

Department: American Lutheran History  
Author: Clint Schnekloth  
Title: J.W.C. Dietrichson at Koshkonong

J.W.C. Dietrichson's photograph hangs on the wall of the education wing of East Koshkonong Lutheran Church. Tucked into the frame is a somewhat unusual relic – clippings of his hair.<sup>i</sup>

This is not the only material history present in the Koshkonong church and community from the Dietrichson era. Also adorning the archives is a chasuble worn when he presided at communion, as well as a small table he used for the first communion service at which he presided in the Koshkonong settlement, August 30, 1844, in the Amund Anderson barn. The next day, a Monday, Dietrichson conducted a service and administered communion under a great oak tree in the western part of the settlement at the Knud Aslaksen Juve farm. The barn and the tree (or trees) are no longer standing, but stone markers commemorate the two places Dietrichson first conducted worship on the Koshkonong prairie.

Not every era nor every people mark the events of their life so carefully. Generations have come and gone in many congregations with little or no archiving and certainly no monuments. Not every generation has preserved clergy vestments, erected markers, or saved clippings of hair. Most pastors have not kept such meticulous records, nor have they published books. This makes Dietrichson interesting not only for the historic impact of his work, but also for his historical sensibility. Dietrichson was especially mindful of the contribution his work and ministry would make to the history of Norwegian Lutheranism in America. E. Clifford Nelson, possibly the most thorough historian of Norwegian Lutheran church history in America, and the editor of Dietrichson's *A Pioneer Churchman*, writes:

*The reader will note how frequently the pastor-author was writing more than a mere chronicle of events; he was consciously interpreting and selecting materials that were judged of value and interest for posterity. For example, at one point he parenthetically apologized for the seemingly excessive detail: "I have so thoroughly reported on these events in this journal because it seemed likely that in the history of the Norwegian Lutheran Church here in Wisconsin, long after my time, they will be of importance. It is precisely the details in a case that make it possible for an outsider to gain a somewhat clear insight into conditions of the past." It is this kind of historical intelligence that characterizes both The Parish Journal and The Travel Narrative... we are indebted to him for giving us a glimpse into the travail of body and soul experienced by the thousands of immigrants who forged a new life in the American West.<sup>ii</sup>*

Dietrichson was born in Norway in 1815, and took his degree in theology at the University of Christiania in 1837. He married in 1839, but his wife died soon after. A religious businessman, P. Sorenson, financed Dietrichson's trip to the United States to found a Norwegian Lutheran Church. He was ordained by the local bishop for this call, and on February 26, 1844, set out for America, arriving in New York on July 9. After preaching in New York and Buffalo in German congregations, he arrived in Milwaukee on August 5, met with Reverend Clausen at the Muskego settlement, and then left for the unchurched settlement at Koshkonong. He preached August 30, September 1 and 2, organized East Koshkonong on October 10 and West Koshkonong on October 13. He helped dedicate church buildings for these congregations on December 19, 1844, and January 31, 1845, and may have had a hand in quarrying stone for the project.

In the course of a return trip to Norway, he visited many other Norwegian settlements in Wisconsin and Illinois and made a number of observations in his travel book about Indians, Mormons, and other groups and "sects" that he encountered. He published his book, *Journey among the Norwegian Emigrants in the United States of North America*, as a kind of "anti-emigration" tract, but he simultaneously made appeals in newspapers and theological journals for theologians or clergy to travel to America to serve as pastors in the Norwegian communities. Unable to find another pastor to accept a call to Koshkonong, he returned to America in 1846 with his second wife to accept it himself. As Nelson writes: "He looked upon his call not as the task of serving some specific congregation in the New World, but as an opportunity to bring order out of the ecclesiastical chaos in the wilderness. In his own words, his call was 'to get information about the religious needs of the emigrant Norwegians, and to attempt to institute church order among them.'"<sup>iii</sup>

He remained at Koshkonong until 1850. Afterwards he served a few difficult calls in Norway, eventually demitted the ministry, and became a postmaster. He died of a stroke in Copenhagen, Denmark, on November 14, 1883.

One of the best quotes introducing the arrival of Dietrichson to the Norwegian settlements comes from another wonderful primary source document of the era, Søren Bache's diary of 1839–1847, *A Chronicle of Old Muskego*. Bache writes: "We expected this day to pass as quietly as the others, but... this morning I met a strapping young man down by the road. His tall, powerful build and rosy cheeks reminded me of some young giant from the Norwegian mountains. We shook hands and introduced ourselves, and I then learned that he was J. W. C. Dietrichson."<sup>iv</sup>

## **The Travel Narrative**

Dietrichson's *Travel Narrative* is an evocative piece of emigrant and travel literature, comparing favorably with other more frequently mentioned works, such as O.E. Rolvaag's pioneer novel, *Giants in the Earth*. For example, Dietrichson begins his narrative with a description of the harrowing crossing of the Atlantic.

