

# Eggertsen Men: Male Family Influences in Virginia Sorensen's *Kingdom Come* and *The Evening and the Morning*<sup>1</sup>

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—to the memory of my aunt Virginia Sorensen Waugh

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE HEROINES in Virginia Sorensen's adult fiction, their real-life counterparts, and inspirations. By contrast, relatively little attention has been given to her male characters and the family figures on whom many were based. As a self-proclaimed family chronicler, Sorensen found in her male forbears, indeed all members of the Eggertsen family, a significant source of information and ideas for her fiction.

Heroic Svend Madsen in *Kingdom Come*<sup>2</sup> was largely based on her paternal great-grandfather, Simon Peter Eggertsen, for example, just as the down-to-earth, iconoclastic railroad-man Ike in *The Evening and the Morning*<sup>3</sup> was faithfully based on Simon's grandson and Sorensen's father, Claude E. Eggertsen. The two real-life men shared both blood and many of the same values, but while Simon Peter was a dedicated convert and true believer, Claude was a dedicated skeptic and unbeliever. In emulation of her family's philosophical divide, Sorensen recreates this schism in the "male personality" of her family in such a way that both believing and doubting Danes speak with equal authority and

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1. This paper was first presented Thursday, 29 June 2000, at the 35th annual meeting of the MHA in Aalborg, Denmark.

2. Virginia Sorensen, *Kingdom Come* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960).

3. Virginia Sorensen, *The Evening and the Morning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949).

conviction in her fiction. In the end, we are impressed not, I think, by the piety or lack thereof in her characters, but rather by their loveable, albeit flawed, humanity.

#### KINGDOM COME

Set in Denmark 1850-52, *Kingdom Come* relates the historical and religious impetus for the earliest migration to America of Scandinavian converts to the LDS church. It also relates the touching love story between idealistic but indigent Svend Madsen and beautiful but spoiled Hanne Dalsgaard, daughter of the rich land-owner for whom Svend works. Orphaned at age five, Svend and a brother, Anders, have lived ever since "at the mercy of relatives whose houses were already overcrowded," then "put out to work. . .to whatever place in the neighborhood might need a handy boy" (21). Svend is separated from his brother Anders at an early age and, some time after coming to Johannedal, "having nothing and nobody," he falls in love with Hanne and "[t]o the bottom of his soul, he want[s]. . .nothing but to be the kind of man Hanne Dalsgaard might marry" (99). However, Svend is asked to leave Johannedal when Hanne's mother discovers their budding romance. He joins the Danish army to do battle against the Prussians, acquits himself with honor, and, along with his mentor and compatriot Simon Peter Melchiorsen, is introduced to Mormonism. It is through Apostle Snow, who preaches about helping "his people to a still greater perfection" (157), that Svend is reunited with his long-lost brother Anders, who works at an apothecary in Copenhagen. Taking their reunion as a "sign," Svend is shortly thereafter converted to Mormonism along with Simon Peter, the former Baptist. Both catch what Danish doctors of the time were calling "preaching sickness" (204).

When Hanne discovers Svend's new passion, she demands to know why he must "believe all those crazy things?" and laments that it "was bad enough before" (245). Despite her objections, Svend proselytizes all over Denmark and Norway and eventually wins Hanne over—if not to his faith, then to his love—so that at the end of the novel both are poised to take their journey across the North Sea to Liverpool and on to America.

We see many similarities to this story in the life of Simon Peter Eggertsen, Sorensen's great-grandfather, born near Odense in 1826. Like Svend, Simon Peter had been orphaned at five; afterwards, he was sent from family to family, working for his board and room while going to school. From 1848 to 1850, he fought with the Danish Army, taking an active part in twelve important battles, and, like Svend, survived to enjoy the "gigantic festival, celebrating the victorious end of the war in Slesvig-Holstein" (105). At 24, he found work with an apothecary in Copenhagen and remained for four years, during which time he became converted to Mormonism. Later, he served a three-year mission, then emigrated (like

Svend) to the United States. Unlike Sorensen's fictional hero, however, Simon did not meet his future mate Johanna Thomasen in Denmark; instead, he was introduced to her, or so it is believed, on board the *Westmoreland* after that ship sailed from Liverpool in 1857. Both crossed the plains pushing handcarts and were married in Salt Lake City in 1858.

