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# A Brief History of the Kromann Family

by Inga Borre Kromann



Golden Wedding Anniversary. Hans and Karen Kromann holding grandchildren Kael and Kari Kelly. Standing: Professors Edward Kelly and Inga Kromann, and brother Egil George Kromann. May 1969; Tyler, MN. *Photo courtesy of Inga Kromann.*

Before his death, my father, Hans Borre Kromann (1886-1969) completed a 204-page handwritten document, his life story. It has been a rare treasure, together with the essays and human interest stories he wrote as an occasional correspondent for the Danish newspaper *Lolands Tidende*, fifteen volumes of diaries from 1912 to 1969, and a large number of clippings, letters, and pictures from and about relatives in both Denmark and the United States.

My parents, Hans and Karen Marie Jensine Hansen (1893-1987), were both immigrants from peasant families. The Kromann family name was originally Jensen, but there were five Christian Jensens in their little village of Vindeby, which caused a good deal of confu-

sion, especially with the postal service. One of these Christian Jensens worked in a pub, a Danish "Kro," a place that served food and drink. Every day when the fishermen came in with their early catch, tired, thirsty, and hungry, this Christian Jensen would be there with beer, hot coffee, and sandwiches. Soon he became known as Christian Kromanden. Eventually, this became a family name, with just a few adjustments to make it look more like a name. That man happened to be an uncle of Hans's. In 1904 the name Kromann was recognized by the government as a legal name. In 1982 I met a much younger cousin of Hans's who was still a Jensen, but had petitioned to have his name legally changed to Kromann. Ironically, his petition was denied on the grounds that so many Danes wanted to change their surnames that it was causing too much confusion in government record keeping!

My father, Hans, and his fraternal twin, Otto Hjalmer, had planned to go to America as soon as they had earned enough money for tickets, but those plans had to be dropped when Hjalmer, while working on a large estate, was killed in a runaway horse accident in 1904 at age eighteen. In the spring of 1909, Hans's younger brother, Maurice, suggested that they go to America. They had an acquaintance who lived in Chicago, so they bought tickets to that city, hoping to run into him there! Hans and Maurice arrived in New York not knowing a word of English or even how to get to Chicago. At Ellis Island they were lined up for inspection and informed that they were supposed to each have fifteen dollars in cash, but they only had five dollars, so they were taken aside for further investigation while a Danish interpreter was called. When he learned that they were farm workers, he recommended that they be released. He directed them to a train that would stop very close to the Chicago stockyards. That is where the brothers sat, "waiting for America to happen," as Hans wrote later.

It was the practice of farmers shipping livestock from Chicago to see if any newcomers had arrived from Europe. They knew that immigrants would likely be looking for work and would be a source of cheap labor. Such persons were easy to detect because of their clothing, shyness, and reddened complexions from doing outside labor. As it happened, a farmer from Rutland, Iowa came into the station, spoke briefly to the agent, and went over to Hans and Maurice. He asked, in Danish, if they were looking for work. Yes, indeed they were! Would

they care to come to Iowa and work for him? Yes – anyplace! The next day they arrived at the farm of Chris Olsen where Hans was hired on, while Maurice went to work on Chris's brother's farm.

Maurice adjusted easily to his new life. In fact, by the end of the year he had married Chris's daughter, Thyra Olsen. The following year their little girl Margaret was born. Hans, on the other hand, found the cold Midwestern climate unpleasant and the work very different from what he was used to. Jobs on large Danish estates were specialized; dairy workers did only dairy work; field workers only worked in the fields. In Iowa farms were smaller, so workers were expected to help everywhere. He became homesick to the point of depression and returned to Denmark in December 1909.

After his return to Denmark, Hans worked here and there before deciding to attend a Danish folk high school. Folk high schools were for young men only, age sixteen and older. There were no admission requirements or grades; they were funded by the government. The programs were interesting; they consisted of daily lectures in such fields as science, literature, history of Danish culture, etc. There was singing, which Hans loved, and regular activities such as gymnastics, folkdancing, and discussion groups. Hans later attended a technical agricultural school of the same type, where there were both men and women. The curriculum for men was agricultural methods, farm management, and care of livestock. Women students learned home-making, which included cooking, sewing, meal planning, and general home management. It was there that Hans met his future wife, Karen Hansen, and they became engaged.

While at school, Hans volunteered to be the editor of the weekly student newspaper. Everything had to be written out by hand and then copied out for other students to read. After the paper came out, the regular student evening session was spent discussing its contents. These discussions became very lively since the paper contained different points of view on many issues in articles written by the students as well as by the editor. Hans enjoyed this "job" very much in spite of the time it took because it gave him a chance to write and debate.