*Although a journey can be very monotonous when one sees only sea and sky, the monotony can be a joy as well. What is more beautiful than a quiet night on the broad Atlantic, when the ship, without a care, is driven by the fluttering sails before an imperceptible breeze, the billows rocking the vessel like a child's cradle, the moon casting its shining silvery beam across the water's surface, the stars playing on the blue waves. And even when a storm comes up and roils the sea and the spray reaches the shortened topsail, there is majesty, beauty, and power. The ocean birds and, occasionally, a whale are our only guides when these storms come up. The more serious-minded person will learn from an experience like this to fold his hands in prayer, lift his heart to the Lord of heaven and the sea, and say, "He who rules over the storm and weather can say to the billows 'so far and no farther.'"*<sup>v</sup>

Reading this, you get a sense of the man's piety, first inspired when he himself was in confirmation, then tested and deepened at the death of his wife. Inspired by the writings of Nikolai Grundtvig, Dietrichson had it as his goal to help lead the Norwegian pioneers away from the many sects proliferating in the New World and back to the ship of the church, grounded in baptism, formed through liturgy and ecclesial structures (especially properly ordained ministers) and guided by the Norwegian hymnal and Lutheran confessions. So he writes of his experience in New York: "To be thrown among all these sects from the wildest emotionalism to the most brazen atheism and not be taken in by them requires a religious stability few of the immigrants of our nationality possess."<sup>vi</sup>

One of the most fascinating sections of E. Clifford Nelson's two-volume work on the Lutheran Church among Norwegian-Americans is an early section on "the trail blazers for the church." He compares the three earliest Norwegian clergy in Wisconsin—Elling Eielsen, C. L. Clausen, and J. W. C. Dietrichson. Nelson identifies Eielsen as the "evangelist," Clausen as the "pastor," and Dietrichson as the "churchman." This seems just about right. Eielsen and Dietrichson are the two most in conflict with each other, because they are each zealous but in different ways. The churchly piety of Grundtvig influenced Dietrichson, which was why he was so committed to establishing a Norwegian Lutheran Church in America. Eielsen was greatly influenced by the low church revivalism of the era, and although he made special efforts to introduce the Lutheran catechism to the communities he served, he was more of a lay preaching, prayer meeting, anti-clerical firebrand. Clausen essentially split the difference. He cared about regenerating souls and piety (the Haugean influence), but believed that would

happen most faithfully in a properly ordered church (the Grundtvigian influence). Clausen was committed to the local congregation and its ministry, and was less itinerant than either Eielsen or Dietrichson.

Dietrichson's firsthand account of the founding of the congregation continues:

*On my first visit, I held services three times, the first two in a barn and the third on a beautiful grass-covered slope under a big oak tree. At this last service, where about sixty people came to communion, I used as the text for my confessional address the words from a psalm [78:19]: "Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?" And for my sermon, Christ's words: "Come to me all ye who are heavy laden." It was a clear and beautiful day and for me an unforgettable one. On this first visit, I was asked by a great many of the settlers to come and work among them, and this request was later made in writing."<sup>vii</sup>*

Later, after the churches were built, he wrote:

*Heretofore we had held services in poor cabins, where I was pushed and shoved around against the clay-chinked logs and where big chests served as pulpit, baptismal font, and altar table, all particularly inconvenient when administering the Lord's Supper. You can imagine how cozy and wonderful it was, both for the pastor and for the congregation, when our simple houses of God were completed."<sup>viii</sup>*

### **The Koshkonong Parish Journal**

Dietrichson's parish journal begins with an account of the first worship services on the prairie. Dietrichson then records his "vita," including a brief autobiography and certificate of ordination. Good order in the church was important to Dietrichson, so he drafted a series of "Four Points," asking the congregation "whether they earnestly desired to hold fast to the church into which they had been grafted by baptism, and whether they wanted [Dietrichson] to try to set their church affairs in order."<sup>ix</sup> (153). They replied with a unanimous yes, so Dietrichson asked them to voluntarily subscribe to the following.

