

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

Anne Ipsen

Anne Schneider

Writing is a mysterious creative process and I often wonder what in-spires a story? From where do the ideas come? As a writer of historical fiction, I usually start with a place and its history. Then the people who might have lived there but never did appear unbidden, clamoring to have their stories told. When I write, it is as if I am recalling a memory rather than creating from my imagination. Yet there is freedom since memory must be faithful to the truth but fiction only needs to be true to what could have been. According to Greek mythology, the mother of the nine muses is Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. Perhaps that is truth and not mythology and creativity is truly a gift from the gods.

My most unusual muse was Anne Schneider. I met her after an impulse led me to visit a Danish heritage community in Southwestern Minnesota. An inner voice whispered that here was the setting for my next book, an historical novel about Tyler where Danish settlers built a folk-school and church in the 1880's. They called it Danebod—the helper of the Danes. A series of such Danish folkschools were founded throughout the US around the turn of the twentieth century but Danebod is the only one that remains open, at least in the summer. A retirement village is near the old school and I spent a fascinating afternoon visiting one of the residents.

"You need to talk to Anne Schneider, back in Minneapolis," she said. "She used to visit an old farm west of here, always asking questions. As a young woman—that would have been back in the thirties and forties—she carried about a notebook and talked to those that had been homesteaders. She would ask them about 'the first days,' where they came from and why."

I called Anne Schneider for permission to visit. She lived in a nursing home near Lake Harriet in Minneapolis, spending much of the day sitting in a chair by the window. Her failing vision limited her view but she could still see the outline of the trees waiving in the breeze and liked the feel of the sun on her face. Her eyes might be dimmed but not her mind, which was as quick and full of curiosity as if she were still a child running across the prairie.

I explained that I was doing background research for a novel about the Danish settlement in Tyler and asked her to tell me anything that she could recall.

"What's your novel about?" she asked.

"I don't know the plot, yet," I replied. "I just had an impulse to write a story about the early days, so I am trying to get a feel for what it was like back then." Little did I know what was ahead, what a treasure was to be revealed in the weeks to come.

Anne became even more animated, as if excited by what I had said. Her habit of asking questions had not changed and soon she had pulled my life's story out of me. I felt as if I were interviewing for a job. We formed an instant bond of friendship, as sometimes happens even between complete strangers on a first meeting, and the conversation flowed easily. We discovered that we had not just our first names in common but

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also a Danish heritage. We were both fascinated by the blending of immigrants from diverse origins and shared a theory that those from Denmark converted their neighbors to their ideals of community. Anne told me several anecdotes that made the times of the early pioneers come alive. However, I soon noticed that she was never in the stories, that any questions about herself were ignored or deflected.

All too soon, the tea had grown cold in our neglected cups and Anne was looking tired. It was time for me to leave. "May I come again?" I asked, anxiously. "May I bring a recorder and take down some of your stories?"

"By all means, but come in the morning—I'm better then, my mind is clearer."

It was hard to imagine more clarity than I had just witnessed. She seemed excited at the prospect of company in what must have become a narrow and dull existence for such an active mind. As we shook hands goodbye to seal an unspoken bargain, she smiled triumphantly, as if at a momentous secret.

Anne and I soon became very good friends and I visited her on a regular basis. I timed my arrival for when she was finishing breakfast, bringing lunch for the two of us to share at the end of the morning. We chatted while drinking a second cup of tea; then she asked me to put the breakfast tray out in the hall and to bring out "The Box." This treasure chest was a round tin that used to contain Danish butter cookies but was now a trove of hundred-year-old keepsakes. Each yellowing scrap of paper contained a hand-copied poem or quotation in Danish or English, and a few in Hebrew and even Norwegian. Each source and author was carefully attributed. Some of the scraps were attached to news clippings and letters, the ink so faded that they were mostly unreadable. That Anne's failing eyes could no longer have read them did not matter as she knew them all by heart.

Pulling out a scrap of yellowing paper from the top of the jumble she asked me to read the quotation. Before I could finish, a story welled up in her mind, and she began to talk. This was our routine each week. How much was absolute truth and how much was a product of her fertile imagination, I was never sure, since any question, except the gentlest reminder of where she had left off when we were interrupted, was useless. The readable parts of the clippings and letters were evidence, but Anne may also simply have used them as a foundation for stories about people, real or imaginary, who were either very old or had died when she visited the farm.

I did suggest that we should write a book together. "Once I'm dead, you can write whatever you want, but don't use my real name and don't use any of the family pictures," she said firmly.

"What pictures?" I asked, hoping for a family album. Anne pretended not to hear, being very good at ignoring questions she did not wish to answer. I readily promised confidentiality, but my protestations that we should work on a manuscript together were to no avail.

After each visit, I transcribed the recording onto its own computer file but despaired of ever making any sense of the jumble. The stories were in-

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ternally consistent, but were told from several points of view and jumped to different periods of time. I decided just to let them come in whatever order Anne chose to tell them, treat each as a separate chapter and worry about their sequence later, hoping that I could eventually piece the puzzle into a coherent picture.

