

Across Oceans, Across Time®

Panel 1: Coming to America

North America is made up entirely of immigrants; people who have moved here from Europe, Asia, Africa, Central and South America. All of these immigrants, except Native Americans, recently emigrated (left their homelands) and came to North America within the last five hundred years. Native Americans began moving here over fifteen thousand years ago.

The United States was founded by and has become home to many different immigrants and their descendants, although from time to time immigrant entry into the United States has been held back by quota systems. Before the American Civil War (1861 - 1865), immigrants to North America largely came from northern and western Europe. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Blacks were brought by force from Africa. Many eastern and southern Europeans came to this continent between the 1880's and 1920's. Today most immigrants come from Asia and Latin America.

The people of the United States and the Danes among them trace their ancestry to more than one hundred different national and ethnic backgrounds.

Panel 2: Introducing Denmark & Danes

Denmark has a proud history and an ability to adapt and grow when necessary. Modern Danes are descended from prehistoric invaders who came from the south after the last Ice Age. Denmark's location at the southern tip of Scandinavia and the northern border of modern Germany involved it in both Scandinavian and European affairs. The Danes first came onto the historical scene during the Viking Era (800 - 1050 A.D.). At that time, the Danes and other Vikings (the Swedes and Norwegians) conquered territory in northern Europe and explored as far away as North America.

After the Viking Era, most of Denmark's wealth belonged to the Crown. What was left belonged mostly to noble landowners, so the majority of Danes were impoverished.

As conditions worsened for the poor from the 1500's through the early 1800's, many European countries underwent revolution. Denmark was able to avoid revolution, however, by legislating reforms for the people, beginning in 1786. In 1849, King Frederick VII changed Denmark's form of government to a constitutional monarchy and a democratic constitution took effect. Ever since then, the Danes have celebrated "Constitution Day" (Grundlovsdag) on June 5th. Denmark lost a large amount of its territory to Germany in 1864, and the economic situation worsened. Some of this land was returned to Denmark after World War I, but Denmark was occupied by Germany during the Second World War. In 1943 the Danish people showed outstanding bravery when the entire citizenry worked to transport Danish Jews out of the country to safety before Nazi troops could place them in their notorious death camps. Today Denmark is a member of the European Economic Union, and known for its high-quality exports, especially porcelains, electronics and agricultural products.

Panel 3: Deciding to Leave

In rough times, several important questions always arise: "Is the grass greener on the other side of the fence?" "Should I go, or should I stay?" Believing things were better elsewhere, many Danes left Denmark in search of a better life.

Economic problems caused the largest number to leave. In the early 1800's, the Danish population increased rapidly. There were not enough jobs, so unemployment also increased. When jobs could be found wages were low; yet the cost of living was high. The eldest son inherited the land, so younger children had little hope of owning a farm. Most Danish immigrants were young, unmarried, male peasants and farmers between 15 and 29, who left to escape poverty, own land, marry, and start a family in a land of economic opportunity.

Although most Danes did not emigrate to avoid religious persecution, some did, especially in the 1700's. Even after freedom of worship was granted in 1849, many Danish Moravians, Baptists, and Mormons continued to emigrate from Denmark. More Mormons (members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) left Denmark than any other religious minority.

In 1864 almost a fourth of Denmark was lost when Slesvig and Holsten fell to Germany. Afterwards, mandatory German military service and repression of Danish culture prompted many Danes to leave for to the New World. Throughout the centuries many Danes left Denmark due to unhappy love affairs, family feuds or disagreements, a need to escape the past, or just because they had "'tramp leather' in their boots" (bisselæder i skoen). Sometimes they left to join loved ones already settled in a new land.

Panel 4: Choosing a New Land

One big question an emigrant must consider is: "Where should I go?" The answer for many Danes was: "To North America or the United States," and they struck out in search of a better life. After 1754, when the Danish monarch opened the Caribbean island of St. Thomas for settlement, Danes traveled there and to other islands of the Danish West Indies (today called the U.S. Virgin Islands). Later, some Danes moved from there to the young English colonies. Others fought in the American Revolution. As time went by, more and more Danes learned about the United States, "the land of opportunity."

