

# JOTTINGS

A publication of the Danish American Archive and Library

May -Aug. 2021

## JOHN W. NIELSEN (1925 - 2021)

*Editor's Note: The Danish American Archive and Library experienced a profound loss on May 12 this year in the death of Dr. John W. Nielsen, the man most responsible for our existence. The following article is a reprint of one first published in the September 2015 issue of Jottings when he had just turned 90. John continued to work here in the intervening years, until poor health forced him to fully retire.*



*The young John W. Nielsen*

A remarkable force has been at work in the Danish American Archive and Library (DAAL) for more than a quarter of a century.

Teacher, college professor, pastor, editor and scholar Dr. John W. Nielsen established the DAAL in its current form in 1990 and infused it with his energy and a passion for Danish American history that carries through to today. Because of his foresight and leadership the DAAL has survived almost insurmountable challenges and come through stronger than ever. And at age 90, John continues to contribute his talent and knowledge to the DAAL.

“With John’s broad experience and acquaintance within the Danish American, Lutheran and educational communities, he is the go-to person for filling in gaps of information we have in our collections,” says former archive president and current board member Dr. Timothy A. Jensen. “He has a phenomenal memory for names and family connections, and can tell you much of the history of almost anyone you ask him about.”

John’s involvement with what was then the Danish Immigrant Archive began before he retired as a professor of religion and director of humanities at Dana College. Through a conversation he had in 1988 with Sarah Hansen, a descendant of a prominent Danish American family, John acquired for the college a collection of documents and photos spanning more than 100 years. This exceptional collection from the

Hansen-Mengers family sparked his interest in taking the Danish Immigrant Archive beyond a basically church- and college-centered institution to one reflecting the lives of all Danish Americans, no matter what their backgrounds or beliefs.

Upon his retirement from Dana College in 1990, John became the first director of the Danish Immigrant Archive, and thus began an era of change and progress for the archive. Among the changes and improvements John made during his term as director were:

**Developing a core of volunteers.** With the help of Dody Johnson, a classmate of his at Dana College, John recruited a core of volunteers, most with roots within Danish Lutheran congregations or Dana College or both. These volunteers came twice a year from all over the country at their own expense to help out with the day-to-day sorting, coding, cataloging and translating of the archive materials. In addition to these twice-yearly sessions, Dr. Nielsen found local volunteers who came in from one to five days a week, thus dramatically increasing the usability of the archive.

### **Creating the *Jottings* newsletter**

In order to bring together Danish Americans everywhere, Dr. Nielsen created the *Jottings* newsletter, which became a forum for news and events of interest to Danish Americans. *Jottings* also served to publicize the archive and bring in more materials.

### **Fundraising**

Early on, John recognized the necessity of raising funds for the acid-free boxes and envelopes and other equipment needed to properly house the delicate materials that were being donated at an increasing rate. As a result of the increased donations, he was able to put together an annual operating budget as well as start a planned giving fund.

### **Creating *Lur* Publications**

Dr. Nielsen realized there was a wealth of information in the DAAL collections that could be shared through the



*John W. and Elizabeth Nielsen with Dody Johnson as all three celebrated their 90th birthdays.*

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(John W. Nielsen, (Cont.))

publication of books. That led to the formation of Lur Publications and the printing of the first book, *Tante Johanne* in 1996. To date, Lur Publications has published sixteen books, the majority of which John edited.

With the start of the new millennium, John focused on how to make sure the archive stays current with the times. To that end, he suggested a name change from Danish Immigrant Archive, which was limiting in nature, to the Danish American Archive and Library, which is much more inclusive. He encouraged the formation of a planning committee to investigate the possibility of the archive's becoming a corporation independent from Dana College. However, the college went bankrupt and closed in July of 2010, before that could be accomplished. Within three days of learning the college would be closed, he witnessed the packing up and moving to temporary storage his beloved archive materials.

