

# 'I'm just the ad person'

Those of us who wander into downtown Junction City at odd hours find it to be captivating this time of year.

The concrete is so clean you could lie flat on your back and soak in the morning sun's warmth from both sides.

The deserted streets are lined with painstakingly designed booths, many freshly painted. Their peaked, shingled roofs beckon invitingly by day, but loom ominously at night. The booths give off a fragrance of new paint and Pine Sol.

Row after row of red banners hang like colorful sentinels overhead. If there's a breeze, their corners flutter in a friendly way. If not, they hang silent, held rigid by their invisible wooden spines.

Petunias reach down from baskets above, and up from planters below. Their colorful faces provide an occasional sweetly-scented breath.

By day downtown Junction City, or Forbindelsestad as it has become, is alive with busy workers. Rome wasn't built in a day, but Forbindelsestad must go up in three.

But when everybody's gone home, the solitary wanderer can marvel at their accomplishments and perhaps ponder the reasons they go to so much trouble to create this picture-perfect but short-lived Scandinavian hamlet.

What is so special about celebrating an ethnic heritage?

I offer Jorgen and Anna Nielsen as exhibit A.

Both were born in Denmark in the early 1890's. Anna came to the United States with her family in 1906. Jorgen, on his own since the age of 14, ventured here that same year to help build a general store in the Danish community of Askov, Minnesota. There they met but nowhere is there evidence that it was love at first sight.

On their 68th wedding anniversary in 1979, Jorgen told Tri-County News editor Paul Fattig that he supposed it was, "but that was so many years ago I don't quite remember."

A family history written by their son, Axel Nielsen, mentions Anna's wonderful cooking as being a big contributor to the union, "besides all her other charms."

And it goes on to say that Anna, realizing that here was a nice man who already had a house and owned his own farm, accepted his proposal.

Never let it be said that the Scandinavians plunge into anything without careful consideration.

The Niensens were hard workers because hard work was the survival technique of the day. Jorgen plowed his rock-rich land and each winter's frost would raise

up a few more rocks. Anna had plenty of chores on the farm herself and began raising a family of eight children.

As Jorgen told Paul Fattig, "I like Minnesota . . . but you have to have something to eat." So he and Anna loaded up the seven children born by 1926 into their 1920 Model T Ford and headed for Oregon. There a Danish community called Junction City had been started by A.C. Nielsen and was prospering according to Anna's parents who had already made the move.

It took the family from June 21 until July 6 to make it to Junction City, partially due to the fact that a tire blew at least every 100 miles and sometimes twice in one town. They camped and picnicked along the way and were warned at the foot of the Rockies that they'd never make it over the "Camel's Hump," a pass in Idaho that was rumored to be "straight up."

They made it through sheer Scandinavian determination and luck.

The Niensens settled in Junction City and still live in a frame house that is so close to the festival grounds that you can hear accordians all day long. Their yard is exquisite. Their children often joke that when the house is finally sold, they will haul away the topsoil around it to put on their own gardens.

Speaking of their children, the children have grandchildren by now. Jorgen and Anna's newest great grandson, Erik Nielsen, plays the newborn Ola in the festival pageant, "Hardanger Wedding."

He was a natural for the part.

Jorgen and Anna love the Scandinavian Festival dearly. In years past they worked just as hard on it as anyone else. In recent years they have strolled downtown, arm in arm and in costume, and charmed passers-by with their rich Danish accents and Jorgen's uncanny sense of humor. God willing, they will be with us for this 23rd festival.

After all, they aren't old. As Jorgen has said many times, "I'm not an old man . . . I've just lived a long time."

When Axel Nielsen went out in search of his first job, Jorgen told him to ask for it. "Stand straight, walk fast, speak confidently, and act like you'd got something on the ball," he advised. And on the job, "Do your very best. When people see it they won't know how long it took you but they will know whether you did a good job."

With such an ethnic heritage as the Niensens have handed down in Junction City, how could we not celebrate? And how could we not do our very best?