

# America Letter

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An International  
Cultural Center



**THE DANISH IMMIGRANT MUSEUM**

*Her Majesty Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, Protector  
Member of the American Association of Museums*

Your Museum in the  
Heart of the Continent  
BOX 470 • ELK HORN, IOWA 51531

## Celebrating 25 Years 1983-2008



- ✦ Messages from Past Presidents of the Board of Directors
- ✦ Why Our Immigrant Museum Matters
- ✦ Preview of the New Permanent Exhibit

# A Special America Letter

In this edition of the *America Letter* we depart from our typical format and focus to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Danish Immigrant Museum.

A timeline of the museum's history and accompanying photos demonstrate how this institution started as an idea that was shepherded forward by a few individuals, growing steadily into a staff, a collection of artifacts and stories, a building with exhibits, visitors, programs – supported today by over 3,000 members.

Messages from past presidents of The Danish Immigrant Museum's Board of Directors give a sense of the voices and perspectives of people who have helped build up this institution. An essay from John Mark Nielsen, executive director, speaks to the continuing relevance of a museum focused on the Danish immigrant story. Finally, a peek at plans for the expanded and upgraded permanent exhibit *Across Oceans, Across Time*<sup>®</sup>, set to open in late May, points toward The Danish Immigrant Museum's future.

Special funding for this edition of the *America Letter* was provided by The Fredrickson Cultural Fund, established through the estate of long-time museum supporters, J. Emory and Edna Fredrickson, Elk Horn, Iowa.

J. Emory and Edna were proud of The Danish Immigrant Museum and its purpose. Edna volunteered many hours at the front desk, welcoming visitors from near and far. She also helped out with mailings and other museum volunteer functions.

The Fredricksons married in 1967. They lived in Elk Horn, Iowa all of



*This picture was taken in honor of J. Emory and Edna Fredrickson's 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in 1992. The Fredrickson Cultural Fund, established through their estate, has helped to fund this 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the America Letter.*

their lives, carrying on the Danish heritage they so proudly inherited from their Danish immigrant grandparents. In addition to the duties of the farm, Emory and Edna were also active in the surrounding community, always ready to lend a helping hand at Elk Horn Lutheran Church or with various community activities. Emory passed away in 1996 at the age of 90 and Edna passed away in 2006 at the age of 99.

We are so grateful to J. Emory and Edna Fredrickson and their family for having provided for The Danish Immigrant Museum in their estate plans. *Tusind Tak!*

## America Letter

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# The Danish Immigrant Museum Celebrates 25 Years

*Introduction by James D. Iversen*

*Iversen served as a member of the Board of Directors of The Danish Immigrant Museum for two stretches—from October 1985 to October 1991 and again from October 1992 to October 1999.*

**F**rom the oldest kingdom in Europe they came across oceans to settle in a new land. They sought an opportunity to build new homes, lives and fortunes. And in America these Danish immigrants found that opportunity. While they embraced their new nationality with enthusiasm, they also hoped to preserve their Danish heritage—the values and traditions that made them special. It was their dream to combine the best of both cultures: the old world and the new.

But these new Americans adapted so readily that many nearly lost their “Danishness.” By the 1980s most members of the first generation of Danish immigrants had passed away. Only photographs, letters and heirlooms remained to remind their children and grandchildren of their connection to Denmark and the immigrant experience. Would these too eventually be lost or forever hidden in attics? Would the sacrifices and accomplishments of the Danish immigrant be forgotten? Would Danish Americans completely lose touch, in such a short span of time, with a proud heritage?

Thus, a museum’s story begins. The following is a chronology of some of the key moments in the development of The Danish Immigrant Museum.

**1979**

Norman Bansen and Richard Jorgensen, professors at Dana College, present the idea for a museum focused on Danish immigrant heritage to the Dana College Board of Regents. The board endorses the idea. Bansen then presents the resolution to the Danish American Heritage Society delegates to the Scandinavian Immigration Conference in Decorah, Iowa.

**1980**

The Dana Regents request that the Danish American Heritage Society (DAHS) appoint an exploratory committee. In response, Arnold Bodtker, president of the DAHS, appointed a committee to explore the idea of creating a national museum. Bodtker is pictured here with Signe Nielsen Betsinger, herself an exploratory committee member and later the first president of The Danish Immigrant Museum’s Board of Directors.



**1981-82**

During these years the committee met on several occasions to consider issues and study possible sites for location of a museum that would serve Danish Americans from the entire United States.



## 1983

The committee met in Elk Horn, Iowa (far right) and, at the urging and support of local residents, chose the Danish Villages of Iowa as the site for The Danish Immigrant Museum.

In May, the Museum was officially incorporated and the first meeting of the founding Board of Directors was held.

In July, the Elk Horn Lutheran Church donated twenty acres (right) for the site of the Museum.



## 1984

The first Annual Meeting of The Danish Immigrant Museum was held in Elk Horn.

## 1985-87

The Museum was temporarily located on Main Street, Elk Horn and with the hiring of an executive director, June Sampson, and a small staff, accessioning of the collection began.



## 1988

A Ground Breaking Ceremony (right) was held at the future site of the Museum. Executive Director June Sampson steers the horse-drawn plow that was used. Dennis Nissen, the first development director, and Marilee Christensen, development secretary, were hired soon after and are pictured below working at their Main Street office.



## 1990

In February, the Elk Horn-Kimballton Arts Council presented Bedstemor's Hus (far right) to the Museum for its continuing preservation.

In September, construction of Phase I of the Museum began with Story Construction Company of Ames, Iowa doing the work. Dirt is moved in preparation for paving the Museum's entry drive.



*Built in 1908, Bedstemor's Hus turns 100 this year. The celebration takes place May 25, 2008.*

## 1991

Members celebrated a *Rejsegilde*, in which the *Rejsekrans* (the traditional Danish construction wreath) was raised to the top part of the building, in this case to the top of the elevator shaft, the tallest part of the building at the time.

## 1992

The Board of Directors authorized the securing of a mortgage loan in order to continue construction.

## 1993

A festive dinner was held in the completed Phase I building, pictured here, to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of The Danish Immigrant Museum.