It is interesting to note that, rather than giving the name of her great-grandfather (Simon Peter) to Svend, on whose life he is modeled, Sorensen instead gave it to Svend's compatriot and fellow Mormon convert. Nevertheless, by borrowing her Danish progenitor's history and namesake, she pays tribute to him. A less superficial difference in the narratives of the real Simon Peter and the fictional Svend is that Sorensen's great-grandfather left his sweetheart, an unbeliever, behind in Denmark and met his future wife en route to America. However, in terms of Sorensen's own background and concerns—especially regarding religious belief and disbelief—perhaps the most significant departure from the real Simon Peter's life has to do with the invention of his lost-then-found brother Anders. While Sorensen's great-grandfather had four brothers, there is no evidence he was reunited with any of these after they were orphaned. Why then did Sorensen invent Anders, and what purpose does he serve in the novel? In a letter to Bill Mulder in which Sorensen describes the "Gallery of Saints" she is creating for *Kingdom Come*, she also refers to "a Voice I had to invent, a very minor character really but one that became more and more necessary to object to everything!" Further, she finds in this character and in "many of his ideas about religion" that "this abominable one [is] ME—!"<sup>4</sup> Anders (the German root of this name, meaning "other"), is the doubter to whom Sorensen refers and the character who voices Sorensen's own objections, then, to Svend's (and her great-grandfather's) religion. Although he is blood kin to Svend and overjoyed at their reunion, Anders worries, for instance, that his brother is too naive to "know about the strange people in the world—the quacks, the pretenders, the peddlers of everything under God's sun"—in this case, the Mormons (176). Anders argues with Svend's companion Simon Peter about the Book of Mormon's assertion that, "as a punishment for their iniquities the. . . skin [of American Indians, or 'Lamanites'] had been darkened," since, he insists, "[t]hose who live in hot countries always have dark skin" (176). Anders also reads from "an exposure. . . about [the Mormons]. . . in the *Tidende*" in which the "true" motives of Mormon missionaries are laid bare: "They are recruiting whatever members of the European working and peasant classes they can find who are ignorant enough to listen and to be influenced,

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4. Letter by Sorensen from Edinboro, Pa., to Bill Mulder, dated 8 February 1954.

taking them to the American West where they are treated as indentured servants" (178). Anders argues that, according to this Danish newspaper, thousands of Mormon emigrants are being exploited for profit, and that the young Mormon women among them are being forced "into illegal marriages with the so-called 'Apostles' of the Mormon Church" (179). While Anders's arguments fail to shake his brother's newfound faith, neither do Svend's nor Simon Peter's counter-arguments change Anders's mind. Sorensen reinforces this "Doubting Dane" theme through other characters in the novel, but none is as intransigent or articulate in his skepticism as Anders Madsen. Nor does the position each brother takes alienate Sorensen's readers, as each is prompted out of love for his brother—Anders wanting to spare Svend humiliation and misery and Svend desiring to bring the light of religious truth, as he sees it, into Anders's life.

#### THE EVENING AND THE MORNING

Just as Lutheran suspicion of Mormonism is a palpable presence in *Kingdom Come*, so is the Mormon intolerance of "anybody different"<sup>5</sup> in Sorensen's most autobiographical novel, *The Evening and the Morning*. Most of the Mormon outrage in this novel is reserved for its heroine, Kate Black Alexander, modeled on Sorensen's maternal grandmother Geraldine Alice Alexander Blackett, who was, like Kate in the novel, one of "the natural ones who refuse to bother to pretend" (30). Yet another "natural one" in the novel who speaks his mind in opposition to the Mormon establishment is Ike Cluff, husband to Dessie, Kate's love child from an adulterous relationship. Modeled closely on Sorensen's father, Claude E. Eggertsen, Ike voices anti-church rhetoric similar to that Sorensen heard growing up. As she recalled in an interview with Mary Bradford: "My Dad made light of what we learned in Sunday School and never let us take it seriously." But unlike her Grandmother Blackett—one of twenty-seven children from a polygamous family—Sorensen's father showed "[n]o bitterness at all. Grandma caused the children to leave the church out of bitterness, but there was not a bitter hair on my father's head. He had that wonderful Danish humor and he dealt with things by teasing. All his life he had that marvelous humor."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Sorensen's beloved father, also known as "Old Dad" in the family, was the inspiration for Kate's free-thinking son-in-law, Ike Cluff. Kate, who has returned to Manti in 1922 to see about a pension due her

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5. Sorensen, *The Evening and the Morning*, 238.