Always a person to face reality, though, John led the volunteers through an interim period from July to October of meeting weekly at First Lutheran Church in Blair and locating a new home for the DAAL at 1738 Washington Street in Blair. Since moving out of Dana College, the DAAL has become an independent tax-exempt organization with a board of directors consisting of nine members. At age 85, John decided it was time to slow down a little. He resigned as executive director of the DAAL and was named executive director emeritus by the board. At age 90, he continues to work at the DAAL and to lead by example. The vision and practices that John establish are still in place today and dictate the methods used to preserve the DAAL's precious holdings. So what makes John run? No one knows, but whatever it is, those who work at the DAAL are grateful for it. ■

## AROUND THE ARCHIVE

- ◆ “Red Boots and Lunch Bucket” written by John W. Nielsen is to be included as part of an upcoming issue of *The Bridge*, the twice-yearly journal published by the Danish American Heritage Society. “Red Boots” is a twelve chapter, 140+ page tribute to John's education in the one-room school he attended, District 22, in Freeborn County, Minnesota. From his arrival as a first-grader after his parents moved to a farm north of Albert Lea, to his sitting for State Board exams allowing him to attend high school in Albert Lea, the narrative explores the many dimensions of school life in rural America during the Great Depression. A separate printing of just the “Red Boots” story will be available through the DAAL in the future. Please contact Jill Hennick at 402-426-7910 if you would like to reserve a copy.
- ◆ October will be a busy month at the DAAL! Here's what's happening:
  - \* Kringle & Mingle, Saturday, October 2<sup>nd</sup> from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m., is part of the Dana College Homecoming weekend. Stop by for fun, fellowship, strong Danish coffee and authentic Danish treats.
  - \* Volunteer Week is Monday, October 4 through Friday, October 8. The annual meeting of members will take place on the Tuesday at 9:30 a.m.
  - \* Major interior design changes are scheduled.
- ◆ Immediately after the end of volunteer week, the Archive will be closed for a few weeks to allow for the installation of our new moveable shelving and all the reorganization of materials that entails. Look for more about the shelving on Page 5. We plan also to add electrical outlets to space out our computer workstations and improve our lighting. When we reopen, we'll have a whole new look!
- ◆ Last June the DAAL was honored to receive more than 30 large boxes of materials from The Danish Home located in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, which closed in 2020. The Danish Home began in Brooklyn in 1906 as a place to house and care for elderly Danes. Included in the collection are resident, financial, corporate and social event files. Look for more about this collection in a future *Jottings*. ■



Danish American  
Archive & Library

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# IN THE STACKS

## The Archivist's Archive By Michael Hennick, Library Director

As you can tell, this issue of *Jottings* is devoted to the late John W. Nielsen. He, more than any other, was responsible for taking a small institutional archive at a historically Danish college and transforming it into an international repository for materials that tell the story of Danes in America. Nielsen took on the role of an archivist during his retirement after a long career as a pastor and a professor.

The DAAL has more than six hundred boxed collections from individuals, families and institutions. Not surprisingly one of them is the John W. and Elizabeth Nielsen collection. As a man who loved any scrap of paper that might reveal some bit of information, he began to organize his own papers so that they might be placed in the archive that was acquiring more and more materials with each passing year.



*John W. Nielsen happily working in his beloved archive. (2001)*

Later a new question would arise: what and when to digitize? Nielsen and his many volunteers had much work to do.



*Another Nielsen-led Interim class, this time in Paris. (1982)*

Ultimately the collection known as JWN-994 at the DAAL would encompass 120 boxes. Just over one-quarter of them are “done” in that they are organized and available in our online library catalog. Nearly ninety boxes remain in various states of organization and are usually marked by a host of post-it notes that Nielsen left behind for those who would continue the work. There is much already available to researchers. One example is boxes 30 and 31, which tell of Nielsen’s yearly journeys to Europe. From 1973-1989 during Dana’s interim between semesters he led students on a themed trip that provided an amazing experience for college credit. In 1985 the class was entitled “Viking Adventure,” and in a whirlwind tour they visited sites in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany, England, Normandy and Sicily.

It may be that words such as exciting, sociable, and inspiring are not always used to describe those who work with archives. In the case of John W. Nielsen, he brought his own passionate style to the work of carefully collecting and preserving every scrap of paper that might give future generations just a hint of what it was like for a Danish immigrant to take whatever job he could get, or whether his children were still singing the old songs of Denmark, or whether his descendants are saving his old letters into the present. ■

# EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

## IT'S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW, IT'S WHO YOU KNOW



*Executive Director  
Jill Hennick*

Once when I was complaining about suffering through a job interview with six representatives of a company at the same time, John W. Nielsen informed me that he never had experienced a job interview. All of his jobs and promotions had been offered to him. The schools, church and college already knew him and wanted him for those positions.