## 1994

The permanent exhibit, *Across Oceans, Across Time*®, was completed (far right) and Victor Borge's piano (below right) was moved in place in time for the Grand Opening of the Museum in June.

The Grand Opening Ceremony was conducted outside just south of the new building. Danish Ambassador Peter Dyvig was a guest speaker at the ceremony. Below, then Iowa Governor Terry Brandstad addresses the gathering.

In June certificates were received by the Museum in appreciation for the rescue of the Danish Jews during World War II.



## 1995-96

Interior construction of the building continued with the completion of the mezzanine and the installation of an elevator. With the hiring of a full-time curator, regularly changing exhibits were introduced. The Family History & Genealogy Center opened on the mezzanine under the guidance of an all-volunteer staff, pictured here.



### **Exhibits**

- ❖ Enriching the Story We Tell: A Focus on Recent Gifts to the Collection

## 1997

Bedstemor's Hus was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

### **Exhibits**

- ❖ A Time of Promise (wedding dresses)
- ❖ Benedicte Wrensted: An Idaho Photographer in Focus
- ❖ Wedding Quilt Show
- ❖ Steen Steensen Blicher
- ❖ Tracking the Source
- ❖ Embracing Two Worlds: The Thorvald Muller Family of Kimballton



## 1998-99

The Visual Storage Area on the lower level, pictured here, was constructed, allowing visitors to view the vast collection of artifacts which has been accessioned by the Museum.



### Exhibits

- ❖ The Danish Pioneer: 125 Years in Words and Pictures
- ❖ A Consecration of Hope: Baptismal Clothing from Immigrant Families
- ❖ Carl Nielsen, The Man and the Music
- ❖ And the People Came . . . Elk Horn's Folk School, a Crucible of Danish Immigrant History
- ❖ Celebrating the Village of Ebeltoft: A Study in Miniature by Folk Artist Richard Storkfelt

## 2000-01

Recognizing the need to provide for the long-term viability of the Museum, the Board of Directors established the Holger Danske Endowment.

The Museum sponsors a community summer production of Lois Lowry's young adult novel, *Number the Stars*. The novel was adapted for stage and directed by Jason Larche, Grand View College's theater professor.

### Exhibits

- ❖ Hans Christian Andersen: Life and Art 1825-1875
- ❖ Danish American Cultural Life in Chicago
- ❖ Pictorial Treasures: The Work of Nulle Øigaard and Ib Spang Olsen
- ❖ Olaf Wieghorst: Artist of the American West
- ❖ Wilderness Exodus: The Danish Mormon Experience in America
- ❖ Scenes from Denmark I: Images of the Homeland
- ❖ Narrating History Through Images: C. C. A. Christensen, Danish Immigrant Painter, Unfolds A Migration Story

## 2002

Plans were generated for establishing an off-site location for the Family History and Genealogy Center, pictured here. A full-time librarian/manager for the proposed facility was hired. Additionally, the Board of Directors approved a plan for expanding the grounds of the Museum into a natural park following the tenets of famed landscaper Jens Jensen.



The Museum sponsored *Hamlet Lives*, a summer theater production with professional actors.

### Exhibits

- ❖ Immigrants from Denmark to America 1856: Danish Folk Costumes from Kalundborg Regional Museum, Denmark
- ❖ From A Gifted Journey: The Paintings of S. D. Rodholm
- ❖ Fredsville: A Danish Village on the American Prairie
- ❖ Danes on the Northern Plains: Patterns of Settlement in the Dakotas, Montana and Wyoming
- ❖ Jens Dixen and the Brorson Folk School
- ❖ A Passion for Coopering: The Life and Work of Niels Christian Thomsen
- ❖ Creative Transformations: The Salmonsens Melberg Stamp Collection

## 2003

The 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Museum was celebrated with a yearlong series of special events that included the grand opening of the new Family History & Genealogy Center in its new location on Elk Horn's Main Street. Here the Sankt Hans Aften bonfire blazes on the Museum grounds.



### **Exhibits**

- ❖ A Weaving Together of Many Diverse Threads:  
The Rich Tapestry of Minnesota's Danish Heritage
- ❖ Highlights from the Collection 2001-2003
- ❖ The Photographs of Sisse Brimberg
- ❖ Housing the Dream: Revisiting Beginnings  
(20th Anniversary)

## 2004

Two Danish graduate students are the first interns, as the Museum initiates an internship program with Aalborg University, the Danmark-Amerika Fondet and The American-Scandinavian Foundation. The Museum partners with the National Museum of Denmark and the Nordic Heritage Museum of Seattle, Washington in mounting an exhibit on Danish folk costumes.

### **Exhibits**

- ❖ Original Paintings by Henri Sørensen
- ❖ Expressions of a Danish American Identity: Exploring the Creative Work of Lorraine Larsen
- ❖ A Celebration of Heritage: Danish Folk Costumes in America
- ❖ Historical Danish Folk Costumes from The National Museum Of Denmark
- ❖ Celebrating 100 Years of the Danish Christmas Seals
- ❖ Quilting Family History



## 2005

The Museum celebrates the bicentennial of Hans Christian Andersen's birth (celebration pictured at right), hosts the annual meeting of the Federation of Danish Associations in Canada and co-sponsors the major conference, "Danish Culture, Past and Present: The Last Two Hundred Years." Museum quality lighting is installed in the mezzanine gallery, ultra-violet light filters are placed on all windows, and the Museum's roof is replaced with a new, red tile look.



### **Exhibits**

- ❖ Contemporary Illustrations of Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales
- ❖ Hans Hansen: A Study in Danish American Ingenuity
- ❖ Americans at Work and at Play: Danish Influences in Every Day Life
- ❖ Hans Christian Andersen 2005
- ❖ Nadjeschda Overgaard, National Heritage Fellow, 1998



## 2006

The Museum celebrates the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Family History & Genealogy Center, initiates a Danish-American artists' series with new exhibits in the lower gallery every six months, and unveils a redesigned website. Outreach programming includes a long-term residency with the University of Iowa's Maia String Quartet and cooperation with the Tempe Historical Museum through its Petersen House Museum. The Museum Shop is remodeled and the exterior of the museum is enhanced by treating exposed timbers and repainting. Local high school students (right) assist in landscaping the Jens Jensen Heritage Park.



