2021

Lives Well-Lived: My Danish American Ancestors in Shelby and Audubon Counties, Iowa

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol44/iss1/7

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My childhood was filled with my parents’ voices describing their love of history and knowledge of their Danish heritage in conversations that linger in my memory. My mother, Elizabeth Aagaard Larsen, and dad, Chester B. Larsen, were both children of Danish immigrants to the communities of Elk Horn and Kimballton, Iowa. They each had an inquisitive nature; any coffee time or dinner time could find my head spinning with conversations that sounded something like this:

Dad: “Did you know Hans L. Hansen was a brother to Anne Madsen?”

Mom would reply with a comment or question such as “Oh I thought she was a Gregersen.”
“No,” Dad would say. “That’s George Gregersen’s sister Anne who is married to Jim Jacobsen.”

And so it would go. Sometimes Dad would begin with an event he remembered from his childhood, or he would reminisce about his dad telling a story about an acquaintance, and Mom would ask if that person was related to Peter Jensen south of Exira. Or Mom would tell a story about large family birthday parties and Dad would ask where that farm was located. That would lead to a conversation about neighbors in that area of Shelby or Audubon County and who owned what land and whose ancestors settled and built the homestead. The names were always the same to me: Hansen, Jensen, Lauritsen, Jorgensen, Juelsgaard, Petersen, Larsen, Hemmingsen, etc. These particular names are fictitious, but the heart of the story is true. Connecting families and histories in a Danish farming community filled with common names and yet individual stories was the core of my childhood instruction.

Audubon and Shelby counties in southwest Iowa are the largest rural Danish settlements in the US. The immigrants who established what is known today as “Little Denmark on the Prairie” began their journeys to Iowa in 1869. They boarded ships launched in Hamburg, Germany or Southampton, England. Most arrived in Castle Gardens, New York, but some traveled through Quebec, Canada. From those locations they traveled by train to Chicago and on to the vicinity of Davenport, Iowa. From this area in eastern Iowa some of the earliest Danish immigrants traveled to western Iowa by horse and wagon, but most rode the train to Atlantic, Iowa. From the depot in Atlantic, they made their way north into Audubon and Shelby counties, purchasing their land either from land speculators or directly from railroads such as the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific.

While Danish immigrants to Audubon and Shelby counties in Iowa came from all parts of Denmark, the two largest groups came from the islands of Ærø and Møn. I am a product of both areas. My paternal ancestors immigrated from Ærø, while half of my maternal ancestors were part of the early immigration from Møn and the remaining group came from Schleswig, which spans the border between Germany and Denmark. Each of their stories is unique; I wish I had known each of these ancestors. My paternal great-grandparents,
Christian Pedersen (C.P.) Lauritsen and Ane Marie Hansen, traveled together from Tranderup, Ærø to Castle Gardens, New York in March of 1882, and then on to Shelby County, where they were married in September that year. C. P. and Ane Marie farmed north of Kimballton and were charter members of Bethany Lutheran Church in Audubon County, Iowa. Their daughter, Ellen Marie, would marry a young Danish immigrant, Claus Larsen.

Grandfather Claus J. Larsen’s correspondence with his Spanish American War Veterans.

My paternal grandfather Claus Jorgen Larsen immigrated from Rise, Ærø, together with his uncle, Ole Olsen. Ole was already an established landowner in Audubon County when he traveled back to visit Ærø in 1889. Upon his return to Iowa, he paid for Claus’s ticket to America and Claus worked for several years as an indentured servant to his uncle until the debt was repaid. Claus was an adventurous young man who, we can attest, contributed his genetic DNA of Danish wanderlust to his descendants. He was employed by several farmers in Audubon County and worked in the general store in Kimballton. He volunteered for the Spanish American War, where he fought alongside Teddy Roosevelt on San Juan Hill in Cuba. When he married Ellen Marie Lauritsen they settled into farming north of Kimballton. Claus traveled several times back to Denmark to visit his family. He enjoyed his military reunions and visits with his extended family across the US.
My maternal great-grandparents, Jorgen Jensen and Ane Margrethe Johansdatter from Emmelunde, Møn, traveled to Quebec, Canada in May 1870, and were married in Cambridge, Illinois in December that same year. Jorgen immediately began using the name George James. They came to Shelby County in 1874. Their daughter, Clara, married a young Danish immigrant from Schleswig, Henry Aagaard. George and Ane Margrethe James were charter members of the Danish Lutheran Church in Elk Horn. George originally farmed south of town but eventually opened a general store. He was an early postmaster and a strong promoter of both the community and the church. The couple
were instrumental in the development of the Danish folk high school in Elk Horn. It was always a point of pride among the family that Ane Margrethe opened her home and her heart to all students at the school who needed a touch of home and a Danish dinner.

