

Danish Brotherhood in America



Sharing their Heritage and their Dream

Over one hundred years have passed since a group of people – beginning a new life in a new land – formed a brotherhood to help each other.

The story of those years is a story of growth and changes, and striving to meet the needs of people living in a rapidly changing world. But most of all, it's a story of people working together and sharing a commitment to preserving their heritage while pursuing their dreams in their new home.

The seeds of the Danish Brotherhood in America were planted in the 1870's when thousands of people were leaving their native Denmark to find greater opportunities in the United States and Canada. The immigrants came with a love for the traditions and culture of their native land and a hope and a dream for the opportunities they could find in their new home. But the language was new. And the culture was new.

And they needed the help and support and companionship of those who shared their common interests.

That was the kind of companionship Mark Hansen was seeking when he formed the Danske Vaabenbrodre (Danish Brothers in Arms), an organization for Danish veterans, in Omaha in the 1880's. Since Hansen was a veteran of the Danish Army and had fought in the Civil War in the U.S., his organization emphasized the military service members had in common.

A war between Denmark and Prussia had swelled the ranks of both Danish veterans and Danish immigrants, so the Danish Brothers in Arms grew quickly – and other similar groups sprang up around the country.

In 1881, it was proposed that those local groups join together in a national organization. Five of the groups agreed to unite, and they planned the first convention of the new group for 1882.



By the time the convention opened the next year, many members had caught sight of a much greater potential for the organization. They recognized that there were thousands of Danish men in America who needed the

support and social sharing of this group even though they weren't veterans.

A majority of members accepted the idea of a broader membership and at that convention The Danish Brotherhood in America was born – with the purpose of reaching out to “honorable men, born of Danish parents or who were of Danish extraction.”

William Wind of Racine, Wisconsin, was elected the first president of the group.

The new group planned to provide members with social activities, to nurture common background through the use of the Danish language and songs, and to provide financial help to their members with a survivor's insurance and sickness and death benefits. The Danish Brotherhood grew rapidly. The first year there were six lodges and a total membership of 200. Within ten years membership had grown to 41 lodges and nearly 2,000 people!

The Brotherhood's reputation grew as more people heard about the group's commitment to helping their members. From the beginning, the group provided insurance protection that members might not have been able to find elsewhere, and in just a few years, invested earnings from the insurance program made it possible for the Brotherhood to offer extra benefits to members.

By July of 1903, \$245,000 in insurance benefits had been paid to brothers. In addition, \$85,000 had been paid to members whose illnesses had caused family hardships, and \$110,000 had been paid in extra benefits just to help members through a time of need. The group had also paid \$3,000 to help with burial expenses for members' wives who had died.

The Brotherhood reached out to many people during those early years. When the earthquake rocked San Francisco in 1906, Brotherhood members sent \$8,000 to help those who suffered losses. When elderly members needed help, they established an old age assistance fund and some districts even established homes for the elderly.



A publication to help members communicate with each other began in 1916, and membership grew each year. By 1925, 21,000 people were members of the Danish Brotherhood in America.

Changing to Meet Changing Needs

Throughout the years of growth, the Brotherhood had established a democratic organization that sought input from members through election of delegates at individual lodges. Delegates then met at national conventions to vote on bylaws, share ideas, and elect a Board of Directors.

Even while the Brotherhood was growing well, the Board of Directors began to look for ways to build a bigger, stronger Brotherhood that could meet the needs of a changing

membership. Danish immigration peaked in 1882, and with fewer new immigrants to increase membership; the Board recognized the day would come when they would have to more actively recruit members.

The Board initiated the first of many membership contests in 1917. While there were no prizes offered in the first contest, all lodges were encouraged to work for new members. In later contests, prizes were awarded and incentives were offered to members who brought in new members.



However, in spite of the efforts of the Board, membership in the Brotherhood peaked in 1925, and without the rush of new immigrants to join the ranks, the number of members began to decline.

Then the Great Depression hit the country. While many organizations faded away because people had no money for dues, members of the Brotherhood followed their tradition of turning to each other for help and clung together through those depression years. When a member couldn't pay his dues, the lodge paid for him – as long as the money lasted. As a result, many members were able to hold onto the insurance protection for their families, and membership in the Brotherhood didn't suffer as much as it did in most organizations.

While the Brotherhood retained many of their existing members, few new people were added during those years, and the numbers in the organization continued to drop.

In the years that followed, an active and determined Board of Directors with the support of thousands of dedicated members began rebuilding the Brotherhood...making the changes that were necessary to appeal to a changing membership.

They gradually broadened their membership appeal, expanded their activities, and changed their approach to recruiting new members.

The Brotherhood enlarged their base of membership, at first, by encouraging participation of more family members. Men who were married to women of Danish extraction were allowed to become members in 1939. The first juvenile members were accepted in 1952, and in 1961, the membership was opened to women, making the Brotherhood for the first time a true family organization.