Even though he never endured a job interview, he more than made up for it by giving job references to potential employers of his students. In 1996, I was planning to warn him that he might be contacted, because once again I had used his name as a reference. I was informed I could find him “at the Archive”. That was when I first learned of his knack for having assistants and volunteers flock around him. From that time on I tried to fit Archive volunteer weeks into my vacation schedule as often as possible.

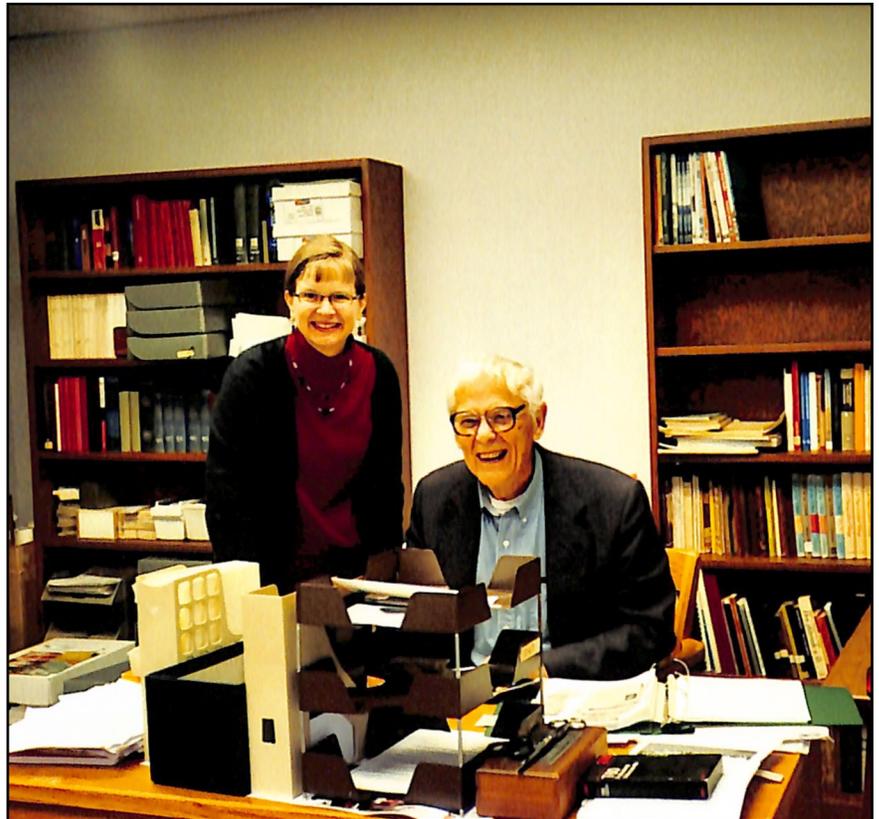
There were many reasons that he drew volunteers and supporters to the Archive. He was a visionary who was able to express his goals and embolden people to strive for them. He was a teacher and always had a lot of fascinating things to say about a variety of topics. He was always a gracious host at coffee

and at dinner parties. He invested himself in relationships. When I first started working here he was still writing an individual note on the top of each newsletter. We had to stop that when we started using a printing company to send out the newsletters, but for several years he continued to write personal messages on the thank you notes we sent out for donations. Whether you had met him in person or only received those notes, you felt like he was a friend.

Interacting with people was not a means to an end for John, unless that end was a more interesting and satisfying life. I’ve met so many people through him – those who went to school with “Johnny”, those who were served by “Pastor Nielsen” in his church in Northfield, Minnesota, those who knew “Father John” as students, those who knew “Pope John” as students, those who didn’t know “Dr. Nielsen” very well (or had extra reverence for him), and those who knew “John” through working with him in the Archive.

