in many of the congregations of the older pastors.

[SPEAKER_01]: My generation didn't do too much of it.

[SPEAKER_02]: Was there not enough interest, or what do you think?

[SPEAKER_01]: I think lack of interest, changing times.

[SPEAKER_02]: But singing and folk dancing, people will still come for, spend time, spend an evening with that.

[SPEAKER_01]: Whether it be Danish or English, that deal was the same, but when I came, most of the andagt singing in the evening was in Danish.

[SPEAKER_01]: When I left there seven years later,

[SPEAKER_01]: It was mostly all English.

[SPEAKER_01]: It was always a change in time and change.

[SPEAKER_01]: In Kansas?

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah.

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[SPEAKER_01]: No, in junior college.

[SPEAKER_01]: See, from the time I started college, it was mostly Danish and English.

[SPEAKER_01]: From the time I finished college, it was mostly English.

[SPEAKER_02]: But that was not seven years.

[SPEAKER_01]: Well, three years of junior college, two years of senior college, and four years of seminary.

[SPEAKER_01]: What year was that?

[SPEAKER_01]: Forty to forty-two at Grandview, forty-two to forty-four at St.

[SPEAKER_01]: Olaf, forty-four to forty-seven at Grandview.

[SPEAKER_01]: And during these years, it would have changed, with respect to the language.

[SPEAKER_01]: A lot of change.

[SPEAKER_01]: Now, the pastor followed me a couple years later at Withee, Wisconsin.

[SPEAKER_01]: I planned that I was there during the time of the major transition from Danish to English.

[SPEAKER_01]: Pastor L.C. Bundgaard, who had been there ahead of me, Bundgaard.

[SPEAKER_01]: really awakened the people.

[SPEAKER_01]: He was one of these old-time lecturers, and he was a go-getter.

[SPEAKER_01]: Sometimes, though, he and a member of the congregation, I understand, almost had a fistcuffs one night.

[SPEAKER_01]: Disagreement.

[SPEAKER_01]: Boxing.

[SPEAKER_01]: But he awakened the people, but he went through the transition, not so much language-wise, but

[SPEAKER_01]: culturally from Danish to English, the nine years I was there.

[SPEAKER_01]: So I started to help people work through that transition, I guess.

[SPEAKER_01]: When I came to Omaha, we were downtown, the congregation was having difficulty, you know, it was still meeting only Danish descendant people, primarily, and felt we needed to do something.

[SPEAKER_01]: We were picked up by the Board of American Missions by the Lutheran Church in America and relocated.

[SPEAKER_01]: And about 80% of the congregation went with us.

[SPEAKER_01]: And I learned to do some fundraising.

[SPEAKER_01]: The first night, the first fundraising program we had, we had a \$20,000 goal.

[SPEAKER_01]: It doesn't sound like much nowadays, but in those days, it was a lot.

[SPEAKER_01]: And we raised \$27,000 the first day.

[SPEAKER_01]: That's a lot of money.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: The man went out and called, went back and told about an older lady who had run across the street from Exarvon where they had a racetrack, and she would park cars in her yard for money.

[SPEAKER_01]: She was crippled in bed, and she gave them ten dollars, and that was the biggest gift they got that day as far as, you know, people really giving.

[SPEAKER_01]: You know, at the time I left Omaha, the congregation was giving at seven and a half percent of

[SPEAKER_01]: It took a lot of money to build a church.

[SPEAKER_01]: But you said you relocated the church.

[SPEAKER_01]: We moved from downtown.

[SPEAKER_01]: Actually, the original church was downtown, then they moved out to the suburbs, which was 22nd Street, which was downtown when I came there.

[SPEAKER_01]: So then we moved way out northwest, 60 blocks west and 60 blocks north of downtown.

[SPEAKER_01]: We needed a new field to cultivate, so to speak, because there were a few Danes moving into Omaha and we wanted to be an American church.

[SPEAKER_01]: But we had the strength and the nucleus of the congregation that moved with us.

[SPEAKER_01]: So it succeeded?

[SPEAKER_01]: It went well even now.

[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah, because Omaha is supposed to have a huge, fairly large population that would have some sort of Danish background.

[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah, but both branches of the church.

[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah, yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: And then they had two Danish Brotherhood societies.

