

Across Oceans, Across Time® ...

Stories from the Family History & Genealogy Center ...



Pete and Hanna – Around 1889 Jens Peter Nielsen, of Flø, in Gravlev parish near Aalborg, caught “western fever” and left his home for South Dakota. Once settled, he sent for his fiancée, Johanne Marie Elizabeth Johansen, who arrived with his sister Else Marie at Castle Garden in New York on the steamship “Island” on June 11, 1891. After marrying in Turner County, SD, later that year the couple made their first home in Beresford, where Pete worked for a creamery and later operated a meat market.

In the 1890s five of Hanna’s younger brothers and sisters also immigrated to South Dakota, while the eldest two remained in Denmark. In 1896 Hanna’s parents, ship’s carpenter Andreas Johansen and Ane Birgitte Pedersen, made the long journey from Aalborg. Ane did not take to life on the Plains, so returned to Denmark after only a short stay; Andreas remained until 1899, when he too returned to his home city.

At the turn of the century Pete and Hanna purchased 160 acres of land in Swan Lake Township, becoming members of a large Danish community there until 1907, when they relocated to Presho, in Lyman County. In June 1911, the family moved themselves and all their household possessions 300 miles by rail and wagon to Alliance, in Nebraska’s Sand Hills. There they lived in a sod house, raised cows and vegetables, and, as a son later recalled, a lot of large watermelons. A sod milkhouse built around their well and windmill tower served as a refrigerator in the summer. 1916 saw the Niensens returning to South Dakota, where they settled in Burdette. In 1925, a month before his 54th birthday, Jens Peter died of injuries after having been crushed against a farm building by a team of horses. Hanna died in 1937 and was buried alongside her husband in the Danefield Seventh Day Adventist Cemetery near Beresford.

Of their large family, four children died in early childhood, three during a single whooping cough epidemic, but six survived to grow to adulthood, married and eventually gave Pete and Hanna eighteen grandchildren. The two eldest children, Hertha and Spence Nielsen, developed an interest in photography during the Nebraska years, obtained equipment and materials by mail order, and took numerous photos of the family, resulting in a rich visual history of this Midwestern immigrant family. The family history written by a granddaughter can be found in the Family History & Genealogy Center.