In the early 1800's, many Danes living in the United States began writing letters home describing their new lives and their new land. The letters were often printed in local Danish newspapers, where they were avidly read and shared. In the mid-1800's, Danes who returned from the United States urged others to sail for America and led emigrant groups across the Atlantic. American railroads sent agents to Denmark and other European countries to recruit emigrants to buy surplus lands given to the railroads by the government.

In the United States any immigrant could claim 160 acres of unoccupied government land, homestead it, and earn title in five years in accordance with the Homestead Act of 1862. Or, an immigrant could work as a farmhand (earning twice what he would have earned in Denmark) and buy a farm within ten years. All in all, between 1865 and 1914, some 300,000 Danes headed to the United States.

Panel 5: Traveling to America

All immigrants had to travel to North America from their country of origin, and the journey was often hard.

Whatever the reason for leaving the Old Country, every emigrant to North America before the 1950's had one experience in common - a transatlantic ship crossing. Initially, they came on sailing ships. Crossing the Atlantic Ocean under sail took four to eight weeks. Tickets were very expensive. During the voyage, poor emigrants of every nationality and religion were crowded into "steerage" - cramped, unsanitary, stinking, vermin-infested, below-deck barracks-like accommodations. They had no fresh food. Disease was rampant, and there were frequent burials of those who died at sea. After steamships were developed in the 1860's, the Atlantic crossing was shortened to ten

days. Steamship accommodations were somewhat more comfortable, too. Still, in the 1880's a steamship ticket would have cost almost a year's wages for a Danish farmhand.

After World War II, most immigrants came to North America by air, and the journey became much shorter and easier.

Panel 6: Arriving in America

Immigrants had to pass an inspection upon arrival in order to be allowed to enter the country. In the late 1800's, millions of European emigrants sailed into New York harbor, where more than 30,000 were processed through an immigrant station each week. Thousands more came through other East Coast, Southern, and West Coast immigration stations. Upon arrival, they were given quick, sometimes painful, medical inspections and asked numerous questions. If an immigrant did not pass the medical inspection, answer questions satisfactorily, or have the minimum amount of money required of all immigrants, he or she was returned home.

Even though Danish emigration increased in the early 1800's, relatively few Danes left before the 1860's. The largest wave of Danish emigration in the United States fell between 1868 and 1900, peaking in the 1880's. A second wave came during the early 1900's. Between 1865 and 1914, over 300,000 Danes sailed to the United States and Canada - twenty times more than all Danish emigrants who previously had come to the New World. In comparison to other immigrant groups, however, Danes were but a trickle.

Panel 7: Traveling to New Homes

After passing through the immigration station at their port of entry, most Danish newcomers faced yet another journey to their new homes. It might be on foot, by boat, by train, or more recently, by airplane. In the early 1800's, most Danish immigrants settled in Eastern cities. Some traveled by boat or "immigrant train" to the Midwest. In the 1860's to 1880's, most Danes headed for Utah on foot, pushing their goods in handcarts ahead of them. Between 1869 and 1914 some 12,000 Danes went directly to Canada after passing through the port of entry in New York, while 255,000 stayed in the United States.

Beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the United States government set immigration quotas by country of origin. Because of these quotas, many Danes who came to North America between 1921 and 1931 went directly to Canada, rather than to the United States. In the 1930's Danish immigration to the United States leveled off to about 1,000 per year, while Canada has continued to lure larger numbers of Danish immigrants to the present day. When the immigrants arrived at their destinations, they were usually tired, dirty, and hungry, and very glad to see their journey's end.

Panel 8: Settling Down

The Danes dispersed widely across the United States in both urban and rural areas. Most Danes assimilated into existing communities, but some formed their own towns. The first Danish immigrants helped settle the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam (now Manhattan, in New York) in the 1620's. When Pietists were outlawed in Denmark in 1735, church members fled to Pennsylvania, where they settled with denominational brethren from Germany. New York City, Chicago, and towns in Wisconsin lured Danish immigrants in the early 1800's.