[SPEAKER_01]: They had the Danish Vandalist Society with Handel Park of their own.

[SPEAKER_01]: The Danes were very active in Omaha.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah, yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: And the National Headquarters of the Danish Brotherhood was in Omaha at that time.

[SPEAKER_01]: And the president, the national president was a member of my congregation.

[SPEAKER_01]: So whenever the Danish Brotherhood had a big meeting in Omaha, they had to have a quote-unquote chaplain.

[SPEAKER_01]: Somebody that knew how to pray.

[SPEAKER_01]: And I say that with tongue-in-cheek.

[SPEAKER_01]: But I was part of that group.

[SPEAKER_01]: I accepted them, they accepted me.

[SPEAKER_02]: So all these congregations you're talking about were the Danish church that later became AELC and what we call the Grundtvigian tradition.

[SPEAKER_02]: How would you say that this background would be shown in, let's say, in church life?

[SPEAKER_02]: Would there be any specific thing in the sermon, in the service?

[SPEAKER_01]: Well, in church,

[SPEAKER_01]: You said church life.

[SPEAKER_01]: I think, first of all, the vacation church schools in the summertime.

[SPEAKER_01]: Now it is called Bible school.

[SPEAKER_01]: Here in Kimballton and other places, they would have a day of religious studies and Danish history.

[SPEAKER_01]: In the afternoon here in Kimballton, they had folk dancing and they had crafts for the boys and sewing for the girls.

[SPEAKER_01]: You see that?

[SPEAKER_01]: Summer school.

[SPEAKER_01]: Summer school.

[SPEAKER_01]: And you see the ULC in the United States, they didn't have it.

[SPEAKER_01]: They had the religious system.
[SPEAKER_01]: But most of these congregations,
[SPEAKER_01]: were similar to a greater or lesser degree.
[SPEAKER_02]: They would also have this kind of summer school.
[SPEAKER_01]: Yes.
[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah, yeah.
[SPEAKER_01]: I think that's part of the church life.
[SPEAKER_01]: Absolutely.
[SPEAKER_01]: The cultural aspect.
[SPEAKER_01]: Absolutely.
[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah, that's what I think about.
[SPEAKER_01]: And of course, I'm sure it was in the sermons.
[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah, yeah.
[SPEAKER_01]: As a young man, I probably didn't appreciate it as much as I should have, but I don't know.
[SPEAKER_01]: Have you read Joy Ibsen's... Not yet.
[SPEAKER_02]: I've
[SPEAKER_02]: I bought it, and I've been looking in it, so I can see that that's the kind of thing you talk about in his sermons, in your sermons and the others.
[SPEAKER_01]: As a teenager, I didn't realize how good his sermons were.
[SPEAKER_01]: No, no.
[SPEAKER_01]: But reading her book, it brought back some of that.
[SPEAKER_01]: And in confirmation class, we didn't have a book.
[SPEAKER_01]: Harold Ibsen lectured, talked to us, shared things, which is a spoken word.
[SPEAKER_02]: Would you say there was a certain outlook, certain values that you would maybe not be aware of then, but that you later have thought about, this was the case in your church, in your congregation?
[SPEAKER_01]: I noticed in my own congregation, I had to remember that my mother grew up a Holy Dame.
[SPEAKER_01]: And so the culture was primarily music.
[SPEAKER_01]: But dancing?
[SPEAKER_01]: No.
[SPEAKER_01]: When I came to college, was I going to dance?
[SPEAKER_01]: Well, the girl I was going with loved to dance.
[SPEAKER_01]: And if I didn't dance, she'd find somebody else.
[SPEAKER_01]: And when it came time, the first year, my second year was her first year, came time to have the folk dance exhibition in the spring for Studenterfest.
[SPEAKER_01]: She was going to be in it, and if I didn't dance with her, she was going to get somebody else.
[SPEAKER_01]: So I had to learn to folk dance.
[SPEAKER_01]: But having to learn as a young man made it easier to be a teacher.
[SPEAKER_01]: folk dance, because I knew how I learned.
[SPEAKER_01]: Some just grew up with it, they take it naturally.
[SPEAKER_01]: When we were in Wisconsin, we went even down to a national folk dance group that met at the state capitol, and I brought my young people down to that.