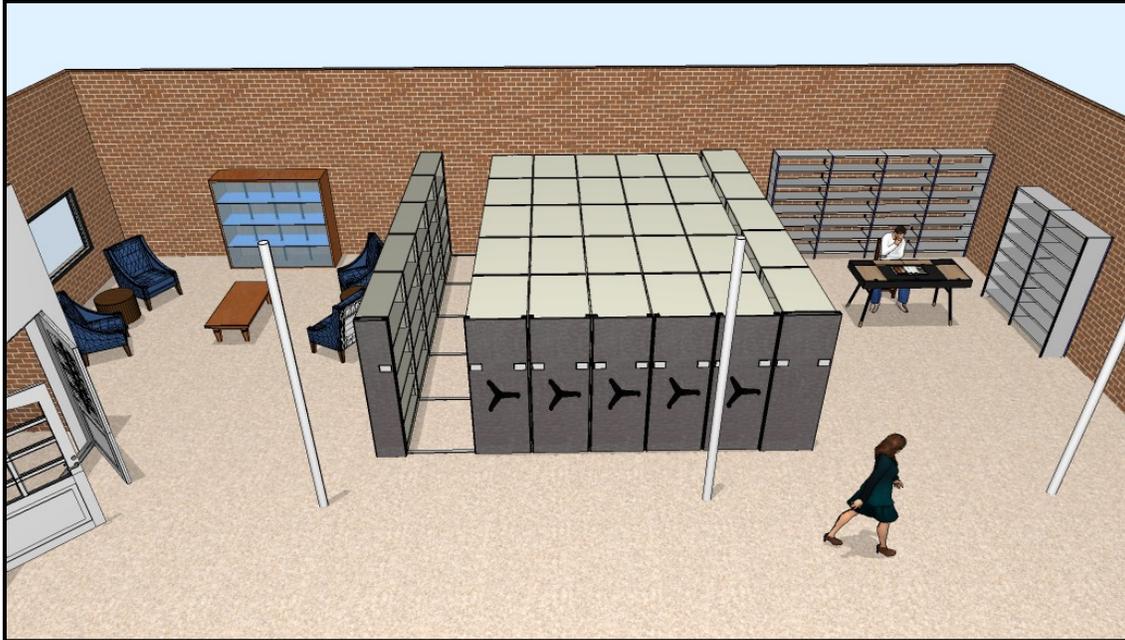
His memory for people and their relationships was legendary. Through him I also feel like I know people who died decades before I was even born. It was because of my relationship with him and those that developed from my volunteering at the Archive that I jumped at the opportunity to join the Archive staff as his assistant.

When you are looking for employment and someone wants to encourage you to network, they say, “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know”. John W. Nielsen showed us this is a saying that applies to all aspects of our life. Our lives are richer for having known him. ■

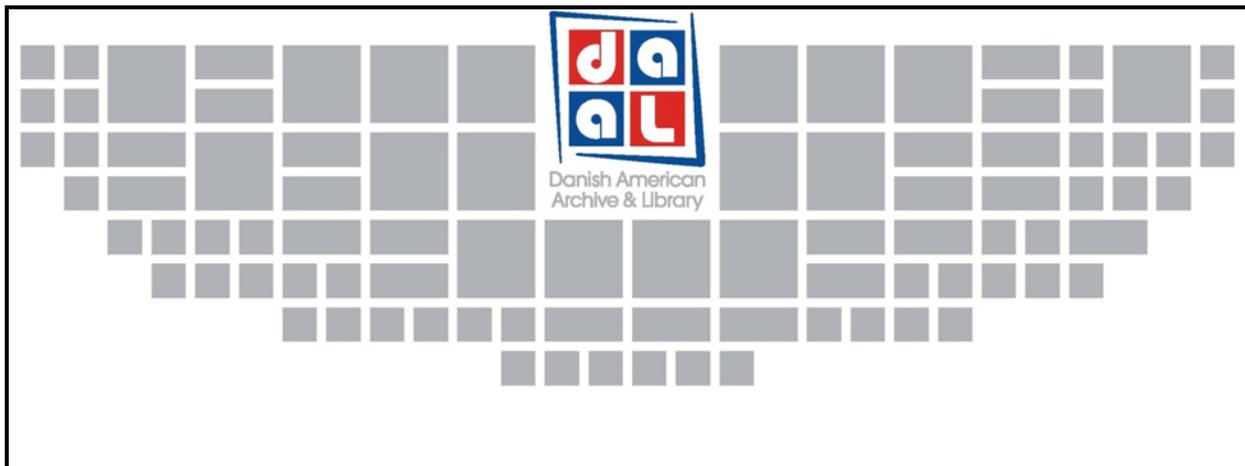


## Coming DAAL Attractions

Two major changes are taking place at the Danish American Archive and Library in October. First, we will be closed at the end of Volunteer Week, October 8, in order to rearrange the entire contents of the archive to make room for new moveable shelving. This shelving will be installed on the west side where the library now resides, so we're moving all the books over to the east side. The archive box collections will then be housed in the new shelving unit. We are so pleased to have this extra space for the precious materials that you continue to send to us.



