



The Danish American
Archive and Library
and the University of
Nebraska at Omaha
present:



Danish
Children
GROWING UP
AMERICAN

Photographs from the
collections of the DAAL





*B*eing a part of the

American dream has brought immigrants from all over the world to the land of opportunity.

The reasons immigrants left their native lands were many and their struggles similar, while the eventual inclusion into the population completed their journey. The Danish immigrants were no exception.

The majority of Danish immigrants made their journey to America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The children of these immigrants were the beneficiaries of their parents' desires for a new and better life in America, and much of these immigrants' emphasis was on their children.

The Danes did not all gravitate to one neighborhood like some ethnic groups, but instead shared experiences by getting together with their fellow countrymen through Danish organizations and Danish churches. It was often through their children that they learned English when the children started to school, and most had a burning desire to become American citizens. Though times were hard, the children were never forgotten; and, as with the family of Christoffer Jensen, Christmas gifts might be a pair of home-knit socks and an orange. There were always Christmas gifts for the children, however.

*The Danish American Archive and Library has preserved memories and photographs of these children, and by looking at a few of these photos, one can see life as it was for the **Danish Children Growing Up American**. Follow in these **Once and Future Immigrants'** footsteps through pictures and share their experiences in **Play, Religious Life, and Education**. See their **Clothes and Costumes** through candid pictures and through **Studio Portraits**. See life **Down on the Farm**, the use of **Automobiles**, and the existence of **Places Just for Children**. Learn, too, about the sadness immigrants felt with **Death and Remembrance**.*

*This is the story of **Danish Children Growing Up American** as told through photographs taken by and for their parents—immigrants to a new home and reaching for the American dream.*



Once and Future Immigrants | *Fortidens og fremtidens immigranter*



The C.M. Petersen family was one of many who returned to Denmark. Their children had been born in the States, so for them moving to Denmark meant coming to a land they had never seen. Such a move had two profound consequences.

First, each move made further moves more likely. One of the Christensen daughters, Dagmar, worked in Manchuria and Liberia, and later married an American and moved to Wisconsin.

Second, during this era a child acquired the citizenship of her parents. When Dagmar moved to Denmark she left her American citizenship behind, which later meant asking permission to immigrate to the land of her birth.

The momentum to keep moving and the ambiguities of citizenship also affected the Schack children. Ellen moved successively to Boston, Chicago, Alberta, California, and back to Alberta. To the end of her days she missed the comforts of Copenhagen. In this nostalgia for Denmark she was not alone.

The tendency to move again and again was characteristic of Danish immigrants. While immigrants from other lands tended to cluster, the Danes kept moving. Wisconsin was a way station on the way to Nebraska, and Nebraska a stop en route to California.







Døden og Minder | Death and Remembrance

Death became a reality for many young children in the days before immunizations and drugs like penicillin. In 1900 more than 10% of children born in America died before their first birthday, and of those who survived, 20% died before the age of ten from a multitude of diseases. With little access to medical care, sometimes all parents could do was try to diagnose and treat the patient themselves with remedies like poultices, mustard plasters or steam.

These two photos show two little brothers, Kenneth and Anker Johnson, who shared their boyhood on a farm in Davey, Nebraska. Shortly before the family was to move to California to start a new farming operation, Kenneth contracted one of these fatal diseases and died. Imagine what it would be like at age five to see your brother and childhood companion buried, and to know you would never see him again.

Imagine what it was like for his parents to bury their beloved son and then move so far away that they couldn't even visit his grave. No wonder they brought along a precious clipping of his hair to their new home in California, and took a photo of Anker beside Kenneth's grave to remind themselves of their loss.



Places Just for Children | *Steder for børn*



All children of Danish immigrants were not able to experience life in a traditional family; however, the Danish immigrant population stepped up and developed children's homes like Elim in Iowa and Oaks in Oklahoma to meet the needs of these youngsters. For children as young as seven months through the teenage years, the places created for children helped to develop well-rounded young people. The children were reared through cooperative living and individualized care.

They were accepted in the local communities in all school, church, or civic activities. The homes became their family, and the children were given the opportunity not only for a better life but also to experience family living in America.







Playtime was valuable for Danish immigrant children. Between class time, school work, chores, church and church activities, actual playtime became a precious commodity.

Many toys were homemade. With imagination an old broomstick could become a horse. A few pieces of scrap wood and some wheels became scooters, wagons and carts, and homemade dolls were treated almost like people. Swimming in the river might become a family event with a picnic besides. Games played at recess not only provided fun but also physical exercise. For example, in the game “Annie, Annie Over”, one team had to throw a ball over the roof of the school. When the team on the other side caught the ball before it bounced on the ground, the whole team would race around the building and try to catch as many kids on the first team as possible. This game required not only skill in throwing and catching, but also integrity, because there was no referee—each team had to be honest about whether they caught the ball before it hit the ground.

Schools and churches provided the main entertainment, with a big school program in late fall, a Christmas program, and an end-of-year school picnic. The whole community turned out for all of these events.



Automobiles | *Automobiler*



Cars were a prized emblem of American life. In Denmark, conversely, cars were rare and only the wealthy could afford them. Thus, for some Danes the very possibility of owning a car was reason enough to move to North America. When Danish immigrants who had prospered in the States returned to Denmark to visit, they brought along their cars as marks of status.



This same prestige led Danish Americans to include the family car in snapshots of their children. Again and again, children were photographed together with the family's car.



Despite their status, travel by car was not easy. Overnight accommodation meant bedding down beside a haystack or on a schoolhouse floor and travel plans were quickly altered when stormy weather arose. Vita Jensen relates in her autobiography how her fiancé had to spend the night in his Ford when it became trapped in the muck of early spring.



