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Recommended Citation
Gehringer, Christie Jensen (2021) "Beautiful Dannebrog, Nebraska," The Bridge: Vol. 44: No. 1, Article 5. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol44/iss1/5

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Beautiful Dannebrog, Nebraska

by
Christie Jensen Gehringer*

In June, a yearly festival is held in Dannebrog, Nebraska, in conjunction with Grundlovsdag (Danish Constitution Day). The festival, which observes Denmark’s independence and honors the town of Dannebrog, named for Denmark’s flag, began in 1987. Dannebrog celebrates its Danish Days, known as Grundlovsfest, every year during the first weekend in June; however, the festival was previously held from the late 1800s through the 1930s when it was called Gorbennad (Dannebrog spelled backwards). Driving down the main street in Dannebrog today one can find an antique store, an ice cream shop, and a bakery, which showcase the town’s Danish roots. The town of Dannebrog continues to promote its Danish heritage in Howard County, Nebraska. (Two other towns in Howard County, Dannevirke and Nysted, were named after places in Denmark.)

Today in Dannebrog’s Oak Ridge Cemetery, a monument stands to the town’s foundation and a family named Hannibal. The monument reads, “Dannebrog, 1886-1986, founded by Lars Hannibal, first postmaster 1871. Peter Hannibal, first mayor, 1886. In loving memory of our pioneer ancestors, the Hannibal family, 1986.” In the center of town, outside the Dannebrog Archives and Tourist Center, stands a sign declaring Dannebrog to be Nebraska’s Danish Capital, a title the Nebraska Legislature bestowed on the town in 1989.

Dannebrog began as a colony founded by Danish immigrant Lars Hannibal. He dreamed of a community set up to support a Danish population, as uncommon as that might have seemed for Danes, who tended not to cluster together in the United States. Lars Hannibal, who resided in Wisconsin at the time, began laying the groundwork for a Danish colony in 1870. He formed the Danish Land and Homestead Company to make it easy for Danish farmers, used to working on small farms rather than the 160 acres of the Homestead Act, to

* Thank you to Edie and Roger Grim of Dannebrog for facts and information, the late Shirley Johnson for her historical records, and to the Danish American Archive and Library for books on the topic.
immigrate to the US. Once established, the company began offering shares for fifty dollars for forty acres of land. The land was purchased from the Union Pacific Railroad. The site was ideal because it reminded the Danes of their previous home in Lolland, Denmark.

In the spring of 1871, Hannibal and six of his countrymen established the first settlement. Other Danish settlers soon arrived. In the early 1870s a post office was established on the homestead of Lars Hannibal and named for Denmark’s national emblem and flag Dannebrog. In March 1874, the Grand Island Independent reported that “Mr. Lars Hannibal, President of a Danish Colony which settled here two years ago broke the sod, and developed the resources of the county. Since that time, he has worked earnestly and zealously in the interest of the town and county, and his labor has resulted in a town of about two hundred inhabitants.” While the colony appeared successful, it was unable to remain a completely Danish settlement. By 1872, seventy-six Danish settlers were living in Dannebrog colony alongside fifty-five non-Danes. By 1874, most of the region originally planned as a Danish colony had been purchased by 125 Danes along with 104 non-Danes. The size of the colony was estimated to be approximately six hundred people the following year.

The town of Dannebrog learned early on the importance of supporting public improvements to connect their community with the rest of the state of Nebraska. In 1873 the first bridge was built, paid for by a bridge tax. The bridge opened in August of 1873 with a parade and festival to celebrate the new crossing over the Middle Loup River. Next came a bond issue to build the Dannebrog Mill in 1874. Unfortunately, the mill’s dam broke due to flooding; however, Lars Hannibal personally financed the mill’s reconstruction. Consequently, the town’s relevance in the county continued. In 1886 the Union Pacific Railroad completed a rail line to Dannebrog.

Unfortunately, by the 1970s, Dannebrog, the second most populated city in Howard County, began losing population. In the 1980s, however, the citizens of Dannebrog decided to revive the town. When the town’s bank closed in 1985, concerned citizens formed a credit union to assure the community of a financial institution. This first step promoted a positive attitude and encouraged the town’s grocery to remodel and increase in size. Harriett’s Danish Café also opened the
same year. In 1986 the residents cleaned up the town and celebrated the town’s centennial anniversary. Next, the citizens formed a booster club and contacted state offices to explore new avenues for the future. All promotional events were and continue to be accomplished with volunteers.

The next year, 1987, the town renewed its festival to observe Denmark’s independence since Dannebrog had been founded by Danish immigrants. To receive support funding from the state of Nebraska the town was required to have a Danish restaurant, a Danish gift shop, and a Danish atmosphere. These requirements were accomplished, and Harriet’s Danish Cafe became known for its Nordic menus, while its gift shop added a supply of Danish gifts to the restaurant’s inventory. Many hours were spent painting Danish signs and sidewalk benches. Flowers were planted and the Danish flag, the Dannebrog, was displayed beside the American flag. The inaugural Grundlovsfest in 1988 became the catalyst for all future community pride and economic development. The programs also included performances by local youth Danish dancers, and the town is also host to Denmark Heritage Tours.

Dannebrog celebrated its first annual “Old-Fashioned Danish Christmas” in 1991 and received the Take Pride in America Award. In the same year, the booster club received charitable status and requested that the Nebraska Arts Council help fund a fifteen-by-thirty-foot ethnic and historical mural. Two local artists painted the Viking ship mural on the outside wall of the American Legion building. Two new businesses were started—the Lille Mermaid Gift Shop and the Danish Baker. A monthly newsletter named Stjernen (the star) was created. This newsletter is sent to subscribers from across the US, the Danish American Archives, the Royal Danish Embassy in Washington, DC, and the Museum of Danish America, among others.

Dannebrog’s Columbia Hall was purchased by eleven of the booster club members in 1992. Columbia Hall was built in 1908 on the town square by the Danish Brotherhood Lodge. The Hall suffered from a bomb detonating upstairs in 1941 during a farewell party for troops departing for armed forces service. Today the renovated building still has the original Danish Brotherhood and Sisterhood Lodge
emblems intact on the front of the building. In 2005 Columbia Hall was officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Today, Dannebrog remains an active town proud of its Danish heritage. The walls of Columbia Hall display photos of the 1800s, including Dannebrog founders and the beginning of the Danish Brotherhood and Sisterhood lodges. Visitors from over thirty states and fourteen foreign countries have visited the display. Some twenty history books are displayed, including historic Danish encyclopedias. Information on Dannebrog’s festivals is included. Bike and hiking trails that extend some three-plus miles and wind around the town and nearby creek, including a nature trail that goes through Hannibal Woods, have been designed and built using several grants to help provide financing for the project. The town has also received numerous awards from various organizations and foundations.

Several years ago, proud Dannebrog citizens Edie and Roger Grim, opened a new antique store, Bedstemors, while the Old Danish Bakery is still going strong under new ownership. Dannebrog Delights, which opened in 2018, is an ice cream shop that is a fun place for all. The owner of Dannebrog Delights returned to the town several years ago. His name is Tim Hannibal; and, yes, he is a sixth-generation grandson of the town’s founder, Lars Hannibal. Tim Hannibal is helping to improve Dannebrog today.

Dannebrog is a small town located in central Nebraska. It began as a Danish settlement and thanks to its current residents continues to shine a light on its Danish heritage. Dannebrog was started by a Hannibal and the new generation of the family Hannibal is carrying on its Danish legacy.