I was surprised at how seriously she took our meetings. During the first few, the telephone rang several times and she sweetly but firmly told the caller, "I'll ring you back, Anne is here and we're working." Later, she refused to answer altogether and then the phone stopped ringing, as if her friends had been told not to call when I was to visit. At first I thought she was being considerate of *my* time and *my* work, but much as she appeared to enjoy my visits, there was an underlying sense of urgency. I sensed that she wanted to go through all the scraps of paper in the box and was afraid that we would run out of time.

The main stories took place in the 1890's about the friendship of Captain Peter Larsen and his wife Karen with Jesse Schneider. Jesse, a scholarly Jewish peddler, intrigued me; his presence on the prairie seemed improbable and his friendship with the Danish Larsens unlikely. That his last name was the same as Anne's only raised more unanswered questions.

Soon I was enmeshed in Karen and Peter's life on their farm and they became as real to me as if they were my own family. I eagerly listened to the stories of those who lived on *Babel Farm*, including the Petersen children and several young immigrant women learning American housekeeping from Karen. This polyglot of cultures underscored the importance to the early settlers of keeping their differing traditions while becoming new Americans.

The mystery deepened of why Jesse, the scholarly Jew, and successful Captain Peter settled on the Midwestern prairie. I had to curb my impatience as there was no way to make the storyteller deviate from her path and my growing curiosity was not to be satisfied until we had almost reached the end of the pile in the box. If I tried to skip to scraps at the bottom, she smiled sweetly and said, "Not yet," and launched into another story of the expanding farm on the prairie, their children, and friends.

I found it difficult to stop, but by the end of the morning Anne needed lunch and then asked me to help her to bed for a rest. She never hesitated to pick up the thread the following visit as long as I gave her the right clipping and read the last few sentences of my transcribed notes from where we had left off. I soon discovered that the easiest way to clear up problems within a chapter was to find the correct scrap and have her tell the story again. If she realized that I asked her to repeat some stories several times, she never let on.

Anne was growing visibly weaker with each week that passed, and as we were nearing the end of the pile in the box, our sessions grew shorter but increased in frequency to several times a week. "I'm tired now," she would say midway through the morning. I was afraid that my visits were too much for her, but she always asked me to come back as soon as I could. Even the staff at the Home urged me to visit, "You mean so much to her; she'll tell you when she's tired." The final week, I came for a brief time every day and, in short installments, she described the gathering of the

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Larsen and Schneider families at a dinner to celebrate the birth of Karen and Peter's youngest child, Rachel.

At the end of the description that was to become the final chapter, Anne's voice failed. I remained sitting by her bed, holding her hand, neither of us speaking. Then she pointed to the framed photograph on the table of a young smiling woman. "My mother's name was Rachel," she whispered and closed her eyes. I tiptoed out.

Soon after telling that last story about the last scrap of paper, she passed away in her sleep. I was told that she had a pleased smile on her lips and imagined her saying, "I finished my job and now I can rest."

After the funeral, her lawyer gave me "The Box." Anne had left instructions that it was to be mine. On top of the pile of yellowing slips of paper was the photograph of Rachel.

The daunting task of arranging the chapters into a logical sequence turned out to be much easier than I had feared. There was really only one main thread with flashbacks to before Jesse immigrated and Peter and Karen arrived at *Babel Farm*. At first I tried to arrange everything chronologically, but the stories refused to fall into place. Then I noticed a small numeral in the lower corner of each scrap of paper and found that these were the key to the order. Anne turned out to be a better storyteller than was at first apparent. Despite changing points of view and time jumps the chapters were coherent and each related to the scrap of paper that she used to unlock her memory. The simple addition of some transitions and a few interpolations created an engaging tale. I believe that Anne always meant to write a book and that the quotations, so carefully collected, formed her outline. Whether her dimming eyes or frail body gave out before she could put the work on paper, we will never know. Or perhaps she discovered that she was a storyteller, not a writer.

Anne never explained her own relationship to Karen, Peter, and Jesse Schneider. Were they all her grandparents or was Schneider her married name? Did the Larsen and the Schneider families only remain friends through the years or did they intermarry and was Anne herself the link? Was her mother the baby Rachel Larsen of the final chapter or only the inspiration? Perhaps her unwillingness to explain her connection to the story was to give me the freedom to put my own into the creation of the book. I decided to let the mystery remain. Whatever Anne Schneider planned and fate contrived, *Running before the Prairie Wind* became mostly as she told it.

I called Anne Schneider my most unusual muse. She came to me suddenly as I was in the midst of writing about Karen, Peter, and Jesse, the fictional characters she supposedly inspired. Her appearance was as unbidden as theirs, her story as much a product of my imagination; yet she seemed to spring completely formed from Mnemosyne's head, much as Athena sprang fully armed from that of Zeus. In writing her story, I feel that I recalled a cherished friend rather than created a work of fiction.

— Anne Ipsen writes memoir, historical fiction, and occasional essays. *Running before the Prairie Wind* her latest novel. For more information, visit <http://www.AnneIpsen.com>