### **Exhibits**

- ❖ The Art of Clint Hansen
- ❖ The Papirklip of Rick Marzullo
- ❖ Danish Gymnastics: Fitness, Form and Rhythm in Motion

## 2007

Working with the Funen Graphic Workshop of Odense, Denmark and the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, the Museum arranges and co-sponsors a traveling exhibit of contemporary Danish graphic art on the theme of immigration. The grand opening of the Jens Dixen House, pictured here, is celebrated. The final unfinished area in the Museum is remodeled into a kitchen and conference room.



### **Exhibits**

- ❖ Sculptures by Elmer Petersen
- ❖ Cut Paper Illustrations by Cynthia McKeen
- ❖ The Whimsical Paper Cuttings of Annette Andersen
- ❖ Contemporary Art Works by Edward Matwijkiw
- ❖ From Postcards to Text Messaging: Friends and Family Stay in Touch
- ❖ The Work of Helle Jørvad, Danish Goldsmith and Designer

## 2008

May 24 and 25 the newly upgraded and extended permanent exhibit, *Across Oceans, Across Time*®, will open. On May 25, the 100th anniversary of Bedstemor's Hus will be celebrated. From July 1 to July 13 the Museum will sponsor a 25th Anniversary Tour of Denmark, including a visit to the 96th annual 4th of July Celebration at Rebild National Park in Denmark; John Mark Nielsen, executive director of The Danish Immigrant Museum, will be the United States keynote speaker.

### **Exhibits**

- ❖ Carl Rohl-Smith: The Artist at Work
- ❖ Rescue of the Danish Jews - 1943
- ❖ Across Oceans: Our Maritime Collection

# Messages from Past Presidents

## Signe T. Nielsen Betsinger

*Betsinger was a professor of home economics at the University of Minnesota before becoming an administrator and then a member of a consulting group focused on fundraising. Betsinger was the chair of the committee originally charged by the Danish American Heritage Society to investigate the potential for a Danish immigrant museum and to determine where it might be located. She served as the first president of The Danish Immigrant Museum's Board of Directors from 1983 to 1989. Originally from western Iowa, she lives in the Twin Cities area.*

**T**he sky was blue. There was a pleasant breeze. The rolling hills were green. The horses were harnessed, the antique plow poised ready to cut into the hillside. Was it Denmark? No, it was Elk Horn, Iowa, and it was Labor Day 1988, the day of the groundbreaking for The Danish Immigrant Museum.

Those first furrows marked the culmination of years of hard work by many Americans of Danish ancestry who, since long before 1983 when the museum was incorporated, pursued the dream of an institution that would tell the story of Danish immigrants in America. With enthusiasm, hundreds of volunteer hours and money, they succeeded in bringing that dream into reality.

And now we celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary!

In 1980, the Danish American Heritage Society Board of Directors convened a committee with representation from several Danish organizations and charged it with studying the feasibility of a museum that would focus on Danish immigrants. When the results of this study showed that a museum was indeed possible, the committee was dissolved, the museum was incorporated, and the committee members became the new Board of Directors of The Danish Immigrant Museum. As I look back over the tasks facing these two groups, particularly two challenges stand out: 1. Gaining support across the country and in Denmark for a new museum – we needed support for the idea and we needed money and memberships; 2. Selecting a location for a new museum.

It is one thing to have a rather small group interested in an idea, it is quite another to garner support nation-



*Betsinger, right, with Governor Branstad at the groundbreaking ceremony in 1988. Board member Judy Andersen, center, was the mistress of ceremonies.*

ally and internationally for that idea. The board members knew they had to achieve buy-in for the idea of a Danish immigrant museum from coast to coast and in Denmark. They also knew that there had to be financial support to get the project underway. I remember that in the early 1980s I spoke with the Danish Cultural Attaché Uffe Himmelstrup at an annual meeting of the Society of Scandinavian Studies held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Hoping to spark his interest, I introduced him to the committee's idea of building a Danish immigrant museum. Understandably, he was guarded in his immediate response, saying that a museum was a very ambitious project. He was certainly not against it, but I think he wanted those of us who were working on the plan to realize that this was a big undertaking.

We who were involved in the early planning stages were keenly aware that he was right: it was ambitious. However, we believed it was a matter of "now or never". The early Danish immigrants were already in their eighties and nineties; we feared that unless we captured their stories immediately, their history would slip away from us. With their rich experiences and artifacts to illustrate their stories, they were the link to Danish immigration in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Financial support was critical. Even the simplest task – sending a letter or making a phone call – required some cash and we had none. Initially, for a project of this magnitude to get underway, some cash donations must come from somewhere. The committee members responded. They (and later, members of the Board of

Directors) took care of their own travel and lodging expenses for meetings. The committee also provided the guarantees required to set-up a line of credit. Individual members paid for various special expenses, including one who paid the attorney's fees for incorporation. Local supportive persons in places where we held meetings provided various in-kind contributions. Finally, when we were incorporated in 1983 and attained 501(c)3 status, donations were then tax deductible and we could solicit memberships and initiate fundraising. Our first contributions were \$1 each from three ladies who came to visit our temporary office on Main Street in Elk Horn.

Much has happened since we received those three dollars. The museum now has a beautiful building, containing 35,000 to 40,000 artifacts. Her Majesty Queen Margrethe II of Denmark is the Protector. Membership has risen to almost 3,000 members and the Holger Danske Endowment is valued at \$1.2 million. A fine director with an equally fine staff are working diligently to maintain and expand the building, the collection of artifacts and the programs.

Another huge initial challenge was that of selecting a location. The Board of Directors developed a set of criteria to serve as a guide in choosing a suitable place for this ambitious project. The place was to be located in an area with a large Danish American population, it was to be near an institution of higher learning where there was a department focusing on Danish culture and it needed to have good access to public transportation.

Again, input was sought from across the country. When the board members assessed the responses in light of the criteria, they voted unanimously for Elk Horn, Iowa. This town was clearly in the largest settlement of Danish Americans in America, it was almost equidistant from Dana College in Blair, Nebraska and Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa (both institutions with strong Danish histories and with academic



*The Danish Villages residents lobbied enthusiastically and successfully to become the home of The Danish Immigrant Museum. In 1983 then Governor Terry Branstad signed a certificate recognizing Elk Horn, Iowa as the home of The Danish Immigrant Museum.*

work focusing on Danish culture) and it was not far from the airports in Des Moines and Omaha. In addition, there was evidence of strong interest by the community to give volunteer support to the museum.