Many travelers preferred the train or the bus. The photo of the Larsen family is an affectionate portrayal of car and children, but when the family moved from New York to Nebraska, they loaded their automobile onto a box car so that both car and family could travel by train.





Elite Studio —

*2249 Cottage Grove Ave.
CHICAGO.*

Tøj og kostumer | Clothes and Costumes

Because the Danish immigrants came to the U.S. determined to live as Americans, their children were clothed in the appropriate style of the day. Because their children were their future, these immigrant parents had professional photographers capture their youngsters in the best light.

Often the children were portrayed in their “Sunday best”—boys in suits with short or long pants and girls in mid-calf dresses with long stockings and Mary Jane shoes. An abundance of ruffles, especially in toddlers, or sailor suits might be the norm. The immigrants’ Danish heritage wasn’t forgotten, however, and a costume for a party might appear as the red and white Dannebrog (the Danish flag).



Portraits | *Portrætter*



The pride and affection that immigrant parents had for their children, and the children for each other, shines though in these wonderful formal portraits. It took a lot of time, trouble and expense to set up a photo session. Everyone had to be in their best clothes, and at the time most of the prettiest and fanciest clothes were homemade.



The photographer needed considerable skill to get an acceptable result. In an era before high-speed and digital photography, the subjects had to remain perfectly still while the photograph was taken. To get even two squirming children to hold a charming pose long enough to get the photo had to be a challenge. And yet these portraits show sophistication and imagination in their technique. The photographer thought about not only the lighting, background and furniture in the portrait, but also the pose and the emotions of the subjects.







Livet på Gården | Life on the Farm

Before heading out to school either on foot or on horseback each day, children had their chores to do so they had to get up early. There was livestock to be fed and watered, cows milked, stalls and barns to be cleaned out with fresh bedding hauled in. Then the children went in the house, washed and got ready for school—fall, winter and spring. Schools rarely closed because of snow.

In the summer children gathered eggs, churned cream into butter, fed chickens and hogs, helped cut and store hay, and harvested fruit and vegetables from the garden. School closed for a week or two in the fall for corn harvest, and sometimes the older boys were pulled out of school in the spring for planting. During harvest even the younger children pitched in hauling bundles of stalks to the adults who made the shocks.

Gardening and housework comprised other chores. Younger children helped by picking up potatoes and shucking corn and peas for canning. During spring and fall housecleaning all the bedding, mattresses and rugs were taken out and beaten. Every corner of the house was cleaned and everyone in the family helped.



Religious Life | *Det religiøse liv*



Freedom of religious expression came to Denmark in 1849, so Danish immigrants expected religious choice. They became variously Mormons, Methodists, Baptists, and Seventh Day Adventists, while many abandoned all religious affiliation. Still, the most common choice was to continue the connection to the Lutheran church.



Lutheran religious life had two centers—church and home. A pastor was obligated not only to hold services on Sunday mornings, but to visit parishioners in their homes. The photo of Pastor C.C. Mengers shows him at home with wife and children, yet with horses hitched and ready to carry him to his next “call.”



When the Ladies Aid gathered at the church, children inevitably were brought along. Because the church functioned as a social and educational center as well as a religious one, many congregations built a forsamlingshus (meeting house) next to the church and organized a chapter of Danish United Youth to encourage religious and secular learning.



Religious education culminated in confirmation instruction, a two year commitment focused on discipline and memorization that marked the transition from childhood to adulthood. At the concluding ceremony girls wore white dresses and boys their first pair of long wash pants. Bestowing a certificate made the transformation official.





Tableau of D. T. U. ved Mødet

Danes had high expectations for education. Schooling had been nearly universal in Denmark since the early nineteenth century, so virtually all immigrants could read and write.

Most parents sent their children to the local public school, but they also wanted education to encourage an appreciation of their Danish heritage and promote lifelong learning. School should be a “school for life.” The simplicity of bringing lunch in Karo syrup pails was combined with a special interest in the arts, most commonly music.

In areas with a high concentration of Danes “Danish Children’s Schools” were established. These functioned much like American public schools, except that instruction emphasized Danish music, history, and language. However, most Danish American communities were not large enough to operate a full-fledged school system. Instead, they founded “Dane Schools,” to complement public education with a focus on the Danish heritage and—for the more pietistic Danes—the study of the Bible.

Formal instruction often ended after confirmation. However, several residential “folk high schools,” were established to extend education through the rest of life. It was not unusual for Danish immigrants to make a højskole (folk high school) the first stop after arriving in the New World.



About the Danish American Archive and Library:

The Danish American Archive and Library had its beginnings in the earlier archives of the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church and of Dana College—each of which essentially was institutional. After 1986 a new archive emerged with its emphasis being ethnic rather than institutional. First named The Danish Immigrant Archive, the focus of the Danish American Archive and Library today has grown to include the experiences and significant contributions to American society and culture of those brave immigrant pioneers. In addition the DAAL includes not only the descendants of those immigrants but also others of Danish descent who have chosen to make their home in the United States.

To learn more about the DAAL visit the website: danishamericanarchive.com



*Cover photo: Dorteia Marie Sorensen, born September 3, 1915, Kansas City, Missouri
Daughter of Alfred and Mary Sorensen, Danish immigrants from Jutland*

Graphic Designer: Lindsey M. Ellis

Exhibit sponsored by: Mogens Bay and Bruce Lauritzen with assistance from John Christensen, UNO Chancellor

Copyright © 2013 Danish American Archive and Library. This is an open access document licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0) License. For full license text, please refer to <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>.