[SPEAKER_01]: When somebody was teaching some of those boys to folk dance, I played the girls' part.

[SPEAKER_01]: You know, to help them get the steps.

[SPEAKER_01]: I was kidding one of the boys one night, who was really reluctant to folk dance.

[SPEAKER_01]: And I said, you know, if you learned to folk dance, you could be a better basketball player, because you'd learn better footwork.

[SPEAKER_01]: He came to me two months later and he said, it was true.

[SPEAKER_01]: You know.

[SPEAKER_02]: That was worth while.

[SPEAKER_01]: It worked.

[SPEAKER_01]: It worked.

[SPEAKER_02]: Good.

[SPEAKER_01]: Well, as I mentioned, too, that I was...

[SPEAKER_01]: national president of the youth group for a while, which allowed me to meet nationally with the youth leaders of the various eight Lutheran bodies in the country.

[SPEAKER_01]: So I got acquainted around in that area.

[SPEAKER_01]: When I came to the church relocated in Omaha from downtown out in the country, I got to meet with some of those people because I had been involved.

[SPEAKER_01]: the Danes didn't establish too many congregations.

[SPEAKER_01]: We established a few, but we met with these larger national bodies who were establishing, and because they knew me, we got a loan to build a congregation that had relocated to Omaha.

[SPEAKER_01]: I'm sure that was, they knew my Senate President too, but I had a personal relationship.

[SPEAKER_01]: Sometimes it's who you know as well as what you know.

[SPEAKER_01]: That's true, certainly.

[SPEAKER_01]: And I served in the old Danish church as secretary and of the various districts from time to time.

[SPEAKER_01]: So I was involved in the total life of the church.

[SPEAKER_01]: And as we set up meetings, district meetings, and also the synod meetings,

[SPEAKER_01]: We saw too there was some cultural aspects, not just Danish lectures.

[SPEAKER_02]: Along all these activities, did you have any, did you go to Denmark?

[SPEAKER_01]: We did not go to Denmark until our golden wedding year.

[SPEAKER_01]: My father-in-law wanted me to go to Denmark after college.

[SPEAKER_01]: I should have gone, I didn't.

[SPEAKER_02]: Why did he want that?

[SPEAKER_01]: Well, I thought it would be good to have the background, but the reason I did not go was he had such a high opinion of the folk schools in Denmark that I was afraid I wouldn't be able to live up to his expectations, that I would disappoint him.

[SPEAKER_01]: So I didn't go.

[SPEAKER_02]: So he wanted you to go to a folk high school in Denmark?

[SPEAKER_01]: I wanted to go to a folk high school in Denmark.

[SPEAKER_01]: on the younger, many of the older Danish-American pastors did.

[SPEAKER_01]: And it served them in good stead.

[SPEAKER_01]: But I did not have that experience.

[SPEAKER_01]: I had the experience of Seminary teachers, Principals of the Grand View, Johannes Knudsen, and Ernest Nielsen, who knew that background.

[SPEAKER_02]: Absolutely, yeah.

[SPEAKER_02]: So, that probably was just as good, at least.

[SPEAKER_02]: Because the folk high schools in Denmark at that point would not be

[SPEAKER_02]: We were very mixed, I think.

[SPEAKER_01]: I think they were, and I was aware of some of that, but not as much as I could have been.

[SPEAKER_01]: I don't know.

[SPEAKER_01]: My Scandinavian library is the top two shelves.

[SPEAKER_01]: Oh, yeah?

[SPEAKER_01]: And a third of the books are Danish.

[SPEAKER_01]: I can't read them, but I like to look at them.

[SPEAKER_02]: You don't read Danish?

[SPEAKER_01]: Very little.

[SPEAKER_01]: My parents spoke Danish when they weren't supposed to understand it.

[SPEAKER_01]: I learned a little.

[SPEAKER_01]: I went to Grand View two years a day.

[SPEAKER_01]: But in your home, you spoke English?

[SPEAKER_01]: We spoke English in the home exclusively.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah, yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: Except when folks didn't want to know what they were talking about, and that didn't last.

[SPEAKER_01]: For me, I beat the oldest living.

[SPEAKER_01]: But then at Grand View, I took two years of Danish and learned enough that I could read some.