There have been those persons, and some even now, in the public who think that the approximate 60 to 80 miles to the airports and the eight miles off Interstate 80 are hindrances to accessibility to the museum – that a metropolitan area would have been better. However, time has shown that the symbiotic relationship of the museum and the Danish Windmill, another important attraction in the community, is good for tourism. Visitors are coming from near and far. In the last five years the museum has hosted over 50,000 visitors. Its plans for expansion include a conference center designed to draw groups of various kinds interested in meetings and discussions about Danish immigrants and their contributions to America. In addition to collecting the more agrarian stories and experiences of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrants, the museum is moving toward recording the stories and experiences of mid and late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century immigrants, which will be predominantly from the arts, such as film, music, painting, and theater, and from professional occupations, for example, in business, engineering, and medicine.

I have great expectations for the museum. Whenever I am in Elk Horn and drive up the crest of the hill immediately west of town, turn down the curved driveway leading to the museum, and look out over the rolling green hills, I ask myself: Is it Denmark? No, it is Elk Horn, Iowa and there before me lies the dream.

My best wishes go to everyone on the Board of Directors of The Danish Immigrant Museum, to the director, Dr. John Mark Nielsen, and to the staff for continued success as they all so ably and loyally work, "To preserve the culture and history of Danish people who have immigrated to America."



*Governor Branstad signs the Certificate of Recognition in the Iowa State House. Branstad is seated and Betsinger is standing to the left of him. Several individuals from the Elk Horn community are also pictured. Lisa Riggs and Ray Johnson are standing to the right of Branstad; Warren Jacobsen is on the far left side of the photo.*



## James D. Iversen

*Iversen is originally from Boomer Township in Pottawattamie County, Iowa. He attended Dana College, then graduated from and completed his PhD at Iowa State University where he became a longtime professor of aerodynamics. He is currently president of the Board of Directors of the Danish American Heritage Society.*

It was my privilege to serve as a member of the Board of Directors of The Danish Immigrant Museum for two stretches—from October 1985 to October 1991 and again from October 1992 to October 1999.

More than eighty other people served as members of the board during that time. I learned to know and appreciate quite a few who grew up in the former United Evangelical Lutheran Church (Dana College), also in the former United Evangelical Lutheran Church (Grand View College), as well as several Danish Jews, Danish Mormons, Danish Baptists and, of course, quite a number who were “none of the above.”

There are many rich and cherished memories from our board and committee meetings and the various activities. In hindsight it seems to me that, much of the time, we didn’t know what we were doing, but we did it anyway and we can rightfully be proud of our accomplishments with the beautiful museum building and cultural center that resulted from our efforts and those of the museum’s staff.

I was privileged to serve as board vice president twice, president twice, chair of a number of board committees, including several employee search committees, and from October 1996 to June 1997, as interim director of the museum. There are many people whom I feel indebted to for significant support



*Danish entertainer Victor Borge stands with Executive Director June Sampson in front of Bedstemor’s Hus. Bedstemor’s Hus was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1997 during Iversen’s tenure as board president.*

and assistance, board members, staff, and others, but mentioning names would necessarily leave some out.

The Danish Immigrant Museum continues to thrive as a center of Danish American heritage and culture. The physical plant is not finished, so much work remains to be done. I am confident that the current and future staff and members of the Board of Directors will continue to advance the state of this most significant repository of Danish American culture and history, The Danish Immigrant Museum.

## Ed Andersen

*A long time executive at IBM in Rochester, Minnesota, he served on the Board of Directors from 1990-1996 and as president from 1995-1996.*

## Charles Faaborg Frederiksen

*Frederiksen was president of the Board of Directors from 1991 to 1995 and from 1997 to 1999. A native of Exira, Iowa, Frederiksen attended Iowa State University and then was head of facilities there for many years. He was so beloved that on his retirement the university named an area of campus after him and his wife. Frederiksen lives in Ames.*

**M**y first involvement with The Danish Immigrant Museum began when I received a letter from Signe Betsinger, then president of the Board of Directors, in 1986 appointing me to the Museum Advisory Council. Three years later, in 1989, I was elected to the Board of Directors, serving as president of the board for four years, 1991-1995. Those were very busy, very exciting years, which included the planning, architect selection, fund raising, construction, staffing and opening of the museum building.

The Board of Directors made the decision to build the museum in February 1990. We started with the excavation and construction of the basement for the museum with the money we had raised. It was difficult to raise money for a museum that was, at the time, only a hole in the ground and an architect's rendering of a picture of our dream building. But after much considering of alternative construction plans, the board made a bold decision: instead of building a temporary low cost building so we could quickly say we had a "place" to call home for our beginning collection of artifacts, we would apply for a loan for the needed money and move ahead with building the traditional structure that is now our museum home.

Story Construction of Ames, Iowa was selected in June 1990 to be the construction manager for the project. The construction management contract was signed in September 1990. Construction began and a *Rejsegilde* celebration was held at the construction site one year later in September 1991.

Construction continued to progress, even though slowly at times, and the efforts of all involved culmi-



*During the Rejsegild celebration a wreath was placed on the top of the elevator shaft, at that time the highest point on the building.*

nated in an informal opening of the building in October of 1993 with a festive banquet which included Jorgen Grunnet, Minister of Information in the Danish Embassy in Washington, D.C. That October, the Board of Directors held their meetings at the new museum building for the first time.

The Grand Opening of the museum was held in June of 1994 and was truly the highlight event after many struggling years. Grand Opening day was a beautiful, sunny Iowa day with about 1,500 people in attendance, including Danish Ambassador Peter Dyvig who brought official greetings from Queen Margrethe as Protector of the Museum. The program was held on museum grounds just south of the building. The guests were seated looking directly at the front of the building. What an absolutely fabulous day!

It has been a real joy to experience the maturing of the museum in its twenty-five years of existence. The improvements in the building, the professional performance of the staff, the many exhibits and sponsored programs, the Family History & Genealogy Center, the sharing of artifacts on the lower level of the museum and many other wonderful additions too numerous to mention are the result of dedicated staff and volunteers, both local and nationwide, each sharing his/her time and talent on behalf of The Danish Immigrant Museum.