At mid-century, Iowa's rich soil drew immigrants who had previously settled in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota. The first Danish settlement in Iowa was at St. Ansgar (near Mason City) in 1853. Utah drew the Danes from the 1860's to 1880's, but in the 1870's and '80s the largest number of Danish immigrants went to Wisconsin. In the 1890's and the

first decade of the twentieth century, Iowa attracted the most. In 1920 California held the largest number of Danish-Americans, and it retains this distinction today.

Until the 1850's, Danes usually lived alongside other immigrants, especially Norwegians, but then they began forming their own Danish settlements. The first was founded in Hartland, Wisconsin, in 1846. Between 1886 and 1934, Danish immigrant leaders founded the Danish settlements of Tyler and Askov, Minnesota; Dannebrog and Nysted, Nebraska; Danevang, Texas; Dagmar, Montana; and Solvang, California.

Panel 9: Erecting Churches

Many Danes of the immigrant generation did not join a church; however, in many Danish-American communities the Lutheran Church was very important. Once in the United States, Danish immigrants emphasized religion and church-going less than many other immigrant groups. Those who joined American churches generally joined the Baptist, Methodist, or Mormon churches if they did not follow their Lutheran heritage. In many Danish immigrant communities, the Lutheran Church remained strong. Those Danes who continued in the Lutheran Church divided into two groups; the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church (which later became the American Evangelical Lutheran Church) and the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church (which later became the United Evangelical Lutheran Church). Today they have merged into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In Shelby and Audubon counties in Iowa nine out of thirteen Danish Lutheran churches are affiliated with the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Panel 10: Building Schools

Danes maintained their Old Country educational traditions and their heritage by establishing folk schools, Danish summer schools and other church schools in the United States.

Most Danes who came to the United States had been well educated at home and they continued to stress the value of education in their new homeland. Because the Lutheran Church especially promoted education, it led to the most important educational contribution Danish immigrants made to the United States: the folk school tradition. The first Danish folk school for young adults was established in this country at Elk Horn, Iowa, in 1878. Many others followed in predominantly Danish immigrant communities. Another type of school founded by Danish immigrants in this country was the Danish summer school for elementary school-age children. These schools met for 6-8 weeks during the summer and had a religious and cultural emphasis. Most were discontinued by 1920, but the one at Kimballton, Iowa, operated into the 1940's. Danish "Saturday" and "Sunday" schools were also formed in Danish immigrant settlements.

Panel 11: Serving Communities

Danish-Americans met the needs of their communities by joining together in organizations and cooperative efforts. The primary Danish fraternal organization, The Danish Brotherhood in America, grew out of a veterans' group called Danske Vaabenbrødre (Danish Brothers-in-Arms). By 1882 several of these groups joined together to form a national organization with lodges across the country. They provided social activities to nurture their common background through the use of Danish language and songs, and financial help to their members with survivor's insurance, sickness and death benefits. The Danish Brotherhood lodge halls were often the social halls for their communities. More informal committees were often formed in heavily Danish immigrant communities to meet the needs of children or old people. Danish immigrants built and operated orphanages and old people's homes. These institutions were

later absorbed or taken over by larger organizations. Young people far from home and working in a strange city needed a boarding house with a “good reputation” and a wholesome place to gather in the evening. Young People’s Homes were the answer to this need and were often formed by churches and fraternal groups.

Panel 12: Becoming American

Unlike many other immigrant groups, the Danes tried to assimilate quickly, rapidly sought citizenship and actively participated in the political life in the United States. Most Danish immigrants blended quickly into the mainstream of American life after they entered the country. They believed assimilating into American society promised greater rewards than hanging onto their Danish identity and traditional ways. To achieve this goal, they sought American citizenship, filing the necessary papers and studying for the citizenship tests.

Even though some Danish immigrants had left Denmark or Slesvig-Holstein to avoid army service, Danish-Americans joined the armed services to fight for their new home even when they were not yet citizens.

Participating in the political and patriotic activities of their communities, they ran for office, served on boards and joined in parades and celebrations.