My other maternal great-grandparents, Andreas Aagaard and Birthe Koch Aagaard, were my only ancestors who immigrated through Ellis Island, New York. Together with their eight children, which included my grandfather Henry, they arrived in Audubon County in 1894. The family had a story typical for the Schleswig area. As Danish speakers in territory controlled by Germany, they were

Clara James and Henry Aagaard were married in the Danish Lutheran Church in Elk Horn, Iowa on March 7, 1907. The silk fabric for Clara’s dress was purchased at her father’s store and sewn by her sister Mary.
escaping the German occupation of their Danish homeland; they feared their four teenaged sons would be conscripted into the German army. This family never spoke of their life in Denmark. As my mother often said, when they left Denmark, they left the old life behind and started fresh in Iowa. They farmed in Audubon County and retired to the town of Elk Horn. These families were early settlers in the Elk Horn and Kimballton communities and played significant roles in the development of the area.

When I was a young girl growing up on a farm north of Kimballton, our church in Elk Horn was the center of our social world. Founded by my great-grandparents as the Danish Lutheran Church, the name was changed to the Elk Horn Lutheran Church when the new building was erected in 1949. It was within these walls that I formed my abiding respect for a particular group of people who were all descendants of Danish immigrants.

Many people of my parents’ generation who never married chose to remain on the “home place” and farm, sometimes with siblings, or live in their parental home in town. A camaraderie existed among the unmarried women, based on dedication to their religious beliefs, and lifelong friendships. My aunt, Edna Aagaard, was a member of this group. I found these women intriguing, somewhat mysterious; they served as role models in my childhood. Many of these women were my Sunday school teachers but as I watched them, their lives touched me in ways they never knew. They had dignity, intelligence, and they valued challenging work. They honored their heritage and their faith. They were teachers, telephone operators, beauticians, workers in the retirement homes, nurses, business owners, and friends.

Among my favorites were Hilda Petersen and Bertha Andersen. Born in 1893, Hilda Petersen was the daughter of two Danish immigrants, Hans and Marie (Hansen) Petersen. Hans was an early teacher in the Elk Horn community who purchased a general store on Main Street in Elk Horn in 1902 that was continually operated by the family until 1971. Hilda was my first Sunday school teacher. She was a woman of substance and ability and I adored her. The family home stood directly across the street from our church and Hilda would lead her siblings to services each Sunday. She had purpose and definition in her stride as she arrived dressed in her navy-blue linen suit with
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its pencil slim skirt and fox fur collar. They always sat in their pew on the west side of the sanctuary as we always sat on the east side. Following their father’s death, Hilda and her siblings operated the Hans Petersen General Store. Hilda was a whirlwind in motion. Her abundant auburn hair held her ever-present pencil tucked behind her ear ready to tabulate the groceries and dry goods for each customer. She wore a white butcher’s apron, folded over and tightly drawn twice around her slim waist. Her slender hands worked quickly as she cut fabric, wrapped gifts, talked with neighbors and customers, and instructed her brother Richard on which fresh meats to prepare for each person. Hilda was the first woman to be elected president of the Elk Horn Lutheran Church board. This was a high honor in the community and in the late 1950s it would appear she was ahead of her times. But my parents always believed she had the business experience, the leadership ability and was due this honor. Simple and straightforward. Honor earned. That is what I was taught.