My appreciation for my Danish heritage has grown through my involvements with The Danish Immigrant Museum and I look forward to the future expansion with great anticipation.



## Halvor H. Strandskov

*Strandskov's father was the well-known Reverend Holger Strandskov, out of the Grand View College-Grundtvigian tradition. Halvor Strandskov, himself, was a graduate of Grand View, then, a long-time sales manager for CCH Canadian Ltd. Along with serving as a board member and president of the board, he also served for a time as interim director of development for the Museum. Strandskov, who now resides in Osterville, Massachusetts, was instrumental in creating Strandskoven, a grove of trees planted on the Museum grounds in memory of the Strandskov family.*

**C**ongratulations are in order for The Danish Immigrant Museum and all those who have been involved with the museum over these twenty-five years. Much has been done. I especially think of all the volunteers who have put in countless hours to help. Without those volunteers there would not be a museum.



*Volunteers plant flowers near the Museum's entrance.*

The volunteers have helped in so many ways and are often overlooked. Then there are the members of the staff, who worked very hard in handling their different jobs. Individuals from all over the country who serve on the Board of Directors do their part in helping the museum. And finally there are those who help the museum financially.

Where will we be in the year 2033, the year the museum celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary?



*Museum volunteer Marilyn Gift demonstrates straw weaving at the annual Tivoli Fest celebration.*



## Egon Bodtker

*Bodtker taught at Grand View College and then in Oregon before becoming a long-time administrator in the Oregon community college network. Bodtker was a charter member of the Board of Directors of the Danish American Heritage Society, which his parents, Arnold and Edith Bodtker, founded in 1977 in Junction, Oregon. Bodtker was board president for The Danish Immigrant Museum from 2001 to 2003.*

I came onto the Board of Directors of The Danish Immigrant Museum in February 2001 at the meeting in Phoenix, Arizona. Here I met other board members and members of the museum staff.

At the June meeting in Minneapolis the nominating committee was actively seeking nominees for board officers. As Hal Strandskov, president, was explaining the role of the president and the responsibilities of the position, the board was behaving like members of the Floor and Ceiling Inspectors Union's Synchronized Observation Team. At a coffee break John Mark Nielsen suggested quietly to me that I should run for president. I gently explained that I had only been on the board for six months, that I had never seen The Danish Immigrant Museum and that a more experienced member of the board could provide the leadership, direction and continuity which the institution needed.

As the meeting progressed, I thought about the proposal. The museum was established. Things at the museum were running smoothly. The board functioned well as a group. Individual board members took responsibility for their committee assignments. And what does a president do but appoint committees, chair the meeting and maintain order? Besides, there was the power and prestige that went with the office. So at the next break I told Norma Lange Nelson, chair of the nominating committee, that she could list me as a candidate for president.

When the October meeting was held in Elk Horn, I got to see the museum for the first time. Elk Horn was smaller than I had thought it would be, the museum was bigger than I thought it would be. The board meeting was as good as the previous two had been. So after just nine months on the board, I was the new president. A lot of things can happen in nine months!

In February 2002 the board met in Dallas, Texas. In the Executive Committee meeting it became evident that there was continuing concern about the financial status of the museum. In addition, U.S. military opera-

tions in Afghanistan (and soon Iraq) would mean that Executive Director Rick Burns would likely be called into active duty in the Middle East.

The board meeting in October in Elk Horn was combined with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Danish American Heritage Society and the conference on Danish-North American Relations Since World War II in Omaha. By this time the board knew we would soon be searching for a new executive director and appointed a screening committee. The screening committee created a job description and a group of preferred criteria for the potential executive director. The board determined that the position would remain open until the proper candidate was found. A nation-wide search began.

Within a month Rick Burns had resigned to meet his military obligations. The board appointed a "troika" of Clark Mathisen, John Molgaard, and Kai Nyby to serve as administrative leadership of the museum until a new executive director was selected. These people modernized many of the procedures of the museum, helped the staff focus on the changes that needed to be made and modernized operations at the museum.

By the time of the June meeting in Salt Lake City we had hired John Mark Nielsen as executive director and he would start working in July. Everyone was excited that the high expectations for the position had been met.

At the October meeting in Elk Horn we celebrated the 20th anniversary of The Danish Immigrant Museum. With a new executive director and a change in the rules so that new board members would attend their first meeting in Elk Horn at the museum, I returned to being a member of the board.

## Joy Ibsen

*Ibsen attended Shimer College in Illinois. She is the current editor of Church of Life, a publication of the Danish Interest Conference, a group formed when the old Danish church merged to form the ELCA. Ibsen lives in Trout Creek in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.*

**D**ear Friends of The Danish Immigrant Museum,

Congratulations for all that has been accomplished in twenty-five years! I am very grateful!

Serving on the Board of Directors of The Danish Immigrant Museum was a great learning experience.

*What did I learn?*

1. Not all Danes are alike. We bridge wide economic, social, political and religious differences, but almost all of us like a glass of aquavit.
2. The museum can have three different executive directors in five years and we can still keep our sanity and make progress. However, I am very grateful for the stability and leadership John Mark Nielsen has brought the museum.
3. Planning must always work closely with fundraising.
4. Financially speaking, early spring (usually March) is crunch time.
5. We have an unbelievably rich heritage from our Danish ancestors, a richness that has to do with values and lifestyle. This deserves our continued commitment in order that it is passed on to future generations.



*A stork roosts in the rafters of The Danish Immigrant Museum.*

*What we discussed then, that I hope and intend to see in the museum's future:*

1. A broader emphasis on Danish culture as a whole.
2. A successful capital campaign resulting in a large community gathering place and exciting interactive exhibits.
3. Beautiful natural landscaping in the Jens Jensen tradition.
4. A center for music and plays, and the hosting of events by other cultural groups.
5. The museum exhibits and the Family History & Genealogy Center again under one roof.
6. A large endowment.

My time on The Danish Immigrant Museum board was a reawakening to more deeply embracing and valuing the great treasure of the Danish culture, which is precisely what the museum provides for many people. Because of you I am becoming more Danish every minute! *Mange Tak* to all you wonderful people! It is a grand journey!