The second change isn't really a change, but an opportunity. We are offering you the opportunity to help us tell the story of the Danish American experience through a permanent exhibit that will take the form of a commemorative wall. The overall display is shown below, and it will be placed on the side of the moveable shelving which faces the front door. The details on the design of the individual plaques will be mailed to you in November. Along with room for text, the two largest sizes can include a photograph. We are offering the large-sized plaque for a \$5,000 donation, the medium for \$2,500 and the small for \$1,000. Our Danish American heritage is something all of us are proud of, and this is a good way to show it to our visitors. If you have questions prior to the November mailing, please call Jill Hennick at 402-426-7910.



## FROM THE DANA ROOM



*Professor Nielsen talks with visitors during an exhibition of sculptures.*

*All Dana college students from the mid-sixties to the early nineties experienced a general education class known as the "Heritage of Western Man." This humanities sequence consisted of three semesters of courses that were taught by a team of professors covering the history, religion, literature, art and music of Western civilization. These "HUM" classes, as the students called them, would acquire the reputation of being some of the most academically rigorous on campus. In 1970, when John W. Nielsen became the director of the program, he took over an old library room in Pioneer Memorial, which had become mainly an administration building, and created a space that would be called "Parnassus," which means a center of poetry or artistic activity. The following article by Harold Cowan, was excerpted from an *Omaha World Herald Magazine of the Midlands* feature that was later reprinted in the Spring 1974 edition of the *Dana Review*. —Michael Hennick*

### **The Greeks had a word for it – Dana's Special Room**

By Harold Cowan

In ancient Greece, those who drank of the waters from the fountain Castalia atop Mount Parnassus supposedly were miraculously enabled to write poetry. Mythical Parnassus was sacred to Greek civilization as the home of Apollo and the Muses, the nine deities of song and poetry, the arts and science.

At the Dana College campus in Blair, the name "Parnassus" has been appropriated to designate what is technically a 30-by-70 foot room formerly housing the library reading room.

It was given its name three years ago to dramatize and underscore an innovative concept in the college's humanities program as envisioned by Prof. John Nielsen, director. Professor Nielsen, a Minnesotan who took undergraduate work at Dana, is an ordained minister who had nine years of pastoral service in Northfield, Minn. He returned to the campus in 1962 as assistant professor of religion and campus pastor. He has since done graduate work at the University of California and at Oxford University, England. He was named director of the Dana Department of Humanities in 1971. "I felt that we had an excellent humanities program at Dana," he said. "But while we were giving students a lot of information, we were turning them off in a most important dimension – in the area of appreciation.

"I wanted to make a change in which we could give them the academic basics, but also involve them very heavily in living humanities – in attending seminars, plays, lectures, concerts – and to have a setting on the campus where they could come together in groups or individually to study, relax, listen to music....So we schedule a whole series every week. One day it may be a person reading poetry or an essay, a townspeople demonstrating a craft or hobby, a professor expanding on some concept he has introduced in a class lecture, a visiting authority on baking bread or Gregorian chants, students doing skits or dramatic readings."

There is seating for 50, but attendance of 90 to 100 is not unusual. Sometimes they sit on the floor. The room, with its changing exhibits of paintings, sculptures, prints, ceramics, art themes and the like, is open weekdays 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and for 90 minutes Sunday afternoons. The program, Nielsen said, operates on a "shoestring budget" and through the generosity of persons who appear on it.

"We need not be provincial in a small college in a small town," Nielsen said. Actually our students may be more exposed to the humanities than are students at large universities. We want them to love the humanities...they have enjoyed here at Parnassus." ■



*Light refreshments were often served during important events at Parnassus.*



*Many courses required students to give a presentation in Parnassus.*



*Professor Nielsen seeks to draw this class of local fourth-graders into the humanities..*

**VOLUNTEERS:** 740 hours by 32 volunteers from Colorado, Iowa and Nebraska.

**VISITORS:** 109 visitors from Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin.

**USERS:** 61 users from Arkansas, California, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, Washington, Wisconsin, Canada, Denmark, Greece and unspecified in email or by phone.

