Essay #5: Where Were the Women? By Mary Hull Mohr

For its first 75 years Luther College was a men’s school. But that did not mean that women had no role in Luther’s early history. Soon after the college arrived in Decorah in 1862, seven women in the Lutheran Ladies Aid took on the task of mending the boys’ clothes. There was a need. Thirty of the 34 students in that year were in the preparatory department, some as young as 14.

It was Diderikke Brandt, however, who assumed the larger role of “mothering” the students. The daughter of a Norwegian pastor, she had come with her husband Nils Brandt to a parish in Wisconsin. When he was called in 1865 to be campus pastor and teacher at Luther, as well as pastor of the Lutheran congregation in Decorah, the family lived in the first Main Building. Two years later they moved into the newly constructed Lutheran parsonage (now Campus House).

Diderikke joined the “menders” and took home with her the more difficult sewing tasks. And she saw another need. She started to raise money for the poorer students by selling hand-crafted articles, communion wafers, and clergyman’s ruffs. Students did not pay tuition in those days but did pay for their board.

Diderikke was also aware that the young students, most from farm families, needed more than an intellectual education. She extended hospitality to them, many remembering the Sunday afternoons at her home—the music they heard and sang and the coffee and cookies they enjoyed. One student commented later, “Even if not a word was said, those social gatherings made you consider your own fitness to be there, both as to dress and manners.” Perhaps most importantly Diderikke did not consider it an obligation. She was a fun-loving woman who genuinely enjoyed the opportunities she had to enliven the experience of students as well as others in the community.

After the Brandts left Decorah in 1884, the second Mrs. Larsen, Ingeborg Astrup, regularly took articles home from the “mender meetings,” gave coffee parties for the boys, and invited poor students to spend holidays with her family. So the tradition continued.

The fund-raising also continued. On the occasion of the college’s 50th anniversary in 1911, the Lutheran women’s group in Decorah organized a drive among the women of the Norwegian Synod to purchase a replica of E.F.A. Rietschel’s statue “Martin Luther at Worms” which we still admire on campus. Along with Brandt Hall, it stands as a tangible reminder of the love that these early pioneer women had for the college and for its students.