6. Mary Lythgoe Bradford, "If You Are a Writer, You Write!" An Interview with Virginia Sorensen," *Dialogue* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1980): 22.

from her late husband's participation in the Black Hawk War, recognizes in Ike a kindred spirit whose most "vivid characteristic" is his "wistful humor" (216). A down-to-earth railroad man married to a fearful, possessive wife who worries over "what people were going to think, hear, say" (240), Ike (like his Danish forbears) has a tendency to "poke. . .fun at serious, important things" (105). He is also severely rational, which prevents him from making promises, since "acts of God made. . .promise[s] ridiculous" (106). An inveterate pipe smoker, he also drinks wine given him by Italian workers on the railroad. Yet he is fiercely loyal to his family and considerate of their needs. After Kate comes to town, he repairs her guitar so that she and the family might enjoy her playing (109). And at mealtimes, he "never ma[kes] conversation at table which could not be called talk for children as long as children were there" (169). And his love for Dessie is legendary: "There was an old story he told the children how she had lost him two jobs before they were married, because he would walk a ways with her and then she a ways with him and he a ways with her until he was hours late and the whole thing was off with the railroad" (110).

Kate feels a great "bond" with Ike "because of his very weakness, because of the way he turned off his hurt in humor," and because of his "courage to stand apart, to be different" (208). When Ike stands up to Kate's detractors—"God's spies"—he proves himself not only her ally but her "champion" (309). He is deeply egalitarian in his dealings with others and takes umbrage when the Italian wives of his fellow railroad workers are snubbed at the July 24<sup>th</sup> celebration, believing it "symbolic of the whole mess," that is, the tyranny and unhappiness caused by the paranoid obsessions of people in this small Mormon town. He is also selflessly compassionate, so that when one of the Italian workers, Paolo, is incapacitated by heart trouble, the already overworked Ike fills in as timekeeper until Paolo can get his promotion to a desk job in Salt Lake (219). Modestly, Ike keeps this to himself, so that Dessie begins to suspect he's having an affair with an Italian woman. The "physical shock of disapproval" she feels when he drinks too much of Paolo's homemade wine is clearly prompted less by concern for Ike's health than by jealousy (172). Yet this overly "fussy" (27), worried woman cannot help admiring this man who teases, smokes, sometimes drinks, makes "friends with queer people" (105), and speaks his mind. She "loved Ike. . .extravagantly. . . She loved his humor with the amazed appreciation of one who has spent too much time with seriousness. . . She loved his differences from other people" (108).

As alike as Sorensen's fictional Kate (the apostate grandmother in *The Evening and the Morning*) and her Grandma Blackett (the apostate in the short story by that title in *Where Nothing is Long Ago*) are Ike and Claude E. Eggertsen or "Old Dad." The name "Cluff" that Sorensen

gave to Ike comes from an Eggertsen connection as well: Simon Peter, Sr., on whom Svend Madsen was based in *Kingdom Come*, had four children—Simon Peter, Jr., Andrew (Claude's father), Lars, and Sarah who married a Cluff. Born in Provo in 1887, Claude was the middle son of Andrew Thomas Eggertsen, who appears as himself in the short story "The Other Lady" in *Where Nothing is Long Ago*.<sup>7</sup> When Andrew's mercantile business went bankrupt around 1901, Claude, only 13, was compelled to quit school and go to work, despite his outstanding athletic ability and excellent scholarship:

[He] got himself a job delivering telegrams for the railroad and slept and lived on a cot in the railroad station for some years. He. . . quickly picked up telegraphy which led to more responsible jobs for the railroad. . . [becoming] a clerk and typist. . . with only two fingers, the index and middle finger, of each hand [just like Ike!]. . . [and later he] became station agent on the mid-night shift in several different very rural stations, those lonely places along the railroad with water towers and supplies of coal or wood for the refueling. . . lacking radios, the trains had to get orders and warnings about on-coming or approaching traffic before the age of easy signals.<sup>8</sup>

After arriving in Thistle to work as a night operator, he met Deva, Grandma Blackett's 15-year-old daughter, and fell passionately in love. He soon became a regular caller at the Blackett home, frequently staying away from his job longer than permitted, so that eventually, his "neglect of duty"<sup>9</sup> led to his being discharged, just as Ike loses two jobs because of Dessie in the novel. Claude describes this time in his personal history when romance got in the way of work: "I got in the habit of leaving the depot whenever an opportunity presented itself, along in the evening and walking down to her house. Frequently I stayed longer than conditions at the office permitted and had a lot of trouble with the dispatchers, finally being turned in when I caused a big delay to a hot shot train and was discharged."<sup>10</sup> Claude and Deva were married, and eventually he was reinstated on the D&RG. In Thistle, where he worked as "third trick operator . . . from 11 pm to 8 am daily. . . [Deva], afraid to be left alone. . . usually stayed with [him] at the office, sleeping as best she could in the road-master's office at the end of the telegraph office."<sup>11</sup>

Children arrived—Claude, Jr., in 1909, Helen in 1910, and Virginia in

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7. Virginia Sorensen, *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955).

8. Paul Eggertsen's personal history, 2.

9. Claude Eggertsen's personal history, 3.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 4.

1912. In 1922 when *The Evening and the Morning* is set, their ages would have been the same: Virginia would have been 10 as Jean is in the novel, Helen (like Lou) 12, and Claude (like Carl) 13. Sorensen told me that Ike's family is her own, and that she was "Jean," during its happy Manti years when Claude Eggertsen, or "Old Dad" (as he was known), was railroad agent there.

As Old Dad's granddaughter (and Sorensen's niece), I myself remember vividly his good-natured humor. Just as he ribbed his own children about their Sunday School lessons, so too did he tease his grandchildren. Since we visited the Eggertsen home on Sundays after we'd been to church, we came to look forward to our parleys with Old Dad and his entertaining confabulations of what we'd been taught that morning. When I was first learning about Joseph Smith and the golden plates, for instance, Old Dad listened, apparently fascinated, to a recital of the facts, then, with great concern on his face, asked, "But what about poor old Mrs. Cumorah? Was that very nice of Joseph to steal her special plates?" Confounded, we didn't know whether to laugh or argue, but he got us thinking—and thinking in the Eggertsen home was a commandment that hung in the air, much as the ten commandments hung in the air at my paternal grandfather's house.

Paul Eggertsen, Claude's and Deva's fifth child, recollects in his personal history, that, while neither of his parents went to high school, "Both were extremely capable persons. . . well-read for their time, alert to politics and sociology and science and almost worshipful of books. . . . My mother simply ached for education. She seemed to live and be sustained by the fond hope that some day she would achieve some kind of educational or intellectual opportunities."<sup>12</sup> In fact, over "Munner's" (my grandmother Deva Eggertsen's) sink, hung a sign I shall never forget which read, "Your mind is your best weapon." An odd sign, I thought many years later, to have been hanging over a sink in a small Springville, Utah, home!

Both Old Dad and Munner saw to it that all their children completed college, and during their early years, they were encouraged to attend the LDS church—not so they might "get religion," but so they would have friends and recreational opportunities. Uncle Paul remembered them both with great admiration and love, as did his sister Virginia and my mother Geraldine. Munner's grandchildren remember her as warm, generously aware of everyone's needs, and conversationally witty, but also as something of a worrier like Dessie. What we remember most nostalgically about Old Dad, though, is his humor. Consistent with Kate's "inner vision" of Ike, Old Dad's humor was the "one [most] vivid characteristic

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12. Paul Eggertsen's personal history, 3.