- 1) Do you desire to belong to the Norwegian Lutheran congregation here?
- 2) To that end, are you willing to submit to the church order which the Church of Norway prescribes?
- 3) Do you promise hereafter you will not accept or acknowledge anyone as your minister and pastor unless he can prove that he is a rightly called and regularly ordained Lutheran pastor according to the order of the Church of Norway? And will you render the pastor, thus called to be your clerical authority, the deference and obedience that a church member owes his pastor, in everything he may require in conformity with the church Ritual of your fatherland Norway?
- 4) Will you, by signing your name or by permitting your name to be signed, avow that you join this church on the basis of the foregoing conditions?

Although these four rules may appear authoritarian to modern ears, Oliver K. Olson observes in what may be the only published review of *A Pioneer Churchman*, "One's estimate of Dietrichson depends wholly on one's presuppositions."<sup>x</sup> Most historians writing about Dietrichson have characterized him as imperious, rigid, authoritarian, the "incarnation of church officialdom," or in E. Clifford Nelson's colorful description, "a barrel-chested proponent of ministerial authority and ecclesial order."<sup>xi</sup> By contrast, Olson writes:

*His contemporaries in Wisconsin suspected that his bold assertion of church authority was the extension in the New World of the Old World's aristocratic system. But in spite of the resentment which attended his organizing activity and which has colored his reputation in seminary lectures, Dietrichson must be credited for having done what he was convinced he was called to do. He brought church order to the confused Norwegian frontier community and bequeathed to a large part of the Lutheran community in the United States a constitutional model, both for congregations and synods.<sup>xii</sup>*

The debatable term in this quote is the word "confused." For better or worse, Dietrichson believed that ministerial authority and ecclesial structures would best combat heresy, lukewarmness of faith, and immorality on the frontier. He believed there was rampant confusion that church order could help ameliorate. One of the most common open immoralities in the frontier Norwegian community was drunkenness. Dietrichson tried a variety of methods to combat the sin. Patience was one tactic. Another, and more drastic, included offering to purchase the entire stock of alcohol at the local saloon in order to pour it out. When the saloon keeper refused, Dietrichson excommunicated him.

The most colorful story illustrating Dietrichson's battle with drunkenness has come to be called the "affair Funklein." Dietrichson described Halvor Christian Pederson Funklein as a "drinker, brawler, and scoffer" and excommunicated him on the Sunday after Easter, 1845. Excommunicated members could attend worship, but they had to sit in the seat specified for them at the back of the church. "At this Funklein threatened to burn the church and kill the pastor, and then promised that he would bring a bottle of whisky to church and sit in a front pew. He appeared in church on Pentecost,<sup>xiii</sup> but at the behest of Dietrichson was forcibly ejected by Trovatten and two assistants. An embroidered version of the event has been preserved [though not so much to the present day] as oral tradition in the Koshkonong parish."<sup>xiv</sup> According to this oral tradition:

*Funklein sampled the contents of his pocket flask at regular intervals during the sermon. When Dietrichson could stand the insult no longer, he cried, "I cannot preach with this abominable sinful wretch before me, drinking whisky in church! Throw him out!" Outdoors in the church yard, Funklein challenged his expellers:*

*“Tell me why I have been thrown out of church.” “Because you are a pig and drink whisky in church.” “Do you mean to say I drank whisky in church? Look here, Ole [Trovatten?], you know whisky as well as I do [Trovatten was also an alcoholic and later succumbed to death as a result of the disease]; take this flask and tell me what kind of whisky is in it.” Ole and the others, thereupon, tasted the bottle and discovered its contents to be nothing but water, whereupon Funklein remarked, “I am an old man. My throat becomes dry when I sit still; therefore I have to quench my thirst with a little water.” The legend concludes with the laconic comment that this was doubtless the first time there was water in Funklein’s flask.<sup>xv</sup>*

Funklein charged the three men who carried him out of church with assault and battery, and the jury found the men guilty.