Panel 13: Earning A Living

Danes worked at many different kinds of jobs in the United States. They brought new energy and skills. Those working in agriculture brought with them the important concept of the cooperative. When Danish immigrants entered the United States, they worked at everything from farming to baking to banking to teaching to praying for their neighbors’ souls. Most Danish men worked for a Danish immigrant farmer or lived in a boarding house and practiced a trade after entering the United States. In this way they could earn enough money to get a foothold in their new country.

Most Danish immigrants farmed, and in the 1880’s they settled the Midwest in large numbers. They were drawn there because the Prairies and Plains had great agricultural potential and the railroads offered large tracts of land for sale. Once settled, Danish immigrant farmers in this area generally raised cattle, hogs, and some sheep, with supplemental poultry and crops.

Once settled, Danish immigrant farmers followed some of the old Danish traditions. Back in Denmark small farmers had banded together into cooperatives in the late 1800’s. This Danish tradition transplanted successfully and was an important contribution to American life. In many turn-of-the-century Danish immigrant communities, strong cooperative elevators, lumber yards, creameries, shipping associations, credit associations and insurance companies were organized.

In the last half of the nineteenth century, construction boomed as new settlements spread westward. Timber needed cutting, railroads needed building, and the Danes helped do the job.

Panel 14: Maintaining Values

In Danish immigrant communities across North America, institutions, churches and schools promoted Danish culture, while also helping Danes adapt to life in the United States. In Danish immigrant towns, the Lutheran Church largely shaped the spoken, educational, social, and cultural life of the community. The Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church Society believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible, stressed repentance and personal faith, and practiced a very

strict morality. They promoted assimilation and the adoption of the English language in order to spread their religion. This group later became a part of the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The folk schools in predominantly Danish communities also helped maintain Danish cultural traditions. The folk school idea came from Danish Bishop N.F.S. Grundtvig in the 1830's. There was a strong religious undercurrent at these schools, but the most important subjects were mathematics, history, and literature, as well as Norse mythology, physics, geography, penmanship, singing, and gymnastics. In the U.S. these were all taught in Danish, but a course in English was also offered. There were no credits, graduations, or degrees. About 10,000 to 12,000 Danish-Americans attended the folk schools, so they were very influential in maintaining Danish culture.

Danish summer schools also were organized here and there by Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church congregations to teach children Danish language, history, hymns, Bible lessons, crafts, and gymnastics.

Panel 15: Embracing Two Languages

In the United States, most Danes quickly learned English, but in heavily Danish communities many immigrants continued speaking Danish almost exclusively until World War I. Several factors eased the Danish immigrant's adjustment to American life. For example, with schooling available to everyone in Denmark, Danish immigrants had a high literacy rate and, thus, had little trouble learning English. In fact, within a generation of the great Danish immigration to the United States in the late 1800's, most Danes spoke English. Danish did persist in Elk Horn and Kimballton, Iowa, and other predominantly Danish immigrant settlements around the country. Danes in these towns retained many traditions and had little need for English until the early part of the last century. The Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in particular promoted the preservation of Danish language and traditions where it was strong. Services, confirmation and Sunday school classes always were held in Danish, and the traditional Danish hymns were sung. All the farmers and businessmen were Danes; they subscribed to a weekly newspaper published in Danish; and English was needed only for out-of-town business. Even after 1900, Danish continued to be spoken in the home, although the American-born generation would often speak English among themselves.

During World War I, however, all this changed. It was considered unpatriotic to use a language other than "American," and all across the country the use of Danish and other foreign languages declined.

Panel 16: Strengthening Ties

Although Danes dispersed widely across the country and assimilated quickly into the American mainstream, the immigrants also sought each other out and formed organizations where they enjoyed each other's company. Without the support of family, the Danish immigrant often needed the aid that fraternal organizations provided. Life insurance, burial policies and especially emergency aid for a stranded individual or fatherless family were provided by such groups as the Danish Brotherhood in America, the Danish Sisterhood of America, the Dania Society and the Danish Relief Society. As a result, strong ties were formed - often as strong as family ties - among members of clubs and lodges.

The regular meetings were a social time that the Dane in America looked forward to. Here he or she could relax, speak Danish and enjoy good food in addition to the program or activity of the group.