Eventually non-Danish members were encouraged to join the group if they were interested in learning more about the Danish culture, and the membership campaign of 1939 was conducted in English for the first time.



By 1971, the group adopted a resolution which said, "Let us open our doors more and more, and let us all share our knowledge and love for the Danish Brotherhood. We should encourage wives and children to join our lodge, and to keep their interest, we must develop our programs to meet the cultural needs of the whole family."

Lodge activities also changed during the rebuilding years – to meet the needs of the expanded membership. The Brotherhood in the years following 1925 began placing less emphasis on helping immigrants and more emphasis on encouraging pride in the Danish heritage and pride in the achievements of the Danish people in America. The

Brotherhood established drill teams and a bowling league. They sponsored cruises to Denmark. They raised money to bring Danish athletes to the 1932 Olympics and sponsored a coast-to-coast radio broadcast in 1935 on the 100th anniversary of the first publication of Hans Christian Andersen's famous short stories.

Members of the Brotherhood took an active role in organizing the National America Denmark Association after Denmark was occupied by Germany in World War II. The organization raised money, which was sent to Denmark for the relief effort when the country was again free.

In 1927, the Brotherhood began dispersing funds from a relief fund, and in the next eight years nearly \$200,000 had been paid to members who were in need of help.

The spirit of helping others reached to the local lodges which often spent the last dollar in their treasuries to help a brother through bad times. The history is full of stories like a man who received \$100 to help pay for an artificial limb when his leg was amputated in an accident, and a man who received financial help after he became blind. And one lodge brought all its members together to husk 90 acres of corn for a brother who had been ill.

Along with the expanded programs and a broadened membership base, the Brotherhood began a more aggressive search for members. Membership contests continued for years and included prizes and incentives for members who added to the membership. Lodge events were held for Danish members of the community to interest them in membership. A promotional director was hired. Advertising materials were printed. And each year, aggressive campaigns were aimed at increasing membership. The Brotherhood hired their first field representative to actively seek members in 1966.

As membership improved and the group grew stronger, a new headquarters building was built in Omaha and dedicated in 1967 – a sign of the progress the Brotherhood was making.

The determination of members and the progressive leadership of the Board of Directors brought the Brotherhood through a time of transition and saw the organization become a strong and successful family organization.

By 1974, the membership was growing again, the primary purposes were still at the heart of the organization, and members were enjoying greater social and financial benefits than ever before.

On the Grow Again

The steady growth during the 70's brought about a continuing increase in the social and financial benefits of the Brotherhood.

Entire families began to gather together to share in a wide range of activities that helped them take pride in their heritage and learn more about the accomplishments of Danish men and women.

Through the Brotherhood, members sponsored activities to help keep the culture of Denmark alive in their communities. Lectures, educational programs, workshops, Community Danish Days, were just a few of the events that, even today, keep the Danish heritage alive.

In 1971, the Brotherhood gave a gift to help finance the archway entrance to the Hans Christian Andersen Park in California. And in 1980-81, the organization cosponsored the American tour of Danish filmmaker Jorgen Leth.

New lodges again began springing up throughout the country, as the new image of the Brotherhood became known to more people. As a larger national organization strengthened the group and a strong insurance program provided increased funds for fraternal programs, benefits for members continued to increase.

Financial assistance was made available to needy members. Scholarships were offered to worthy students, camp grants were provided for children, and orphans' benefits were instituted.

And while the group was growing, the tradition of helping others continued to grow too. The list of good works became lengthy and included such things as donating over \$2,000 to help victims of flooding in Rapid City, and working to support five Danish Homes for the Aged that have been established through the efforts of local lodges.

Challenges Bring About Change

Yes, over one hundred years have passed since those people beginning their new lives in a new land first came together to share their heritage and their dreams. Even with the growth experienced in the 70's, the organization met outside challenges especially during the decade that followed.

Increased insurance regulatory and compliance requirements caused an increase in administrative costs, such that it became questionable whether the well-established organization had enough surplus funds to invest in the future and truly grow the organization. The Board of Directors analyzed different options for the Society in the early 1990's and presented a plan of action to the membership.

As a means to protect the surplus and financial investment made by Danish Brotherhood certificate holders, the organization merged into Woodmen of the World and/or Assured Life Association in August of 1995.

Although the Brotherhood has changed in many ways since those early days, the ideals at the heart of the group are as strong today as they were then. It continues to offer the joy of fellowship to many and financial help those individuals and organizations in need. The Danish Brotherhood continues to retain its identity under the auspices of Woodmen of the World and/or Assured Life Association. Through their new association, members continue to instill pride in their Danish heritage and offer the financial help and security that bring people a little closer to the dreams their ancestors brought from Denmark so many years ago.