

## **PROSPECTS OF FOLK HIGH SCHOOLS: A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE**

**Jindra Kulich**

The University of British Columbia

The idea and the Scandinavian models of the folk high school, a liberal education residential center for adults, have attracted North Americans since the early 1900s in successive waves, as it seems, one for each generation.

Among the early indigenous adaptations on this continent were the John C. Campbell Folk School and the Highlander Folk School in the United States. Canadian adaptations followed considerably later, in the post Second World War era. By 1960 there were folk schools in Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia; none exist today. These Canadian folk schools, although definitely inspired especially by the Danish folk high schools visited by Canadians in the mid-1950s, differed markedly from the Danish prototypes; the programs lasted only from a weekend to a week, and almost none of the Canadian folk schools had their own facilities but were rotated among several farms. The reasons for their growth and their ultimate demise still are awaiting analysis. The later Quetico Centre in Northern Ontario, which is still in its prime, is an interesting year-round residential center for adults influenced by the folk high school idea.

It is interesting to note that several attempts by Danish immigrants around the turn of the century to transplant the Danish model (as it existed at that point in time) intact to North America (for example, Dalum in Alberta and Elk Horn in Iowa) all failed within a few years, as they were destined to fail in the two societies based on assimilation (in the U.S.A.) and acculturation (in Canada) of immigrants.

However, for adult educators in any country who are concerned with questions of self-renewal and social consciousness in their own country there is much inspiration and food for thought in the original Grundtvig idea and its permutations as these evolved in a number of countries. Pantzar in his article reminds us again that residential adult education, especially of the folk high school type, has been, is, and can be an important social institution in many, if not all, countries.

All the examples of transplantation and adaptation of the folk high school around the world demonstrate that the folk high school idea can and does inspire people even today, but that any attempts to transplant the actual Danish folk high schools to another country, with different background, conditions, and culture, have been foolhardy and destined to fail. If we wish to benefit from the folk high school idea, and I think we could and should, we

need to be equally creative now, as our Danish and other colleagues have been before us, in our appreciation of the idea and its application to *our* needs, *our* situation, and *our* people.

We do have a number of residential adult education centers in Canada, among these are the Institut Cooperatif Desjardin in Levis, Quebec, the UAW Residential Centre in Port Elgin, Ontario, and the Banff Centre in Alberta. Of these, the Banff Centre has been inspired by the Scandinavian folk high schools. However, useful and important as these centers are, they come nowhere near the original and still timely concept. The Quetico Centre comes the nearest in Canada to the folk high school idea. We also do have a number of camps and residential centers operated by various church groups. All of these institutions operate on a two track system, sponsoring their own educational programs, but also renting their facilities to outside groups for their own educational and meeting purposes and thus many have become "educational hotels."

I would like to close my commentary with an edited version of my comments at the 1983 Grundtvig conference in Copenhagen:

I am concerned about how Grundtvig's ideas apply to a modern, highly industrialized, immigrant society.

In our increasingly more specialized and automated society, a society where we most likely never again will have full employment, a society where self-renewal will be more and more important, we need more than ever before a general, liberal education rather than only vocational or professional training.

Most of us have lost our myths, forgotten our historical connections, and have become print-oriented. However, I see signs of growing awareness of these losses and of trends to regain lost ground. I see these in the increasing interest in the mythology of the Indian and Inuit people, in the almost explosive interest in one's roots, in genealogy, which is sweeping North America, in the interest in folk art, folk singing and folk dancing, as well as in the renewal of the art of story-telling

I feel very strongly that relatively new, especially immigrant societies, like Canada, need to find and to establish their own cultural identity, on a creative combination of their rich ethnic heritage of the peoples who make up Canada, influenced by the wisdom of the original native people, and interacting with the natural environment in which we live.

For the kind of awakening Grundtvig was talking about, for the kind of self-renewal and social consciousness we need today, we need residential liberal adult education, because it is precisely in that setting, removed temporarily from the daily business of earning one's own living, that we can be periodically re-charged in a fellowship with others in lively interaction, can find our bearings in our unending quest for the meaning of our individual lives and that of our people, and can continue to grow

and develop our potential, both as creative individuals and as responsible members of society. But, I would remind us that this refuge needs to be only temporary, that, like the young farmers of Grundtvig's time we need to return to our daily life, hopefully renewed and inspired.

We would do well to reexamine again the folk high school idea and its various manifestations in several countries to see what we can learn and what we can apply or adapt to the Canadian situation and needs in the 1990s. In my view, the Dutch folk high schools would be an especially interesting model to explore.