## Acquisitions

### Materials

The following are the donations of materials we have received from May through August. The Archive could not continue to document the history of Danish Americans without these wonderful materials including complete family collections, photos, books, periodicals, music and obituaries. We appreciate your financial donations to support the processing and storage of your materials.

Keld Alstrup (Manchester, VT)  
Dennis Andersen (Atlanta, GA)  
Bill & Betsy Anderson (Blair, NE)  
Fran Anderson (Omaha, NE)  
Sarah Anderson (Blair, NE)  
Erna Berthelsen (Albert Lea, MN)  
Blair Public Library (Blair, NE)  
Ginny Blood (Burnsville, MN)  
John R. Christianson (Decorah, IA)  
Dana Alumni & Friends Assn. (Blair, NE)  
Danish Home for the Aged  
(Croton-on-Hudson, NY)  
Dan & Mari Dibben (Blair, NE)  
John Dolinsky (Arlington, NE)  
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First Lutheran Church (Poy Sippi, WI)  
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Richard & Pat Jorgensen (Blair, NE)  
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Joan Krogh (Blair, NE)  
Beulah Larsen (Fremont, NE)  
Phil & Florence Larsen (Blair, NE)  
Kristin Lawson (Pittsburg, KS)  
Gary & Diane Madsen (Omaha, NE)  
Linda Miller (Henderson, NV)  
Museum of Danish America (Elk Horn, IA)  
Liv Paulson Norderhaug (Chanhassen, MN)  
Marge Orth (Racine, WI)  
Donald B. Petersen (Pea Ridge, AR)  
Shirley Petersen (Canyon, TX)  
Eleanor Schou (Albert Lea, MN)  
Kurt Schrader (San Antonio, TX)

Sandy Sonderup (Blair, NE)  
Sharon Street (Blair, NE)  
Carol Svendsen (Denver, CO)

## FINANCIAL REPORT

### Memorials

Lettie Anderson  
Erna Berthelsen (Albert Lea, MN)  
Glen Christoffersen  
Paul & Leana Christoffersen  
(Underwood, IA)  
Donald B. Pedersen (Pea Ridge, AR)  
Anne Christopherson  
Myrv Christopherson (Decorah, IA)  
Robert E. Coffey, Dana class of 1953  
Myrv Christopherson (Decorah, IA)  
Bernard Falksen  
Jerome Falksen (St Paul, MN)  
Ann George  
Ernest & Marilyn Abariotes (Blair, NE)  
Bodil Strom & Jorn Muller (Hillsboro, OR)  
Shirley Petersen (Canyon, TX)  
Judi Seaver (Fort Calhoun, NE)  
Bill Hall  
Myrv Christopherson (Decorah, IA)  
Edward & Shirley Hansen  
Lee Anne Lack (Montrose, MN)  
Dorthea Sorensen Jensen  
Chris Gehringer (Omaha, NE)  
Lois Johnson Kemble  
Peter Mathiasen (Surrey, BC, Canada)  
Mildred Kramer  
Michael & Jill Hennick (Blair, NE)  
Dody Johnson  
Michael & Jill Hennick (Blair, NE)  
Julianne Johnson (Columbus, OH)  
Calvin & Alice Jorgensen  
Kenneth & Bonnie Jensen  
(Albert Lea, MN)  
Dennis Larsen  
Michael & Jill Hennick (Blair, NE)  
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Sarah Anderson (Blair, NE)  
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Joe Burns (Blair, NE)  
Lance & Ann Carlson (Lincoln, NE)  
Kevin Carper & Janet Puncochar  
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John & Birgitte Christianson  
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Myrv Christopherson (Decorah, IA)  
Lynn Danielson (Omaha, NE)  
Dan & Merri Dibben (Blair, NE)  
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Linda Dutton (Bennington, NE)  
Phyllis Finger (Northfield, MN)  
Lorraine Ford (Lincoln, NE)  
Charles & Sherry Forrest (Omaha, NE)  
Kay Beth Frahm (Blair, NE)  
Kevin & Carol Frahm (Blair, NE)  
Nancy Gardner (Blair, NE)  
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Lucy Hansen & James Kasper (Tipton, IA)  
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Paul & Liz Johnson (Loveland, CO)