## Vern Hunter

*A senior partner of Hunter-Grobe Architects of Fargo, North Dakota, Hunter served two terms on the Board of Directors and from 2004-2005 as board president. He is an active leader of the Red River Danes and in the Fargo-Moorhead communities.*

## Kai Nyby

*Nyby worked in acquisitions for Waste Management for many years before becoming involved with United Rentals. Nyby served along with Clark Mathisen and John Molgaard as co-interim director of the museum from 2002-2003 and as board president from 2005-2007. Currently retired, he makes his home in Indiana.*

Imagine this: a group of twenty-five individuals, men and women ranging in age from their thirties to their eighties, people of both political parties with the common element being DANISH. Ask this group to travel to various locations across the country, paying their own expenses. Then, challenge this group to serve as the guiding light for a not-for-profit organization. Finally, inform the group that the organization they represent is located in one of the most rural parts of America.

For the past six years I have had the privilege and honor of serving with such a group, the Board of Directors of The Danish Immigrant Museum, the most



*Kai Nyby, Clark Mathisen and John Molgaard, pictured here (left to right) served as interim administrative leaders for the Museum during 2003.*

recent two years as board president. I must admit that I often asked myself the rhyme and reason behind making such a commitment. I can assure you, though, that after these six years I have developed deep and meaningful friendships on the board and feel truly rewarded by the opportunity of knowing them. For this I will always be grateful.

However, our common purpose was not to socialize and extol the virtues of being Danish; it was to direct and guide the mission of this museum. As one enters the museum building one immediately senses the depth of commitment that this group of immigrants made to arrive in this country. We have the privilege of sharing this story, reminding the coming generations of their family heritage. This is an honor that we hold solemnly.



# Why Our Immigrant Museum Matters

John Mark Nielsen, executive director

**A**s a student and teacher of language and literature, I am intrigued by words and stories. I believe that the stories we tell ourselves both reflect and shape our perceptions of who we are as individuals and as members of communities, nations and cultures. To me, all is story. My own reality is a story in which I am the central character, the protagonist.

In 1983, twenty-five years ago, I participated in the founding of The Danish Immigrant Museum. My participation was motivated in part by my discovery of the novels of Kristian Østergaard. Here were stories by an immigrant set in the American Midwest, but arising from a Danish literary and cultural history. I also wanted to assure that there was a place that preserved the stories of my Danish immigrant grandparents, two of whom had recently died.



Five years ago I left teaching full-time to come to the museum as executive director. There were many reasons for this move but I would not have done so if I had not seen the opportunity as one that also involved teaching. Effective teaching for me is not instruction or “knowledge transfer,” it is inspiring our innate human curiosity, which can lead to self-discovery.

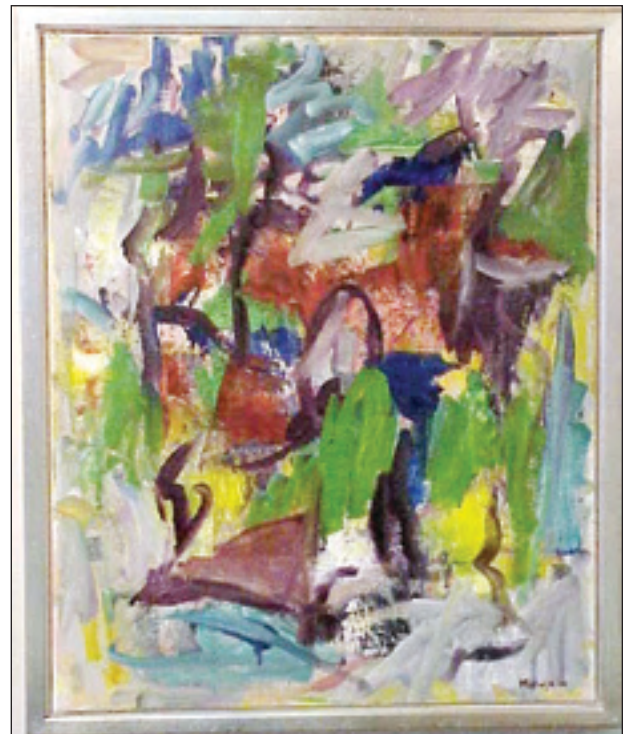
The words “museum,” “Muse” and “to muse” are all related, and yet I wonder if we consider this when we think about museums or, specifically, The Danish Immigrant Museum. The word museum comes from the Greek and means a place for the Muses, the nine goddesses of Greek mythology who were sources of inspiration and creativity. The concept of museums as places to preserve the art and artifacts of past history is an 18<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon arising from Enlightenment philosophy. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century this was expanded to include sciences and technology. But I believe the collected artifacts in a museum should inspire us to think deeply (to muse) about that which we encounter. Such an experience might inform our subsequent thought and actions. It may even amuse!

Too often museums become places “we take for granite.” This was a clever marketing phrase used by the Joslyn Art Museum of Omaha a number of years ago and, I suspect, has been used by other museums elsewhere in the country. It conveys a popular assumption

that museums are cold places of stone, containing dead relics of the past. Just seeing the artifacts in our visual storage area without knowing the stories behind each can contribute to this impression. And yet each artifact has a story, a story that is a small piece in the larger narrative of the immigrant experience.

How do we avoid being “taken for granite?” How do we inspire visitors to leave The Danish Immigrant Museum considering the complex social and cultural challenges inherent in the immigrant experience? Recent events in Denmark and the United States should inspire us to think deeply about the experience of immigration and its effects on culture and society.

On February 11 of this year, the Pew Research Center released a study projecting population growth and change in the United States by the year 2050. Accord-



*This piece by Edward Matwijkiw, a contemporary Danish artist, was part of the exhibit Kaleidoscopic Colors of Scandinavia displayed at the museum in 2007.*

ing to this non-partisan research study, the nation is projected to grow from 303 million today to almost 440 million. Eighty-two percent of this increase will be due to immigrants, their children and grandchildren born in this country. By 2050, almost one in five Americans will have been born outside the United States. This equals the numbers of immigrants and their descendants in the American population in the early 1920s. This ratio and the suspicion of “foreigners” following World War I led to passage of stricter immigration laws in 1924 and the establishment of a quota system. Population growth in the United States—driven by immigration—guarantees that the issue of immigration will continue impacting the political debate.

