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Annotated Bibliography of Resources for Researching Danish-American Folklife
by GREGORY HANSEN

Danish-American folklife consists of the expressions of traditional culture that identify Americans of Danish heritage as belonging to this small ethnic group. Encompassing a full range of expressive behavior, ranging from building and decorating immigrant homes to crafting intricate patterns with knitting needles, scissors, hammer and anvil, Danish-American folklife includes any form of knowledge or skill that is learned by observation or imitation within a community context (Hansen 1988:23). It is the knowledge learned informally, independent of academic instruction and institutional direction. Folklife is often equated with folklore, and folklorists frequently divide the subject matter of study into distinct genres for their academic inquiry. These genres include but are not limited to narrative, folk music and dance, ritual, belief, material culture, festival, foodways, and occupational folklore. The study of Danish-American folklife entails any form of traditional culture that reflects an individual's active construction of culture from resources that Americans of Danish extraction brought with them during their emigration from Denmark. Looking backward to a Danish past and moving forward in the world of the present, Danish American folklife, represents a fusion of history and culture. Thus, to study Danish American folklife is to study
Danish history as reflected in the everyday experiences of Americans.

Although not totally ignored, Danish American folklife has largely been neglected by professional folklorists. American folklorists have written only two books on Danish American folklife (Chrisman 1975 and Wright & Wright 1983), and they have written only two doctoral dissertations on Danish American folklore (Paulsen 1967 and Kerst 1989). Only a few folklorists have written scholarly articles on Danish American folklore, and few others have devoted any scholarly attention to the traditional stories, folk songs, dances, folk arts, and traditional skills and practices of Danish-American craftspeople (Cheney 1959, Chittenden 1985, Hansen 1988; Hustvedt 1916, Lund 1975, Kaplan, Hoover & Moore 1986, Larson 1954, Oliver 1909, and Taylor 1918). The remaining scholarly attention to folklore within Danish American families and communities has been offered by anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and community scholars. Little work has been done, and the scope of Danish American folklore remains an area wide-open for scholarly study.

This annotated bibliography was compiled to encourage academic inquiry into Danish-American folklife. Along with the few book-length publications on Danish-American folklore, the bibliography consists of all of the studies on Danish American folklore in the major professional journals used by American folklorists. This dearth of scholarships among folklorists is augmented by the work of other students of history and culture who work from a range of disciplines and backgrounds. Studies by historians provide insight into the historical circumstances within Denmark and America that shaped life in Danish-American communities. Studies by sociologists and anthropologists deal primarily with the tension many
Danes experienced between balancing the dream of a better life in America with the anguish of cutting ties of family, community, and nation through the immigration experience. Studies by literary artists suggest non-fictional themes created by their fictional characters. Recollections of Danish immigrants present autobiographical ethnographies that contain primary information on the history and culture of immigrants. In these narratives, their communities’ folklife provide a meaningful — if oftentimes implicit — context for their everyday experiences.

While the bibliography is by no means exhaustive and the annotations are sketchy, this resource is offered to provide resources useful for further developing an understanding of Danish culture and history in America. Specific articles in The Bridge are not included, for all of the work published within the Danish American Heritage Society’s journal is potentially useful for scholarly attention devoted to identifying, documenting, and interpreting Danish-American folklife.

Selected Bibliography


**Betsinger, Signe Tronborg.** "Danish Design Influences in House and Home Furnishings in a Selected Community in Southwest Iowa." Ph. D. dissertation at the University of Minnesota, 1970. Although not written from a folklorist's perspective, Betsinger's dissertation is the major study of Danish American vernacular architecture.

-----, *Danish Immigrant Homes: Glimpses from Southwestern Minnesota.* St. Paul: University of Minnesota, 1986. Developed from her dissertation research, this study is particularly accessible to non-specialists.


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Broken Hoops and Plains People: A Catalogue of Ethnic Resources in the Humanities: Nebraska and Surrounding Areas. Lincoln: Nebraska Curriculum Development Center, 1976. Although limited in Danish-American resources, this resource is useful for locating resources useful for comparing Danish American immigrant experiences with the cultural history of other ethnic groups.


Cheney, Thomas E. "Scandinavian Immigrant Stories." Western Folklore 18:(1959):99-105. Although limited in its analysis, this article contains important texts of a range of stories.


Christianson, J. R., ed. *Scandinavians in America: Literary Life.* Decorah, IA: Smyra Literary Society, 1985. Although this study deals more with literary culture than with traditional narratives, the articles are useful for understanding connections between folklore and immigrant literature.


Dundes, Alan. “Slurs International: Folk Comparison of Ethnicity and National Character.” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 39 (1975):1538. Although Dundes’ study contains few specific references to Scandinavian folklore, this article provides a thought provoking discussion of a problematic issue within folklore.


Fink, Deborah Ruth. "Women’s Work and Change in a Danish Community." Ph. D. dissertation at the University of Minnesota, 1980. Although Fink completed her study in Denmark, her excellent descriptions and insightful conclusions are relevant to gaining an understanding of Danish American folklife.

_____. Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986. Although not dealing with Danish Americans, per se, Fink’s study is an excellent treatment of women’s folklife in rural Iowa. Her conclusions about women’s culture are worth considering in relation to Danish American folklife.