which seemed to permeate everything [he]. . . did" (216). Like Ike, Old Dad "considered teasing—learning to be teased—a necessary part of a child's education for life, and he loved to attend to it" (88). I was powerfully reminded of Old Dad during the scene in which Ike teases Aline, Jean's best friend and the bishop's daughter, while she nervously toys with the firebox poker and says, "I don't care" to repeated offers of toast and jam. It would have been characteristic of Sorensen's own father to respond as Ike does in the novel by saying, "Well, then. . . if she—don't—care, Dessie, let's just forget the whole thing and make a new rule—anybody without toast and jam on her face before nine o'clock in the morning has to stand by the stove and monkey with a poker *all day long*" (89). Old Dad's teasing, like Ike's, was never cruel, just provocative, jolly, and wonderfully tailored to the foibles of the person being teased. Rather than feeling humiliated or embarrassed, one felt privileged to have been singled out, a rare experience for many children.

Our pious paternal grandfather left quite a different impression on me and my siblings. One running joke Old Dad had with my brother Jim was prompted by this other grandfather, referred to by them as "Goober." During Jim's childhood years my family lived in Byron, Wyoming, where my father was superintendent of schools. In one letter remaining from that time, Old Dad writes to Jim about that name:

Jimmy—Jimmy—Jimmy, I'm surprised at you! Taking the definition given by some ignorant Southerner in preference to one furnished by an admitted authority like Webster or me. It just goes to show how dangerous a little learning can be. You must work harder at your lessons. But to the question at hand—and I must say that I very much appreciate your confidence in me, as evidenced by your asking my advice—such an important question as to the meaning of the term "goober." Always refer these difficult questions to your "Old Dad," and you can be sure of perfectly reliable and well-considered information on small inconsequential matters. I may fool around a little, but on [certain] questions, you can rely on me. Now as to the question at hand—Goober—Gooseberry—Goosey—Goosey Gander—all derived from the Spanish meaning a vegetable—a fruit—a big duck. Therefore, Goober could not be a peanut unless such peanut is half-baked—a small round potato, slightly decayed—is a vegetable everyone could properly designate as a goober. But all jokes aside—I sure enjoyed your letter. Got a big laugh out of it—but if I had you here, I'd flip your nose. Love, Old Dad [underlined].

Whether or not this was typical of Danish humor, it was surely typical of Old Dad's. Also, of course, there is some satire at "Goober's" expense in the implication that he is not only "half baked," but also "slightly decayed." At the same time, these negative implications are somewhat offset by Old Dad's self-deprecating assertion that he's an authority only on "inconsequential" matters.



Despite his rare humor, Old Dad was also, like Ike, severely rational in his thinking and took nothing on faith. When his two sons, Paul and Hal, entered his hospital room as he lay dying, he:

emerged from his oxygen tent with obvious pleasure. . . looked at [them]. . . and said, "Well, to get you two here together with me in this awful place I must be in a hell-of-a-shape. Well, I am in a hell-of-a-shape and I'm going to die very soon and I'm glad. Don't expect any of those fancy death-bed conversions or confessions from me, though. I believe that dead is dead and there isn't anymore to come and I'm damn glad of that too."<sup>13</sup>

So much for his Grandfather Simon Peter Eggertsen's religious faith! Here was the Doubting Dane persisting *even unto death*. Like Ike, Old Dad clearly believed that "religion serves a purpose for weak people—keeps 'em straight and honest. . . .But some are strong enough without it" (178).

Also like Ike, Old Dad had strong political and social ideas and expressed them openly around the family. I remember many enthusiastic political debates at the table, debates that would sometimes go far into the night. Paul, Sorensen's younger brother, remembered that his folks would talk politics with their children and that during the thirties and forties, "the family sang a lot of labor songs."<sup>14</sup> Sixty years with the railroad before his retirement, Old Dad was an avid union man, active in the Democratic Party, serving four terms as a city councilman in Springville. In 1950 he ran for County Auditor, losing by only 600 votes out of a total 28,000 cast. In a letter to Virginia written Thanksgiving 1950, his humor is overwhelmed by his sense of injustice when he condemns the election in which:

[a]ll of the democratic candidates, including myself, were castigated as Communists, Un-American and Socialistic [at] General Conference, quarterly conferences, ward meetings, and relief society platforms [where]. . . people [were warned] of the disasters in store for them if the Socialists, Labor Unions and other such subversive organizations were returned to power.