A similar debate has been occurring in Denmark although the experience and numbers are dramatically different. Arising from employment needs in the 1960s and 70s and more recently by a humanitarian instinct to offer safety to peoples displaced by political turmoil elsewhere in the world, Denmark has invited immigrants into its society. Immigrant communities have grown as new immigrants have arrived to join family members already established in the country. The impact these immigrant communities have on the imagination of the Danish public is far beyond the 5% of the total population that immigrant communities represent.

Inherent in the debates occurring in both Denmark and the United States are conflicts arising from differing assumptions of faith, culture, social construction, and the perceived slowness of members of immigrant communities to acquire language and adapt social behaviors. They are fueled by, as Fouad Ajami states in *The Dream Palace of the Arabs*, “dread of the other” and “impatience with difference.” The dread, Ajami suggests, arises in native-born citizens from real and perceived differences; the impatience of these people from the fact that immigrants have not recognized the generosity afforded them by accepting the values of the host culture.

There is a tendency among Americans to telescope the assimilation experience, to think assimilation occurs more rapidly than it does. This arises in part because of a relative disinterest in history and a longing to shape a national identity out of a multicultural and pluralistic experience. Belief that assimilation occurs rapidly contributes to impatience with immigrants and particularly those communities with a critical mass large enough to preserve language and other cultural expressions. Moreover, groups who do not share the same religious beliefs inspire suspicion and even dread.



*This piece by Tine Hind was part of a traveling exhibit that The Danish Immigrant Museum cosponsored along with the Funen Graphic Workshop of Odense, Denmark in 2007.*

Danish social and cultural identity has been shaped by a much different history. While there is regional diversity, Denmark’s long history has contributed to a homogeneity not found in American society. Further, social conventions have evolved over time, profoundly influencing the ways that Danes view themselves and those who live in the world around them. It is a view that admits and is open to global diversity, but can be rigid when considering what makes a person “Danish.” There are behaviors and assumptions, secular, political and social, that one holds if one is Danish. Perceived or overt resistance by newly arrived groups in accepting the behaviors and assumptions of the host community inspires frustration and reaction.

A common response, both in the United States and in Denmark is to erect barriers, whether physical or legal. How does building a fence along the border with Mexico echo the construction of the *Dannevirke* across



the southern Jutland peninsula during the Viking Age. Do physical barriers stop or simply impede change? Will the strict immigration laws passed recently in Denmark be any more successful than the actions of Congress in 1924? We can respond to these questions intellectually, but we also respond as human beings, living out our lives.

For example, at the end of World War II, one of our museum members left Denmark in part because he was frustrated with the Danish government. A member of the Danish Resistance on the Danish-German border, he was well aware of a desire by both Danes and Germans following the defeat of the Nazis to move the Danish border south to reclaim much of the former Duchy of Slesvig. The Danish government, however, took the position that the border had been determined by a vote of the people following World War I. To change the border would only sow seeds for future conflict. Frustrated by this decision, he emigrated. Today, he is a Minute Man and serves as volunteer eyes along the U.S. border. His is an individual immigration story in a much larger one involving greater forces motivated by deep convictions arising from personal experience. Out of the threads of such individual stories, the fabric of history is woven.

The dynamics of immigration both in the United States and Denmark ensure that an institution devoted to exploring the immigrant experience remains relevant. The Danish Immigrant Museum matters because it exists to tell the stories of this immigration, to ask questions, and to inspire reflection on the nature of human migration. True, we may be small. But just as a single artifact among the many in the museum's collection can raise interesting questions and inspire speculation and narrative, so too the experiences of even a small immigrant community contributes to our greater understanding of what it means to be human and live in a global community.

Twenty-five years ago, my interests were more personal. Being a part of the founding, building and operating of a museum has introduced me to thousands of individuals and the artifacts of lives both past and present. I have been privileged to participate as these individuals, like students, have discovered the relevance of their own stories and how these stories are woven into a tapestry of heritage and culture. Our Danish Immigrant Museum matters: it is here that the future will discover a present and a past.

## Upcoming Events with The Danish Immigrant Museum

**April 21** ..... Annual Volunteer Recognition Banquet

**May 24-May 25** ..... Tivoli Fest

Grand opening of the expanded permanent exhibit, *The Continuing Story 1940-2000: Across Oceans, Across Time*®

**May 25**..... Celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Bedstemor's Hus

**June 13-June 15** .... Board meeting in Des Moines, Iowa

**June 21 and 22** ..... Sankt Hans Aften and the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Kimballton

**July 1-13** ..... Museum-sponsored 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Tour of Denmark

**July 4** ..... Rebild Festival

The 96<sup>th</sup> annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July Celebration at Rebild National Park in Denmark, featuring John Mark Nielsen, executive director of The Danish Immigrant Museum, as United States keynote speaker

**October 18** ..... 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of The Danish Immigrant Museum and the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Banquet at the C.G. Therkildsen Center, Harlan, Iowa

**For information on these events or other questions about museum programming, contact the Museum at (712) 764-7001 or toll free at (800) 759-9192 or by e-mail at [info@Danishmuseum.org](mailto:info@Danishmuseum.org).**



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### Founding Board Members

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Diane Doyle, Papillion, NE  
Thorvald Hansen, Des Moines, IA  
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*The Danish Gymnastics Team performs in Elk Horn.*

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Every effort has been made to include all of those who served on the Board of Directors of The Danish Immigrant Museum since its founding in 1983. Cities and States noted are where the board member lived at the time of their service. To the best of our knowledge the information presented here is accurate; however, we apologize for any errors or omissions.

# New Permanent Exhibit!

## *The Continuing Story 1940-Present: Across Oceans, Across Time®*

The Danish Immigrant Museum's permanent exhibit *Across Oceans, Across Time®* is being upgraded and expanded to cover the years from World War II through the present. The new exhibit will open in time for Elk Horn's Tivoli Fest on the weekend of May 23.