This was not the only confrontation and legal battle for Dietrichson while serving at Koshkonong. When Dietrichson returned with his new bride to fulfill his promise to resume his call if no other candidate was willing to serve there, he moved into his new parsonage and was immediately abused by a group of neighbors, many of whom he had rebuked as sinners during his previous stay or were Funklein sympathizers. A significant portion of the *Koshkonong Parish Journal* is an account of the struggle.<sup>xvi</sup> Dietrichson begins his account of the affair thus:

*Although [the location of the parsonage] may be well chosen in other respects, still, for the present pastor, it has truly proved to be the most unfortunate place that could have been chosen in the entire Norwegian settlement. For if what Luther says in his explanation of the Fourth Petition is true, that to daily bread belong also “peace and good neighbors,” then it has become apparent here that the pastor lacks that part of his “daily bread.” The fact is that the parsonage is surrounded by the meanest people in the whole congregation and by the worst neighbors that a man could have to put up with. I am robbed of outward peace by the most tiresome quarreling and carrying on.<sup>xvii</sup>*

Then it gets worse. The hecklers make up and sing filthy songs about the pastor night and day. The plotters take their complaints to church on Sunday morning outside the church and in the church entryway, accusing the pastor of misappropriation of funds. Harsh words and condemnations escalate, so much so that by the afternoon of that day, when Dietrichson arrives back at the parsonage, it “was filled with the most faithful and upright members of the east half of the parish. They asked me sorrowfully what they should do.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Dietrichson demands that the congregation bring suit against the accused, against Thomas Johnsen Braaten for godless conduct, disturbing worship, and threats against the pastor. He threatens to resign if they don’t. Thomas was

acquitted on all charges. Dietrichson, as in the Funklein affair, considered this a travesty of justice, an example of contempt towards Norwegians by the justice system, and a blow to the right of congregations to set their own rules and procedures. Dietrichson proceeded to write an extensive letter to the congregation, which he read to them in the parsonage of the Koshkonong Norwegian Lutheran Church on October 3, 1847. The congregation promised to do everything in their power to keep peace for the church and the parsonage, and it seems they did so, for Dietrichson was able to remain until the expiration of his call in the congregation without recording other complaints. By December 2, 1847, Dietrichson was able to write, "The order of the church seems now to be well-established."

Besides these frontier tales, Dietrichson is remembered for his work in helping draft a synodical constitution that became the basis of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Although the synod was organized later, after Dietrichson had returned to Norway, it is his draft that formed the basis for the constitution. It is a model of brevity and clarity. As Nelson writes, "The constitution which had been prepared by J. W. C. Dietrichson in 1849, adopted in 1851, annulled in 1852, revised and adopted again in 1853, was a carefully worked out instrument of church polity which sought to adapt the spirit and practice of the Church of Norway to the American frontier."<sup>xix</sup> Dietrichson would likely be proud of this description, because it was his intent, as much as possible, to adapt the spirit and practice of the Church of Norway to the American context.

CLINT SCHNEKLOTH is Pastor at East Koshkonong Lutheran Church in East Koshkonong, Wisconsin.

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1. This endnote's text is missing!

2. E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian-Americans* (CITY: Augsburg, 1960), 37-8. For those interested in studying Dietrichson in greater depth, resources are few and unfortunately, most of the works in English are out of print. E. Clifford Nelson's aforementioned magisterial work is the most comprehensive and helps place Dietrichson in historical context. A slim volume published by the Norwegian-American Historical Association in 1973, *A Pioneer Churchman: J. W. C. Dietrichson in Wisconsin 1844-1850*, collects his *Travel Narrative* and *Parish Journal* in English translation. The only essay in English on Dietrichson of which I am aware was published in the March 1946 (!) issue of the *Magazine of Wisconsin History*. The author, Einar Haugen, was the head of the Scandinavian Department at the University of Wisconsin and wrote the essay while on leave serving as the American Cultural Attaché to Norway. Interestingly, he borrowed the *Parish Journal* from Rev. Henry Thompson of East Koshkonong, because at that time the document was archived at the parsonage

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in Utica, Wisconsin. It had seldom been made use of by historians until Einar Haugen discovered it, and this warranted the publication of his essay in *The Magazine of Wisconsin History*.

3. Nelson, 99.

4. Søren Bache's, *A Chronicle of Old Muskego* (Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1951), 96.

5. *A Pioneer Churchman*, 47.

6. *Ibid.*, 55.

7. *Ibid.*, 79.

8. *Ibid.*, 83.

9. *Ibid.*, 153.

10. Oliver K. Olson, "Title," *Lutheran Quarterly* 27 (1975): 95-96.

11. Nelson, 95.

12. Olson, 95.

13. It is questionable whether Funklein knew this was a liturgically appropriate day to appear as a drunkard in church, for the first apostles were thought to be drunk when the Holy Spirit descended on them and they spoke in various tongues (Acts 2:1-11).

14. Nelson, 109.

15. *Ibid.*, 110.

16. *A Pioneer Churchman*, 178-190.

17. *Ibid.*, 179.

18. *Ibid.*, 181.

19. Nelson, 159.