Another woman whom I dearly adored was Bertha Andersen. She was like an aunt to me. Bertha was born in 1911 to Anders and Ane Marie (Christensen) Andersen, who farmed south of Elk Horn and were neighbors to my Aagaard grandparents. She was the same age as my mother, and they were lifelong friends. Bertha was an elementary school teacher, and I was her pupil in first grade. She was the organist at church, sang in the choir with my Aunt Edna, belonged to many social and religious groups and taught me many life skills. When she traveled to Denmark or Japan, she would send me postcards about her experiences and bring me unique gifts when she returned home. When I was in fifth grade, she asked me to be her pianist as she opened each Sunday morning’s classes. We worked as a team like this for several years. She was a formidable force; from childhood, I was smitten with her indomitable personality. She had friends from her many walks of life, and her home was a beacon for travelers. She was instrumental in the establishment of the Danish Immigrant Museum, now known as the Museum of Danish America, and was actively involved in the construction of the Danish Windmill in Elk Horn. She served as a translator for many people and institutions.

The church had many women’s groups called “Circles.” Many of the single working women belonged to Circle 9, the first such group
to meet in the evenings. In 1959 this Circle wrote what became the “Bible” of Danish recipes in the Elk Horn community. Lovingly referred to as the “Blue Cookbook,” it has been used by generations of people; many of these recipes have graced my table. Gathering for celebrations or simply ordinary working days, the communion of friends and family around a table was a Danish tradition taught in my childhood.

Another group of church women was the Danish Ladies’ Aid. It was made up of elderly women of the community, who, in my mind’s eye, were all grandmothers who spoke rapid Danish with English words interspersed. Each fall they held an æbleskiver fund-raising supper in the town hall. It was an event never to be missed. The town hall on Main Street in Elk Horn was much smaller than our church basement, with a tiny kitchen, but this was the location chosen every year. The kitchen was in the basement and the women would bring their æbleskiver pans and serve those Danish treats by the gross. Everyone came. The steam and smoke from the kitchen wafted up the steps and flowed out the open door saturating the outside air with the delicious smell and beckoned everyone to come and eat. It was a communion of the local people. Tables were covered with white paper and surrounded by folding chairs. Æbleskiver were served with butter, syrup, sugar, or jam. Trays of open-faced sandwiches were also abundant. These were not fancy Danish sandwiches, just a single layer of Danish rye or white bread with a slice of cheese or rullepølse. Some had slices of egg or dried beef,
staples of the farming community. Blue-and-white or red-and-white checkered metal trays covered with white paper doilies were piled with sandwiches, which were quickly eaten. Coffee flowed like water and voices rose in a common thread of farming jargon. Some years the ladies served Danish egg coffee. Large kettles held the boiling water and eggs were mixed into the coffee grounds. This produced a rich and deep coffee valued by all those Danish coffee drinkers.

There were also activities for young and old. When I was a child, my favorite event was the fishing pond. Pieces of tall cardboard were placed on the corner of a table and with a “fishing pole,” I would cast my line over the top to a person behind the board. They would attach a small toy to the fishing hook and pull on the string indicating it was ready to be “reeled” in. The prize was always just a small token, but it was the fun of a game reserved specifically for the children. Adding to the fundraising profits, the ladies brought their “handiwork” to sell, offering crocheted or knitted doilies, cross-stitched tablecloths and assorted hand stitched items for sale, including pillowcases adorned with gracefully-crocheted trim as much as three inches wide and as delicate as a spider’s web. These Danish women, like my grandmother Clara (James) Aagaard, could crochet these pieces of art counting each stitch and share memories of her childhood simultaneously.