[SPEAKER_01]: I can write better than I can read, or could.

[SPEAKER_01]: Then I went to Solvang after I retired.

[SPEAKER_01]: They still spoke a lot of Danish out there.

[SPEAKER_01]: They had Danish services once a month.

[SPEAKER_02]: Still?

[SPEAKER_01]: Back in 19, 20 years ago, I would do the Danish communion, and we would have the pastor would come up from Yorba Linda and preach the Danish service.

[SPEAKER_01]: You're from L.A.?

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: The first Sunday that I had the Danish Communion, an old pastor's widow came up to me and said, we understood you better than we understood the pastor.

[SPEAKER_01]: I said, I speak Danish with a mid-American accent.

[SPEAKER_01]: I learned enough Danish that I could do Communion in Danish.

[SPEAKER_01]: When I came to Withee, Wisconsin, the Danish lady's aide wanted the Danish devotions.

[SPEAKER_01]: So I would take my wife's Danish hymnal, read a scripture lesson for Sunday, and collect them up with it, and that was it.

[SPEAKER_01]: I got an A for effort, probably a D for quality, but I tried.

[SPEAKER_01]: I appreciated it.

[SPEAKER_02]: All these years when you were serving in these different congregations,
[SPEAKER_02]: And there was some kind of Danish background all the way, the Danish tradition all the way.
[SPEAKER_02]: But it was carried on in the English language now.
[SPEAKER_02]: Mostly.
[SPEAKER_02]: Mostly.
[SPEAKER_02]: How would you be much aware or just to a little extent aware of this tradition in your church life, in your daily life?
[SPEAKER_01]: Was that something you did?
[SPEAKER_01]: I think primarily at Christmas.
[SPEAKER_01]: Everybody sang Nu Har Vi Jul Igen around the tree.
[SPEAKER_01]: So we sang it around the Christmas tree.
[SPEAKER_01]: We didn't know what it meant, but we did it anyway.
[SPEAKER_01]: And there would always be a Christmas party after Christmas for the children and the young people.
[SPEAKER_01]: And the young people would do it with full tats at their parties.
[SPEAKER_01]: Children didn't, but I would go over to Tyler for their post-Christmas party and we would
[SPEAKER_01]: I had a cousin that took me over there and we would folk dance over there.
[SPEAKER_02]: So that was just your, that was just your traditions.
[SPEAKER_02]: No matter what, where they came from, that was just... Tradition.
[SPEAKER_01]: It wasn't labeled Danish.
[SPEAKER_01]: No, exactly.
[SPEAKER_01]: Exactly.
[SPEAKER_01]: And that's how... We just grew up with it.
[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah, yeah.
[SPEAKER_01]: I understand that because you don't,
[SPEAKER_02]: put labels and stamps on whatever you do in your normal daily life.
[SPEAKER_02]: Of course not.
[SPEAKER_02]: But were you familiar with the name Grundtvig in those days?
[SPEAKER_02]: How would you say that you got an idea of Grundtvig?
[SPEAKER_01]: I was familiar with Grundtvig because his name appeared under all of the hymns we sang.
[SPEAKER_01]: And I suppose with Harold Ibsen particularly,
[SPEAKER_01]: It came through in his lectures.
[SPEAKER_01]: And then, of course, when I went to Grand View, a lot of it there, both in seminary and in the church there.
[SPEAKER_02]: Like, for instance, that you would read some Grundtvig writing translated into Danish.
[SPEAKER_01]: He deported it in translation.
[SPEAKER_01]: Sorry?
[SPEAKER_01]: The Grundtvig would be quoted, but in English translation.
[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah, sure.
[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah, sure.
[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_02]: So you would have some English textbook or whatever with quotes from Grundtvig.

[SPEAKER_02]: You would know of his main ideas and what he stood for.

[SPEAKER_01]: Through the sermons and through the... Well, again, this is part of the whole atmosphere of student life.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: For instance, we always had...

[SPEAKER_01]: in the middle of the forenoon, a so-called religious service.

[SPEAKER_01]: More than likely, if Jokester (name?) was doing it, it would be something on the latest thing in the news.

[SPEAKER_01]: Okay.