# FINANCIAL REPORT

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 Don & Peggy Leehy (Blair, NE)  
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 Michele McNabb (Iowa City, IA)  
 Betty Megrue (Blair, NE)  
 Mary Miller (Blair, NE)  
 Maxine Mitchell (Omaha, NE)  
 Bodil Strom & Jorn Muller (Hillsboro, OR)  
 National Foundation for Danish America  
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 David Nielsen (Winfield, KS)  
 Erik & Jami Nielsen (Bellefonte, PA)  
 Patti Nielsen (Blair, NE)  
 Jim & Sue Olsen (Blair, NE)  
 Diane & Barry Olson (Blooming Prairie, MN)  
 Dorothy Olson (Blair, NE)  
 Carolyn Patterson (Lincoln, NE)  
 Don Pedersen (Pea Ridge, AR)  
 Roger Petersen (Blair, NE)  
 Shirley Petersen (Canyon, TX)  
 Larry & Palma Plume (Evergreen, CO)  
 Gary & Linda Rasmussen (Ankeny, IA)  
 Lynette & Kurt Rasmussen  
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 George & Sharon Rozanski (Omaha, NE)  
 Cindy Schou (Bloomington, MN)  
 Eleanor Schou (Albert Lea, MN)  
 Greg Schou (Albert Lea, MN)  
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 Dorothy & Harold Wright  
 Joanne Peterson (Oshkosh, WI)  
 Else & Brian Young  
 Michael & Jill Hennick (Blair, NE)

## Honoraria:

Vaughn Christensen's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday  
 Dick & Sonja Switzer (Omaha, NE)  
 Jill Hennick's birthday  
 Arvin Hernes (Blair, NE)  
 Michael & Jill Hennick's 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary  
 Arvin Hernes (Blair, NE)  
 Phil & Florence Larsen's 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
 Lars, Julie, Cole & Elodie Madsen  
 (Omaha, NE)  
 Agnes Paulsen's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday  
 Phil & Florence Larsen (Blair, NE)  
 Erling Schultz  
 Phil & Florence Larsen (Blair, NE)  
 Carole & Roch Vaillancourt  
 Donald B. Pedersen (Pea Ridge, AR)

## General Fund:

**All donations are placed in the General Fund unless otherwise specified. Those who give through the 50/100 Club are listed in each issue of Jottings.**

Benevity Impact Fund by Stephanie Adams  
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 Margie Lou Hussey (Bellevue, WA)  
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## 50/100 Club:

**The name of the 50/100 Club was inspired by the idea that if 100 members gave \$50 per month, most of our operating expenses would be met. Members sustain DAAL by giving a minimum of \$600 per year (given monthly, quarterly, or yearly according to the donor's preference). Those at the Founder's Level give at least \$2,000 per year. An added benefit of being part of the 50/100 club is receiving one donation acknowledgement for tax purposes in January reflecting a yearly total of all donations, rather than getting a separate acknowledgment for each financial contribution. These donations are part of the General Fund.**

## 50/100 FOUNDER LEVEL

Phil & Florence Larsen (Blair, NE)  
 John W.\* & Elizabeth Nielsen (Blair, NE)

## 50/100 GENERAL

Erna Berthelsen (Albert Lea, MN)  
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**Thank you for your ongoing support of the Danish American Archive and Library**

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Joan Sorensen  
Deb Schou Wood ■

*Currently on display at the DAAL are  
photos of former professors and Dana  
College memorabilia.*

### Legacy Builders:

**These donors have named DAAL in their  
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not on this list but should be, please  
contact Jill Hennick at 402-426-7910.**

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Paul & Liz Johnson  
Lorene Larsen  
Phil & Florence Larsen



## PARTING SHOT



Here are the young John W. and Elizabeth Nielsen with their two oldest sons, John Mark and Tom. They are having dinner in their apartment in the Boys' Dorm in the spring of 1953.

John W. was serving as Dana College's Dean of Men at the time—one of the first of many positions he held during his long and distinguished career at Dana College.