I was taught that to be Danish was to be hospitable, opening your home with warmth and gratitude. Anyone who needed a dinner or companionship on any occasion was always welcome. Mother illustrated this message with stories from her childhood. There were many single men in the Danish communities, who were not always employed. One such gentleman was named “Little Fred.” He was a friend to Grandpa and Grandma Aagaard. He was always welcome at their home and at their table, especially on Christmas Eve. He would walk the two miles from Elk Horn to their farm for dinner. He was very poor, and Mother said he would wrap newspapers around himself under his coat to act as insulation and layer the same in the bottom and toes of his shoes. But Little Fred was also an artist. He hand-carved wooden birds which always hung in our home. Their graceful wings were individually carved and tucked into the body of the bird. Fragile yet with an artistic construction, this lovely object still flies in my home.
In 1949, the original wooden Danish Lutheran Church was replaced with the current sanctuary. The decision was not short on controversy. Some believed the Danish traditions should be left in the past and history not honored nor remembered. My family was not among that group. Many Danish treasures, including Danish music and oil paintings, were lost with the old church; they were burned. One evening Grandpa Aagaard attended a very contentious meeting. Fearing that the Danish ship which had always hung in the church would be destroyed, he brought it home. He and Grandma wrapped it in a soft blanket and carefully stored it under their bed. There it remained for many, many years. All the cousins of my generation recall lying on our grandmother’s bedroom floor and peering under the bed to see the treasure, but it remained covered and never was brought out to be looked at. The ship was always spoken of with reverence, and we know Grandpa Aagaard played a special role in the conservation of our Danish heritage. Eventually the ship was returned to its rightful home in the church. Like the churches in Denmark where ships float in
the air, so too does this ship once again share its home and history in the Elk Horn Lutheran Church.

Christmas was a time filled with Danish traditions. Friends gathered in each other’s homes to celebrate the season and enjoy the special yuletide delicacies. Many types of Danish cookies and coffee cakes were baked, and the Blue Cookbook again offered up its most valued recipes. In my childhood we attended church on Christmas morning as no services were held on Christmas Eve. In my mother’s childhood the Christmas tree was placed in the “parlor” and decorated by her parents behind closed doors. On Christmas Eve the tree was revealed to the children with white candles adorning each branch. As Mother told it, a gallon of water stood near in case a candle set the tree on fire. We decorated our tree after church on a Sunday afternoon. Our Christmas Eve dinner was typically American, with turkey, dressing and all the trimmings. But dessert was always layered Danish æblekage and more of the cookies we had baked throughout the Christmas season. We placed Danish flags on our tree, but all other decorations were typical of the era.

My ancestors were among the early Danish immigrants who purchased farmland in the rolling hills of southwest Iowa. It was their
lives and experiences that introduced Danish traditions and language into American agriculture communities. They helped build the communities of Elk Horn and Kimballton through their farms, homes, churches, and the folk high school in Elk Horn. They held social events, established businesses, and founded financial institutions. They bore the first generation of American citizens. Life was not without its difficulties nor was sorrow or loss a stranger in their lives. But for the most part, life went very well. Then came the 1920s and 1930s and the Great Depression and Dust Bowl days and life was irrevocably changed. Farms were lost to foreclosure, banks and businesses were closed and young people flocked to California. Individuals such as my great-grandmother Lauritsen loaned money to her neighbors to keep their farms or businesses afloat. The rural areas were desecrated by the drought, crops were lost, and animals no longer grazed on green fields. These experiences were shared nationwide; they left lasting impacts everywhere including rural southwest Iowa.

Life again changed with the onset of WWII. Many young men were called to war, while others were instructed to stay home and plant crops to provide food for the nation. Once peace was achieved and the troops returned, another era dawned. My generation was not taught the Danish language, as it was thought to be “old fashioned,” and it all but disappeared. Agriculture changed as farms increased in size and more people moved away. My generation was the first to marry outside of the Danish community, and traditions were lost and abandoned.

So now it falls to another generation to keep the Danish traditions alive by acknowledging our love of history and honoring those early immigrants. Our family celebrates the traditional Danish Christmas Eve and new generations are lovingly taught recipes from the Blue Cookbook. Danish flags ring our tree and we develop new traditions for combined Danish American heritage. Grandkids are taught to design and construct the Danish woven heart baskets to hang on our tree, and gifts from the Museum of Danish America or the Danish Windmill in Elk Horn are treasured. History is again illustrated with a new nisse or new copies of the Blue Cookbook.
In the one hundred and forty years since Ane Margrethe, George, Christian, and Ane Marie set foot in Iowa, much has changed. Generations have come and gone but core values remain. Trips to Denmark are cherished and pictures of original churches and homes and ships in the kirkes are loved. History is rich with both shared experiences and times that will never come again. We value those ancestors whose life-changing decisions set new generations upon roads to carve their own history and give birth to new stories to be shared and valued by their children. Across those generations I say “thank you” to those ancestors with lives well-lived.