*These computer images show plans for the new section of the museum's permanent exhibit. On the left is a panel from the area focusing on World War II; on the right there is a recreation of a Danish fishing boat, similar to ones used to transport those fleeing the Nazi occupation of Denmark.*

When visitors enter the building they will be drawn to a new multisided, freestanding kiosk—the new beginning point for the enhanced exhibit. New interactive elements will be incorporated into the existing permanent exhibit; visitors, for example, can build Danish icons—like a mermaid or a windmill—in a Lego building area or even crawl into the recreated hold of a fishing boat used to transport those fleeing the Nazi occupation during WWII.

Visitors will move through the current permanent exhibit into the new section called *The Continuing Story 1940-2000*. This section will focus on major events

beginning with the occupation in April 1940, tracing the rise of resistance, and exploring the assistance provided by the U.S. government and Danish Americans at the end of WWII. The expanded exhibit will follow the increase in immigration to the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s of Danish professionals and, then, explore the assimilation of Danish American institutions into the broader American society. Next, the exhibit will trace how the airing of the popular television series *Roots* inspired an interest by many in discovering their ethnic heritage; this leads in the 1970s and 80s to an upsurge in Danish cultural awareness, resulting in the founding of The Danish Immigrant Museum in 1983.

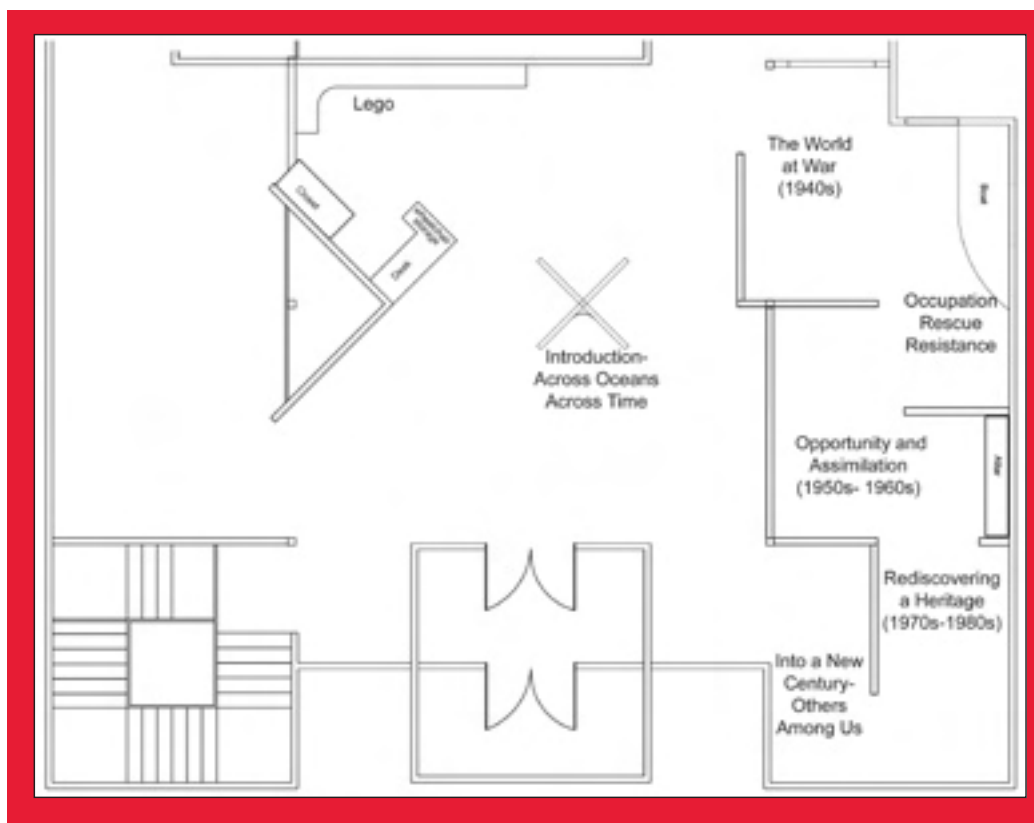


*This image is from the new exhibit section called "Rediscovering a Heritage," which explores the upsurge in Danish cultural awareness in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. This section is designed visually to reflect the immigrant's tendency to recreate an image of the home country that does not always actually exist.*

The last section of the exhibit addresses some of the issues that Denmark and the United States consider when discussing immigration today.

To date we are pleased to acknowledge the following lead donors who are making the new exhibit possible: an anonymous gift managed by the JP Morgan Philanthropic Services from New York; Rita Neergard Han-

sen of Kenosha, Wisconsin; H. Rand and Mary Louise Petersen of Harlan, Iowa; John and Audrey Kofoed of West Branch, Iowa; and the estate of Ollivene Olsen, Lakeview, Iowa. Should you wish to support this project, please contact John Mark Nielsen at the museum.



*This image gives a sense of the floor plan for the upgraded permanent exhibit including the new section. The museum entrance is on the bottom center of the plan. Visitors will flow to the introductory kiosk in the center; move toward the upgraded permanent exhibit toward the left of the kiosk and around to the new section which begins on the upper right-hand side of the plan with "The World at War." Please note that one of the exhibit area titles shown here, "Occupation, Rescue, Assistance," has been changed to "Occupation, Resistance, Assistance."*



# ADMISSION & HOURS

## ADMISSION

(Includes Bedsternor's House)  
Current Museum Members:  
FREE with Membership Card  
Non-Members: Adults, \$5  
Children (ages 8-17), \$2

## MUSEUM HOURS:

Mon.-Fri.: 9:00 am-5:00 pm;  
Sat.: 10:00 am-5:00 pm;  
Sun.: 12:00 noon-5:00 pm

## BUSINESS HOURS

Monday - Friday: 8:00 am to 5:00 pm

## FAMILY HISTORY & GENEALOGY CENTER HOURS

May-Oct.: Tues., Wed., Fri.,  
9:00 am-5:00 pm; 1st & 3rd  
Saturday: 9:00 am-5:00 pm  
Nov.-April: Tues., Wed.,  
Fri.: 10 am-4 pm

*Other Times By Appointment*

**All facilities are closed on  
New Year's Day,  
Easter Sunday,  
Thanksgiving  
& Christmas.**

*(Local weather conditions may  
cause occasional closures.)*



**The Danish Immigrant Museum**

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