[SPEAKER_01]: You know, it was the cultural thing again.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah, yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: Before lunch?

[SPEAKER_02]: About ten o'clock in the morning.

[SPEAKER_01]: About a half hour.

[SPEAKER_02]: So it was a short lecture, kind of?

[SPEAKER_01]: Short lecture with singing a couple of Danish-American songs, usually, and a 15-minute sermon or lecture, or one or the other, never knew for sure which.

[SPEAKER_02]: But not necessarily any specific religious thing in it?

[SPEAKER_01]: No, it was called, I think it was called Mourning,

[SPEAKER_01]: I don't remember what we called it.

[SPEAKER_01]: We also had, in the evenings, at 10 o'clock, everybody came down for coffee.

[SPEAKER_01]: In the evening.

[SPEAKER_01]: In the evening.

[SPEAKER_01]: We were a student body of 40.

[SPEAKER_01]: Just like a big family.

[SPEAKER_01]: And everybody would come upstairs in the living room, in the dining room, and sing some songs and have a religious thought.

[SPEAKER_01]: And then we might sing the rest of the evening until 10.30.

[SPEAKER_01]: It was time for the girls to be locked up and the boys to say good night.

[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_02]: So that would be all the students?

[SPEAKER_01]: All the students.

[SPEAKER_01]: Not only the seminary?

[SPEAKER_01]: No, the seminary was a small part.

[SPEAKER_01]: The seminary was probably never more than seven.

[SPEAKER_01]: At a time?

[SPEAKER_01]: At a time.

[SPEAKER_01]: Sometimes as few as three.

[SPEAKER_01]: Before I was there, there was just one of the seminary at one time.

[SPEAKER_01]: In the whole seminary?

[SPEAKER_01]: The whole seminary.

[SPEAKER_01]: Wow.

[SPEAKER_01]: So, before my time, very often you would go into seminary after two years of junior college.

[SPEAKER_01]: About the time that I was in college, most of the young men had gotten their bachelor's degree first and then came back to seminary.

[SPEAKER_01]: And many of them were married by that time.

[SPEAKER_01]: Virginia and I chose not to be married to complete our education first.

[SPEAKER_01]: I don't regret that at all.

[SPEAKER_01]: We dated for five years before we were married.

[SPEAKER_01]: That's a long courtship.

[SPEAKER_01]: That's a long courtship.

[SPEAKER_01]: But I don't recommend that long courtship, but for us it was good.

[SPEAKER_01]: It turned out well.

[SPEAKER_01]: But, you know, we were married 60 years, but we had 65 years together in a sense.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_02]: And we shared things.

[SPEAKER_02]: So... This...

[SPEAKER_02]: cultural or spiritual background that was obvious that it was part of your group.

[SPEAKER_02]: It was just in the atmosphere.

[SPEAKER_02]: We grew up taking it for granted.

[SPEAKER_02]: Once in a while when you met with other groups or other people outside, elsewhere, would you sort of be more aware of your

[SPEAKER_02]: your specific outlook, your values.

[SPEAKER_01]: Particularly when I met with the other leaders of the other Lutheran groups.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah?

[SPEAKER_01]: For instance, I don't know, something was ganged up on them one night.

[SPEAKER_01]: Three or four of them were on the radio, and we posed a question about dancing, which of course for most of them was a no-no.

[SPEAKER_01]: But, you know, they accepted what we did.

[SPEAKER_01]: Some of the

[SPEAKER_01]: The Norwegians had their Danish Christmas annuals.

[SPEAKER_01]: Let's see.

[SPEAKER_01]: I'm sure you've seen them, but I think I can pull them off rather quickly.

[SPEAKER_01]: I know where I'm looking.

[SPEAKER_01]: I'm afraid this is, I think this is the, is this your ground?

[SPEAKER_02]: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: We had those, they were common in the holes.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: Best of them haven't got moved down here yet.

[SPEAKER_01]: Mm-hmm.

[SPEAKER_01]: You see, in the early days, the U.S.

[SPEAKER_01]: published a monthly magazine called Ungdom.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: And it was Danish and English.

[SPEAKER_01]: And later we had our own publication.