Choral societies and athletic groups would represent the Danes to the larger community. Floats, parade entries, exhibits at fairs and exhibitions were all projects a club might undertake. Groups organized tours to other Danish communities and even back to Denmark. Even for Danish-Americans who were not active members, the local lodge hall was a social gathering place where they could renew their connections with Denmark in America.

Panel 17: Celebrating the Arts

The Danes brought a strong heritage in arts and crafts with them to their new land. There is an especially lively tradition of songs and folk dancing, as well as needlework and woodworking. Music was and is an important part of Danish life, both folk songs and hymns, and Danish immigrants carried much of their musical tradition with them across the oceans. Although sometimes discouraged by the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church, Danish folk dancing continued in some areas in the United States with a large Danish immigrant concentration. The folk songs are cheerful and humorous; the dances express common folk themes and celebrate peasant life or special occasions like weddings.

Two Danish crafts evident in Danish immigrant households were needlework, among the women, and woodworking, among men. Many young Danish women had learned both practical and fancy handwork before they left Denmark. In both their old and new countries, they typically did cut-work; crochet, tatting, hardanger embroidery, lace-making, counted cross-stitch and knitting, and they used all these needlecrafts to embellish their home-sewn clothing and linens and to decorate their walls. Most skilled Danish immigrant carpenters also did elaborate woodcarving, fretwork and wood-inlaying and built furniture, as well as constructing houses and other buildings.

Panel 18: Making A Home

Although most Danes assimilated into American ways, in the home many Danish holiday cooking and other traditions were kept. Most Danish immigrant men in the United States married non-Danish women, gave up their traditional Danish ways, and assimilated into American society. But Danes who settled in largely Danish communities retained many traditional Danish social customs and folkways. They continued traditional holiday celebrations, including serving traditional foods. Danish immigrants in these towns, for example, celebrated Constitution Day (Grundlovsdag) on June 5th (the anniversary of the Danish democratic constitution). Today it is not so much a patriotic celebration as a celebration of Danish traditional foods, dancing, singing, and crafts. Danish immigrants continued to celebrate Christmas in a typically Danish fashion, too. On Christmas Eve (Juleaften) Danish immigrants would have the most important feast of the year. The traditional dinner consisted of rice pudding, roast goose with prune sauce or prune and apple stuffing, glazed potatoes, red cabbage with currant jelly, coffee, and pastries. Adults and children alike would fashion traditional red and white woven-heart baskets (julehjerter) and other paper decorations, with which they covered their Christmas tree.

In spite of many hardships and an alien environment, Danish women strived to maintain their high standards of hospitality, cleanliness, decoration and that special sense of coziness (hyggelig) which makes a Danish home.

Panel 19: Bridges Across the Ocean

Danish-Americans continue to reach back to Denmark, and Danes extend their hands across the Atlantic to their American relations building bridges that span across oceans, across time. Over 365,000 Danes had left their homeland and come to live in the United States as of 1990. Often it was difficult to start a new life. There were many problems, and some of them were difficult enough to send the immigrants back to Denmark. Yet most Danish immigrants have stayed.

From the time Danes first came to North America and the United States, relations between the old and new worlds have been close. Many Danish immigrants worked to keep their Danish heritage. They kept in touch with relatives at

home by letter or by telephone or by returning home to visit, bringing a renewed pride and special mementos home with them when they returned.

Danes often regard the United States as a special place, partly due to the 1.6 million Americans with Danish heritage who live here today. To keep in touch, Danes with relatives who came to our country often sent gifts and reminders of Denmark. Her Majesty Queen Margrethe of Denmark has followed her parents' footsteps and visited the United States. Danish cultural groups, students, and athletic teams make special tours. In addition, ordinary everyday Danes have traveled here to see their loved ones.

At least one Danish immigrant to the United States felt it was so important to keep close ties between the two nations that he established programs to do so. Dr. Max Henius donated his land in the Rebild Hills near Aalborg, Denmark, on the condition that Danes and Danish-Americans gather there annually to celebrate American Independence Day.