The outcome of the election proved for him that "they [the Mormon voters, had] thought more of the hereafter than the here," but, he writes that, despite the fact that he had been:

"rated as a radical or communist, a non-believer, non-supporter of the church, and general no-account [in the campaign], I didn't have anything to

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13. Paul Eggertsen's personal history, 20.

14. *Ibid.*

lose. . . as I never was noted for my conformity when it came to church or political affairs and didn't stand too high with the conservative element in our community."

When Ike drinks the Italian homebrew he is given in gratitude for helping Paolo, his talk turns to immoral industrialists, oppressive small-town politics, and Utah's religious Puritanism, all concerns of Sorensen's father (177-84). Like Kate, the heroine of the novel, he would have despised the practice of home teachers "inform[ing] a brother how to vote as often and as naturally as they advised him in his prayers" (7-8) as well as the subservience of church members who allowed their "thoughts and feelings [to be] determined at conference" (11). Also like Old Dad, when Ike sees an injustice, such as when he is falsely accused by Dessie of having an affair, he "feels his anger coming over him." At this point in the novel, he thinks but doesn't say, "If Dessie thought she could stick her nose into his business, he'd teach her a thing or two—damn it to hell" (239).<sup>15</sup>

Ike, like his real-life counterpart, is too proud to defend himself when unfairly accused; however, his social and intellectual self-sufficiency is not something he passes on to his oldest son. In the novel, Ike and Karl have father-son difficulties. Described as "good [and], soundly like Ike" (137), Karl bears no other obvious resemblance to his father, and unlike his father, Karl decides to tow the line in society, as "there's no use making people mad. . . like he [his father] does." An over-achiever, he suffers because of his father's public smoking and imbibing and explains to his grandmother that "[w]hen you've got a feeling that people are sort of—well, suspicious, or something, you work harder. You do all kinds of things you might not do if you were—well, ordinary" (139).

Of her older brother Claude, Jr., Sorensen writes, "I was proud of Claudie, my big brother, who was the smartest student in his class and who was an Eagle Scout who had his name in the paper. He told me recently that he had to be the best and most polite boy in town because Dad and Mamma never went to church and Dad smoked that terrible

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15. Another outspoken railroad man in the novel is Peter Jansen, Kate's lover of years gone by, who was likely inspired by Fred Sorensen, the author's first husband, and a conflation of the various doubting Danes Sorensen knew growing up. He is red-haired—like Fred—and, after emigrating from Denmark as a young man, is quite a rebel, "refus[ing] to bow as [his father] Hans did to an Authority which claimed to give and to owe allegiance only to Almighty God, dictating to men in His name even where a man should live and even, often enough, who a man ought to love and marry" (55). He tells his father that he's a "fool" for giving the church his property, and—like Ike and Old Dad—Peter smokes, drinks coffee, and abhors church policy. In an interview Sorensen gave in 1990, she describes how her first husband Fred "fought every policy the Mormon Church [and its conservative teachings] had" (Mary Kenyon, 19 July 1990). Like her husband Fred, Peter has an adulterous affair, and tells Kate he is "not sorry for anything" (60).