My mother, Karen Marie Jensine Hansen (1893-1987), came from the small village of Svogerslev, Sjælland. She tells of being sent "ud at tjene" (into service) at the age of eight. She was a kitchen helper on a

large estate for four months during spring and summer. All this time she had no contact whatsoever with her parents or siblings, so she was always glad when fall came and she could go home to go to school. Being sent out to work was in many instances less for the pittance in money the parents might get; it was more so that there would be one less mouth to feed in a large, growing family. Eventually, Karen trained as a practical nurse, working at various hospitals and institutions, much of the time with children.

Upon finishing his agricultural courses, Hans worked at a number of government institutions, including an agricultural experiment farm. He had almost decided to settle down at one of these jobs, but his fiancée, Karen, said that she was not going to spend the rest of her life in humble circumstances with little hope for the future. She urged him to return to the United States, where opportunities were greater for a better life. So Hans became an immigrant again, this time in 1914. Now he was eager to learn English and to assimilate into American culture as quickly as possible so that when Karen arrived to marry him he would be in a position to establish a home. He learned to speak, read, and write English very well and very quickly, especially after sitting in on English classes at the local high school in Askov, Minnesota.

Things did not turn out quite as planned. World War I broke out in 1914; Hans could not leave the country and Karen could not enter it. Then tragedy struck: Maurice's wife, Thyra, died of the Spanish flu epidemic that raged throughout the world, leaving Maurice a widower with a five-year-old child. Hans became ill as well, so Karen came to America alone in 1918 after the armistice was signed. They finally married in January 1919. The next years went well for them. Hans and Karen settled on a rental farm near the Danish community of Tyler, Minnesota. Crops were good; they had a large herd of cattle and a beautiful vegetable garden. They were overjoyed when their first child, little Else Helene, was born. Then tragedy struck again. Else became critically ill with what was called inflammatory rheumatism, which we now know to be an autoimmune disease like lupus and type 1 diabetes. She was in and out of hospitals for most of her life and died at age fifteen.

The terrible recession of 1929, along with the years of drought in the Midwest, were disastrous. Farms were foreclosed; there was unemployment and poverty everywhere. I remember, when I was seven, helping my brother to herd bone-thin cattle along road ditches where there might be a little grass to keep them alive. But there was a wonderful sense of community. Families helped each other. Birthdays were celebrated with neighborhood gatherings. Danes love to sing. We gathered for "song evenings" at someone's home. There were June 5<sup>th</sup> (Denmark's Independence Day) and July 4<sup>th</sup> celebrations at the Danebod Folk School campus in Tyler, as well as lectures, amateur play productions, and musical events.

The election of Franklin Roosevelt brought hope to millions. Farmers were among those who had suffered for years. The Federal Land Bank enabled farmers to get a mortgage at the same interest level as banks, but with a much longer time to repay it. But farmers needed solid buildings, machinery, and livestock to be successful. Thus the PCA (Production Credit Association) was established. In 1942 my parents finally were able to buy a farm, where they lived until retiring to Tyler in 1960. Hans had always been an activist for the poor and downtrodden so it was a source of pride to be elected to serve on the local PCA Board for many years. He interviewed people who applied for Federal Land Bank loans and helped determine if they were in a position to repay the loans within the required time frame. If not, he sought to help them become better equipped to eventually succeed. In 1959 my parents were finally able to return to Denmark after a forty-five year absence. It was a joyful occasion when they arrived to celebrate Karen's mother, Kirstine Hansen's one hundredth birthday, and to visit many relatives and friends.

In 2002, I was in my office at Washington State University, Pullman, when I received a mysterious and puzzling email. The writer identified himself as David Kromann of Copenhagen. He was seeking information about a relative who he believed had come to the United States in the early 1900s and had settled on a farm in the Midwest. Did I have any information about that? David had gotten an internet list of Kromanns living the United States and had randomly reached out to me to start his search. The person David was seeking turned out to be my uncle Maurice, who came to America with Hans in 1914.

Unbeknownst to me, Maurice had left behind in Denmark a son born out of wedlock. This son would be my first cousin, of course. He was named Ejnar Hjalmer Kromann (1907-91) and he became the father of Sven Kromann, David's father. All of this news turned out to be a delightful surprise!

Later, David came to visit my family in Seattle as well as two cousins in California. We have been in almost constant contact ever since. He is constructing the family tree, having ready access to Danish church and government records. I am using this information as part of the Kromann family story which I hope to complete in a couple of months. Then I will continue working on the story of my own life which began ninety-two years ago.

My parents, though poor, gave me a gift no one can ever take away: my Danish heritage. Being bilingual and bicultural has enriched my life beyond belief. It has led me to Denmark many times to enjoy my Danish family and to study and do scholarly research as part of my professional life. It's all been a wonderfully fulfilling experience that continues to unfold.