Hansen, Judith Friedman. We Are a Little Land: Cultural Assumptions in Danish Everyday Life. New York: Arno Press, 1980. A study by an American interested in typically Danish cultural assumptions. This study is useful for comparing Danish culture to Danish American cultural retentions.


Kerst, Catherine Hiebert. "Enlightenment, Fellowship, and Celebration at the Danebod Folk Meeting: A Danish-American Grundtvigian Cultural Expression in the Spirit of the Old Folk School." Ph. D. dissertation at George Washington University, 1989. One of the few studies of
Danish-American folklore written by a folklorist, this study examines the celebration of Danish culture and history at Tyler, Minnesota's folk school.


Larsen, Birgit Flemming and Henning Bender: Danish Emigration to the U. S. A. Aalborg, Denmark: Danes Worldwide Archives, 1992. The important study of Danish immigration. This volume also contains a particularly strong bibliography useful for developing a broad understanding of Danish American history and culture.


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"Migration and Mobility Among Danish Settlers in Southwest Iowa." *Journal of Historical Geography* 17:2 (1991):165-189. This study is useful for examining the diffusion of Danish American folklife in relation to migration and settlement patterns.

**Matteson, Edith M.** "Danish Settlement in Nebraska, 1880-1900." Masters thesis at the University of Nebraska, 1985. One of the few studies of Danes in Nebraska, Matteson's thesis provides important historical and cultural information necessary for studying Danish folklife in Nebraska within its historical context.

**McDonald, Julie Jensen.** *Amalie's Story.* Montezuma, IA: Sutherland Publishing, 1970. The first of a trilogy of Danish immigrant novels, this a useful and enjoyable resource for investigating literary's artists use of folklore.


The Danish Lutheran Church in America: The History and Heritage of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church. Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1967. An excellent study of religious history that is essential for understanding how religion influenced the character of Danish American folklore in various communities.


Nielsen, John Mark. "Kristian Østergaard's 'A Merchant's House': A Novel of Danish Immigrant Life in Early Omaha, Nebraska." -Ph. D. dissertation at the University of Nebraska, 1988. One of the few translations of Danish ethnic literature, Nielsen's study of Østergaard's novel includes an excellent analysis of the work's themes. His translation and scholarship is particularly useful for studying folklore within literature.


Oliver, Thomas Edward. "Some Analogues of Maistre Pierre Pathelin." *Journal of American Folklore* 22:87 (1909):395-430. Oliver's work is possibly the earliest study of a Danish folktale by an American folklorist. Oliver's conclusions about the origin and diffusion of the tale are more than academically suspect, but the work provides an excellent example of the use of the historical-geographical method of folkloristic scholarship, an approach to the study of folklore that is rarely used by contemporary folklorists.


Paulsen, Frank Martin. "Danish American Folk Traditions: A Study in Fading Survivals." Ph. D dissertation, Indiana University, 1967. The first doctoral dissertation written on Danish American folklore. Although his theory of cultural survivals is limited, Paulsen’s approach is appropriate to his topic and research interests, and this study contains significant texts of Danish American folk narratives.


Rasmussen, H., ed. Dansk Folkemuseum and Frilandmuseet, History and Activities. Copenhagen: Glydendal, 1966. This description of the relation between museums and folklife studies in Denmark, provides useful perspectives that can be adapted to the study and display of Danish American folklore.

Reich, Wendy. "The Use of Folklore in Revitalization Movements." *Folklore* 82 (1971):157-175. Reich's study discusses key issues within movements designed to revitalize folk traditions within a range of communities. Her discussion is particularly relevant to gaining an understanding of dynamics involved in the preservation and perpetuation of Danish American folklore.


Skaardal, Dorothy Burton. *The Divided Heart: Scandinavian Immigrant Experience through Literary Sources*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974. Although Skaardal does not specifically discuss folklore, she provides means for using literary sources to understand Danish American culture. Her conclusions are worth examining in relation to Danish American folklife.
Sorenson, Jacquelynn. "Kierkegaard, Grundtvig, and Danish Literature in the Plains." Ph. D. dissertation at the University of Nebraska, 1984. Another of the few dissertations on Danish American culture, Sorenson's study provides useful historical information on immigration as well as a discussion of the influence of Danish literature on the ethnic communities.

Stern, Stephen. "Ethnic Folklore and the Folklore of Ethnicity." Western Folklore 36 (1977):7-32. An important article that provides a distinction useful for classifying Danish American folklore.


Stewart, Susan. On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984. An important study of the role of storytelling on memory culture, Stewart's insights are particularly important for gaining an understanding of the connection between heirlooms and narrative.

Taylor, Archer. "An Old-World Tale from Minnesota." Journal of American Folklore 31:122 (1918):555-556. Taylor's article is the first study in which an American folklorist analyzes a Danish folktale told in America. Although Danish American folklore has been largely ignored by scholars, it is significant to note that one of the major early folklorists devoted some interest to the subject.


Trolle-Steenstrup, H. When I Was a Boy in Denmark. Boston: Lothrop, Lee and Shephard Co., 1923. This example of autobiographical ethnography contains excellent descriptions of folklife written by a non-specialist.


Winther, Sophus Keith. Take All to Nebraska. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1936. An immigrant novel that provides useful material for studying folklore in literature.


Yoder, Don. *American Folklife.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976. An important study that outlines goals and methods of folklife study. Yoder does not fully explore Danish contributions to the folklife study movement, but he acknowledges the connection between Scandinavian folklife museums and American folklife research.