pipe."<sup>16</sup> In a letter to Sorensen written in 1952, her brother Paul castigates Claude, Jr., on whom Karl was clearly based, then apologizes, saying, "I feel remiss in so discussing Claude. It is unkind, for he did suffer the most from the folks. . . . He was first and had to conform the hardest and it must've gotten to be an unbreakable habit." In another letter from 1952, Paul complains again about Claude, Jr.'s conservatism and "social ideas [that] are miserably come to." Sorensen's two younger brothers, Paul and Hal, emerged as social rebels, whereas Claude, Jr., seems to have joined, according to Paul, the "die-hard categorizers." It could have been Old Dad writing when Paul complains about people like his older brother Claude, Jr.: "They make me so damn mad because they have no humility in the face of complication."<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, pride interfered powerfully with Claude, Sr.'s, lifelong desire to become a lawyer and politician. While initially it was his father's bankruptcy that checked Claude, Sr.'s, aspirations, Paul relates in his personal history that at one point a wealthy Eggertsen cousin offered to send him to law school, but that he "spurned [the] offer of support. . . out of pride." Paul regrets his father's choice, as "a good deal of help would have come out of this. . . and he would have been much more satisfied with his life."<sup>18</sup> Likewise, in the novel Karl (Ike's son) tells his grandmother Kate that "his father started out in law, but. . . there wasn't enough money, he couldn't get through." He tells Kate about his father's "big books in the attic," law books that his father can't bear to give away (141).

Possibly it was pride as well that prevented Sorensen's father from parting amicably with his own father Andrew when he visited the Eggertsen house for the last time. Sorensen has written movingly of this occurrence in the fact-based short story "The Other Lady," included in *Where Nothing is Long Ago*. Andrew, Claude, Sr.'s, father and the second son of Simon Peter, Sr., seems even as a child to have been dogged by bad luck and discriminated against by his "hard-fisted, puritanical, hard-working [and] devout" father.<sup>19</sup> A famous story handed down in the family illustrates this: When his three sons, Simon Peter, Jr., Andrew, and Lars were small, their father bought two horses, a black one and a white one (though color varies from teller to teller). Then Simon Peter, Sr., made the pronouncement that his oldest son, Simon Peter, Jr., could ride the black horse and that his youngest son, Lars, could ride the white

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16. Sorensen, "Houses in Earnest," first draft of an unpublished autobiographical essay, dated 12 February 1991, 9.

17. Letter from Paul Eggertsen to Virginia Sorensen, dated 1956.

18. Paul Eggertsen's personal history, 3.

19. *Ibid.*, 1.

horse, and that Andrew could ride “sometimes.” Sorensen’s brother Paul writes that:

[a]pocryphal or not, this story, or whatever situation it arose from, did in fact divide the family over three generations. Andrew remained as rebellious as his own father had been demanding and unforgiving. The estate followed through [to]. . .the oldest. . .and the youngest son[s]. . .and little came Andrew’s way.<sup>20</sup>

Even after Andrew succeeded in business with “a big store of his own,” the “Cleveland Depression” brought about the ruination of this thriving enterprise.<sup>21</sup>

Another story I grew up hearing is that, after Andrew’s bankruptcy, his two wealthy brothers bought him out with the promise that when he could afford to do so, Andrew would repay them and all three would own equal shares in the store. Legend has it, however, that when, eventually, Andrew produced the money he owed them, he was denied an equal share, while his brothers went on to become millionaires. Was the offer of financial support made to Claude, Sr., then, an expression of remorse for this crime? One has to wonder. In any case, Sorensen’s story treats the last months of Andrew’s life, in which he falls in love with a pretty milliner from Ephraim, divorces his wife, and dies on his honeymoon, with great compassion. She also describes in “The Watcher”<sup>22</sup> the deep depression into which her father fell after Andrew’s death.

Simon Peter, Sr., Andrew, Claude, Sr., and Claude, Jr., are all important presences in Sorensen’s adult fiction. Moreover, the conflicts and losses which shaped these men appear to have been influential in the development of the characters they inspired. Just as the women in Sorensen’s early life had a profound impact on who she was and what she wrote, so too did the men. A middle child who “longed to go away and dreamed of excelling at something to prove that poor descendants of a Middle Son. . .were also worth notice,”<sup>23</sup> Sorensen escaped the Mormon ethos that her great-grandfather had so wholeheartedly embraced. Yet she could never escape the complexity of her rich family story, nor the “imagined community” of ancestors left behind in Denmark. These she was able to know and love through both their pious and impious descendants. In identifying with all of them, Sorensen is able to suspend judgment and, at her finest, allow us to do the same.

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20. *Ibid.*, 1.

21. Sorensen, *Where Nothing is Long Ago*, 130.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Letter by Sorensen from Edinboro, Pa., to Bill Mulder, dated 8 February 1954.