[SPEAKER_01]: And later we had a page in the National Church Monthly Magazine.
[SPEAKER_01]: But that's what I was looking for, but I don't have them here.
[SPEAKER_01]: They're up at the house.
[SPEAKER_01]: Oh, yeah.
[SPEAKER_01]: But they're published on the similar format as the Yulegran (?).
[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah.
[SPEAKER_02]: And they would be of both?
[SPEAKER_01]: Well, they would have very religious articles and very secular short stories.
[SPEAKER_01]: They would have both.
[SPEAKER_01]: I haven't got totally settled.
[SPEAKER_01]: I don't have my English business on the floor.
[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah, that's good.
[SPEAKER_01]: I'll find where it goes.
[SPEAKER_02]: So...
[SPEAKER_02]: This tradition has been characteristic of several things like your singing and folk dancing.
[SPEAKER_01]: Singing and folk dancing.
[SPEAKER_02]: And lecturing.
[SPEAKER_01]: Lectures.
[SPEAKER_02]: And a certain outlook.
[SPEAKER_02]: Would you also say it also was to be seen in the political atmosphere?
[SPEAKER_01]: I've been told that.
[SPEAKER_01]: A few years ago we had a series of a pair of
[SPEAKER_01]: what is it we call it, where they came about four or five days and do cultural studies and we did one here on the Danish American life and where am I going?
[SPEAKER_01]: I'm running off my head now.
[SPEAKER_01]: Oh yes, I think the Danes tended to be
[SPEAKER_01]: more liberal politically than the UELC.
[SPEAKER_01]: In the Danish church.
[SPEAKER_01]: In the Danish church.
[SPEAKER_01]: In fact, one of the attenders one year said, wondered if the influence of the folk school in Kimballton had had to start marriage, things like that.
[SPEAKER_01]: Whether it did or not, I don't know.
[SPEAKER_01]: I think the Grundtvigians tended more to be Democrats than Republicans.
[SPEAKER_01]: And the ULC tended more to be Republicans than Democrats.
[SPEAKER_02]: But you wouldn't know.
[SPEAKER_02]: That means that you would not know of, for instance, the political outlook of your congregation and your fellow ministers.
[SPEAKER_01]: The party you belong to...
[SPEAKER_01]: was that it grew out of your cultural heritage.
[SPEAKER_01]: My father was in the legislature, for instance.
[SPEAKER_01]: In Minnesota, they were elected without party designation.
[SPEAKER_01]: In other words, you were not labeled either Republican or Democrat.
[SPEAKER_01]: There were Republicans and Democrats.

[SPEAKER_01]: In Minnesota, they had what they called a primary labor party, which was a liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

[SPEAKER_01]: My father was an independent.

[SPEAKER_01]: He was in the legislature.

[SPEAKER_01]: He worked very closely with the more liberal group up there when he was out there.

[SPEAKER_01]: And locally, the liberals were always on the candidate against him.

[SPEAKER_01]: So it was interesting.

[SPEAKER_01]: I was with my father in politics.

[SPEAKER_02]: But it wouldn't be so simple as to say that the Grundtvigians would be Democrats.

[SPEAKER_01]: No, it wouldn't be that simple.

[SPEAKER_01]: But many of them were natural.

[SPEAKER_01]: I think if you got to the old AELC conventions, there was a liberal bent more so than you would find in the UELC conventions.

[SPEAKER_02]: So that would have an effect on, well, that was part of the whole outlook, wasn't it?

[SPEAKER_01]: Part of the whole outlook.

[SPEAKER_02]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: Unconscious on our part, really.

[SPEAKER_01]: A little looking back now, I'm 87, I can look back and see some of those things that I had a little perspective.

[SPEAKER_01]: I didn't see it at all when I was there.

[SPEAKER_02]: No, that's what happens when you're in the middle of a group.

[SPEAKER_02]: You don't think about what is this group.

[SPEAKER_02]: You just sit there.

[SPEAKER_01]: I just wanted to look at what I jotted down.

[SPEAKER_01]: For instance, my wife's uncle was a seminary professor for a year.

[SPEAKER_01]: What was his name?

[SPEAKER_01]: NN? Jensen.

[SPEAKER_01]: He and my father were the only two of their family of eight who were born in this country.

[SPEAKER_01]: The rest were born in Denmark.

