



2020

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Recommended Citation

Powell, Chantal (2020) "My Life as a Danish American Archive and Library (DAAL) Intern," *The Bridge*: Vol. 43 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol43/iss1/9>

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My Life as a Danish American Archive and Library (DAAL) Intern

by
Chantal Powell

Scouring through archives provides a person with a glimpse into the details of the past not provided by just reading a history book. Homemade Christmas cards and PanAm airplane tickets, award ribbons and family pictures, newspaper clippings and handwritten letters are just a few of the details of people's lives I got to go through and experience for myself at the Danish American Archive and Library (DAAL) in Blair, Nebraska.

I was an intern at the DAAL my last semester at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, where I earned my bachelor of fine arts degree with a double major in creative writing and English. It was the first internship opportunity my advisor showed me that intrigued me, as I have always enjoyed digging through details and learn the history of people's lives. Interning at the DAAL provided me with a wonderfully concentrated version of this, where was able to learn expressly about the history of Danish people who came to America.

As a way to teach me where things were located, intern coordinator Dr. Tim Jensen sent me on a scavenger hunt at the beginning of my internship. This required me to find information on both the library and archival sides of the DAAL. It had me digging through acid-free envelopes in acid-free boxes, flipping through periodicals, and looking through the Dana College and Lur Publications rooms for specific details. It was a great introduction into how things are organized and the types of items and information you can find at the DAAL.

The first project I worked on was writing an article about Tiny Loveland, whose daughter, Dody Johnson, volunteers at the DAAL. Tiny, who was born in Denmark and immigrated to the United States with her family when she was young, was a trailblazer for women's rights during the 1940s and 50s. She was a part of two different groups of women that met with Eleanor Roosevelt and Congress to discuss women's rights, and worked her way up through the ranks in her career as well as any man could. It was interesting to find that some of

the same struggles she went through are still taking place in today's women's movement. Through my connection with the DAAL, I had the opportunity to have this article published in *The Danish Pioneer*. Writing about Tiny gave me insight into the specific details and mementos an archival box could contain, the opportunity to visit personally with Dody for her recollections, and the chance to learn what life could be like for a Danish immigrant.

A few of my favorite discoveries in the archives include a collection of quips such as "I started out with nothing – I still have most of it left" and "Never turn your back on a unicorn," a newspaper article about a Nebraskan who bought a castle in Denmark, an ad for an Underwood typewriter that exclaims, "You can't expect this weak little finger to do the work of this big strong one!" with pictures of a woman's pinky and middle finger, respectively, and a letter from a soldier with vivid details of everything he encountered during the time he was serving. I also enjoyed looking through holiday cards; you can see how a family grows and changes from year to year, and what each stage of their life held just by reading them. Each archival box at the DAAL is a treasure trove of unique items that tell a story about individuals and their families; but collectively, they all tell a history of Danes and their lives both in and outside of America.

One consistent thing I found, no matter which archival box I looked through, was the sense of community the Danish people have. I experienced this firsthand at the DAAL, where every day at 10 a.m., whether you are a volunteer, visitor, or just happen to be there for whatever reason that day, you are invited for coffee and treats, which usually includes some sort of Danish pastry. During this time, I heard personal stories about Dana College, learned about other archival projects going on, and got to know the people that work so hard to make the DAAL an amazing resource for the history of Danish American people. Starting out, I didn't know what this internship would hold; and I am grateful for the history I learned, the opportunities I was presented with, and the community I got to be a part of as an intern at the Danish American Archive and Library.



The Danish American Archive and Library collects, catalogues and makes available to the public documents and other media that span three centuries—from the mid 1800's to the present. It is open weekdays from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Left to right: Ruth Rasmussen, Elaine Hoyer, David Shepard, Laura Meldrum, Joan Sorensen, Dody Johnson, Erna Berthelsen, Julie Johnson.

For more information go to www.danishamericanarchive.com.