Essay #1: Toward Community in a New Land, by Wilfred F. Bunge

The first major group of Norwegian immigrants to America arrived in 1825 in the sloop *Restauration*. They settled first in New York, moving later to Illinois, mostly people of the land, attracted by good soil. Others joined them in Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota, forming clusters of farm families, connected by language and culture.

Their shared culture centered in the church—worship and major occasions (baptism, confirmation, wedding, funeral). They had brought their Bibles and hymnbooks with them, and they quickly got to work organizing the church as the basis for community in this new place.

Some pastors followed their countrymen to America, including recent graduates of the University of Christiania (Oslo). Clergy couples in Norway enjoyed social privilege and prestige in a well-established culture. The challenge of America was to transform traditions of that culture for a new setting. This was for the strong of heart and adventurous in spirit, the wives as well as the young pastors.

In 1853 these immigrants established the Norwegian Synod for the shared work of congregations. Pastors provided leadership; lay participation was fundamental to its success. An early challenge was theological education for potential pastors. A temporary arrangement with Concordia College and Theological Seminary in St. Louis accommodated Norwegian immigrant students, with Peter Laurentius Larsen as Norwegian professor. Larsen assumed his professorship on October 14, 1859, a date commemorated at Luther College as Founders’ Day of Norwegian Lutheran higher education in America.

The outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861 and the resultant uncertainty in St. Louis speeded plans of the Norwegian Synod for its own school. In June 1861 the Synod chose Decorah as the location. Absent suitable accommodations in Decorah, the school opened that September in a vacant parsonage at Halfway Creek, Wisconsin. There were two professors, President Larsen and Friedrich A. Schmidt (a Missouri Synod pastor fluent in English). Sixteen students, eleven at any one time, ranging in age from 16 to 26, varied widely in preparation. The parsonage was the school—dormitory, classroom, apartments for professors and caretaker/cook, and dining room for all. That’s how it all began, the first year of Norwegian Luther College.