[SPEAKER_01]: And my wife translated copies of the

[SPEAKER_01]: letters that my grandfather, her grandfather had written back to grandmother.

[SPEAKER_01]: My daughter has them on her computer out in California now, putting them in good format, where my wife spent time, a number of days and weeks doing that translating.

[SPEAKER_01]: My wife's grandfather conducted religious services in the schools in the area

[SPEAKER_01]: related to one of the folk schools here in Elkhorn.

[SPEAKER_01]: The students would come out there, and these two little boys would pass out the hymn books.

[SPEAKER_01]: And the story goes that the boys were talking one time when their father was conducting this service or whatever, whatever should be a minister.

[SPEAKER_01]: I said, yeah, that would be a good idea.

[SPEAKER_01]: One says, you be the minister, and I'll support you.

[SPEAKER_01]: And those two brothers were so close to the years my father-in-law

[SPEAKER_01]: a bridge construction.

[SPEAKER_01]: And his brother was a pastor.

[SPEAKER_01]: And those two were as close as twins.

[SPEAKER_01]: They visited Denmark and they were called the—anyway, one was the contractor and one was the pastor.

[SPEAKER_01]: But those were not the words they used.

[SPEAKER_01]: I can't remember the words right now.

[SPEAKER_01]: I think my father-in-law would have encouraged us to go to Denmark, but you know when you're in the parish, how do you afford it?

[SPEAKER_01]: How do you get the time for it?

[SPEAKER_01]: So we didn't go until after we retired.

[SPEAKER_01]: We were all over there for a short time, too short a time.

[SPEAKER_01]: I would like to go again if I didn't have to take that plane trip.

[SPEAKER_00]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: Coming back, we had the backs of the back seat on the plane, and I had no noise in my ears

[SPEAKER_01]: engines for 12 hours.

[SPEAKER_01]: It was too much.

[SPEAKER_01]: That is a little long.

[SPEAKER_01]: It's a long trip.

[SPEAKER_01]: But I enjoyed Denmark.

[SPEAKER_01]: I didn't get to see many of my relatives.

[SPEAKER_01]: The only relative I was going to visit was my stepfather's sister, and she died between the time of (word)? and the time I got there.

[SPEAKER_01]: I didn't talk to her son on the telephone when we were in the town right off the island of Lyø.

[SPEAKER_01]: Oh, yeah?

[SPEAKER_01]: That's the last contact I've had with him.

[SPEAKER_01]: But somebody met me at the bus, a close friend that told me that she had met his head in her house in Omaha, that my father-in-law's sister was deceased.

[SPEAKER_01]: But we do have some relatives over there on my wife's side.

[SPEAKER_01]: On my father's side,

[SPEAKER_01]: One of the first women pastors to be ordained was a cousin.

[SPEAKER_01]: I don't even know her name.

[SPEAKER_01]: So, you know, stick this, stick that.

[SPEAKER_02]: You wrote some notes.

[SPEAKER_01]: I wrote some notes.

[SPEAKER_02]: Would you have more to say about this tradition in the church?

[SPEAKER_02]: No, I don't know.

[SPEAKER_02]: Well, I think we've been through a round of... I think we sort of... I think we have.

[SPEAKER_02]: I think we have.

[SPEAKER_02]: I have forty-five, sixty-five minutes now.

[SPEAKER_02]: Well... And, so, is that it?

[SPEAKER_01]: So, I think I'll... I jotted all about, jotted down was, if you had seen Annette, talking about Harold Ibsen and A Very Life Up There.

Interview of Clayton Nielsen by H.B. Simonsen
Transcript reviewed and corrected by H.B. Simonsen
Danish American Archive and Library – Digital Archive

[SPEAKER_01]: the youth work of the, uh, Danish, that's, I'm still doing something, the Danish (word)? People's League, World of Song, Ruth Herman's, uh, thesis, which I will try to get for you.

[SPEAKER_01]: Yeah, that's good.

[SPEAKER_01]: Uh, some of the seminary professors, D.S.

[SPEAKER_01]: Jensen.

[SPEAKER_00]: Yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]: Uh, the card file list of the, of the brilliant books that I have, that I've, uh, put up at the end of your interest, and I can just, uh, make sure you get a current file

[SPEAKER_02]: I think I'll stop my laptop here.