

Genealogy

American with Danish blood Brought up in California: Denmark is in My Heart

[photo caption: Five American-born girls with roots in Danish soil: Farthest left is Michele's mother, Elsie. Next: Mamie, Helen, Elizabeth and Myrtle]

When Michele Christine McNabb is working at the Museum of Danish America in Iowa, she helps Danes get in touch with relatives who have emigrated and Americans find their Danish roots. She's happy every time it succeeds. Michele knows from her own experience how much it means to know something about one's family's past.

By Lise Petersen, danskeskæbner@egmont.com. Photo: private.

When American Michele Christine McNabb sits in a summer cottage in Ebeltoft, where she is relaxing after several weeks of visiting Danish friends and getting together with Danish family members, one completely forgets that she is not from Denmark. Michele speaks Danish, and regardless of where in Denmark our conversation leads, she usually is familiar with it.

"It's difficult to express in words. Denmark is in my heart. I feel very comfortable here," says 70-year-old Michele.

She was born in California and grew up as an ordinary American girl. Her maternal grandmother had emigrated from Denmark, but she died at the age of 48, so Michele only knew about her and about Denmark through stories of her mother's childhood. But in 1959 visitors came from Denmark.

"Jørgen, who was a son of my grandmother's youngest sister, came visiting with his wife. Their visit was very exciting to me. They spoke English with an accent, and their clothing was different from that we were familiar with in southern California; for example, they wore suede jackets. I don't know how Jørgen found out about us, but now we had contact with family in Denmark," says Michele, who two years later got a Danish friend.

"At the university I met Lene from Aalborg, who was an exchange student. We became good friends and remain so today."

In 1963 Michele traveled to Denmark for the first time.

"I was 18 years old, and it was my first time in a different country. When I arrived, it was the many bicycles and the yellow brick buildings with balconies and flower boxes that made an impression on me. I became so happy at being here that I changed my university major to Scandinavian languages and literatures," said Michele, who has stayed here several times. Her girlfriend Lene taught her to speak

Danish. Jørgen introduced her to his mother, Hansine, his father, Adolf, and three sisters, and when Michele studied at Aarhus University for three semesters she became part of the family.

"I participated in family get-togethers and also was often invited home to Tante Hansine and Onkel Adolf for Sunday afternoon coffee. It was very *hyggelig*; she taught me that there was supposed to be three different types of cake and that after the first serving one was supposed to say 'no, thank you,' three times before accepting another portion."

Tante Hansine as a little girl remained with her parents in Denmark when Michele's grandmother Christine left for America in 1903. It was at her home that Michele for the first time saw photographs of her grandmother's Danish family and heard stories about them.

[photo caption: Michele on the ferry from Zealand to Aarhus during her first visit to Denmark.]

"That was exciting, for I had a lot of gaps in my knowledge of our family's history," said Michele, who back home began to put the first pieces together before stopping work on the project. But when she became the mother of two sons in the late 1970s and lost her father and paternal grandfather within a short time of each other, she got busy again.

"It became clear to me that if I was going to get additional information from older family members, it had to be then."

Michele didn't stop with speaking to family members; she also began perusing church registers and archival documents.

[Photo caption: Michele Christine McNabb is a professional genealogist at the Museum of Danish America in Iowa, where she helps Danes get in touch with emigrant relatives and Americans find their Danish roots. She has researched her own family for over 40 years.]

"Today one can find a lot on the internet, but back then I had to order microfilm from Salt Lake City, Utah, and sit trawling through the films, searching for various vital records. Each film only covered a certain period and perhaps one hadn't chosen the right one. Then you had to send the film back and order a new one. It cost quite a bit in terms of money and time. I also wrote to several Danish parish offices and received answers back."

Michele's work was made even more difficult by the fact that her grandmother's family had moved around a lot. Although the family resided in Elsinore when her grandmother left for America, she was actually born in Maribo. Her great-grandmother came from a seafaring family in Faaborg, and her great-grandfather was a master butcher born in Husum in Slesvig. This great geographical diffusion made it very time-consuming for Michele to trace back her family's history.

"I never knew my maternal grandparents and was driven by curiosity. I wanted to see where it would lead," she explains. And her family research has led her back in most branches of the family to 1800; the family branches from Slesvig she has been able to follow all the way back to the 17th century.

“There we have a Doctor of Law named Burgundien, who for 30 years was mayor of the small town of Tønning. I don’t know where he received his university degree or the surname Burgundien, but back then it was common to adopt a fancy surname if one had studied at the university,” says Michele, who has learned how to get much information out of the notations in the parish registers.

There are notes, for example, of how long the church bells were rung when a person died. When Burgundien died five bells were rung for an hour and fifteen minutes. That was the longest one could have. If the deceased was an innkeeper’s maid, a single bell might ring for fifteen minutes. In that way one can see where one’s relative was placed socially, she explains.

[Photo caption: Michele’s maternal grandmother, Christine, left for the United States at the age of 16. In 1905, several years after her arrival in Minnesota she was married to Danish-born Hans Christian Rasmussen. The watch hanging on her dress she had with her from Denmark.]

Behind all the stories that Michele today can tell about her own family lie many hours of research, among other places at the [Danish] National Archives.

“In 1987 my then-husband worked for a year in Denmark, and we resided outside Copenhagen with our sons. Once a week I went in to the National Archives to do research. Yes, I invested many hours doing it, but I think that it is an exciting puzzle to try to put together. When I was a little girl, I wanted to look like Audrey Hepburn or Sophia Loren. But when I compare myself with my forefathers’ photographs I can see that I look precisely the way I should, because I have those ancestors. I’m satisfied with myself now.”

The fact that many others enjoy learning about their family history was something Michele learned when she studied to be a librarian and began to work professionally with genealogy. First she worked at a couple of libraries with genealogical collections, where she helped family researchers. Thirteen years ago she got her present job at the Museum of Danish America, where one can pay for assistance in researching one’s family.

“About one-third of our patrons are Danes who want to know what happened to such and such a relative who emigrated. Contact was often lost after the first generation. The others are Americans who perhaps have the names of their immigrant family, but often lack information about where they came from. Many come because they are planning a trip to Denmark and would like to visit the areas that their families came from. We help them arrange that, or we find contacts so that they can get in touch with Danish relatives,” says Michele, adding that it often happens that family reunions are held in America because family members from Denmark come over who have been found via family research.

“Other relatives never meet, but they may email back and forth and exchange photos. It gives people a wider view of the world, and I think that’s important.”

{Photo caption: When Michele traveled to Denmark for the first time in 1963, she wore fine white cotton gloves because she had read that one should have them when visiting Europe. Here she is pictured with her brothers just before leaving.]

Michele lost touch with her Danish family when she returned home in 1988. She divorced and it took some time to get organized again. But she knew how to find her family again when she planned a visit to Denmark in 2010.

“On a genealogical forum I wrote a request for information on descendants of my maternal grandmother’s Danish parents, Anna Johanne Katarine and Ludvig Gerhard Andreas Mortensen. The father-in-law of one of Tante Hansine’s great-grandchildren saw it, and so I got in touch with that branch of the family. And up to this present visit I have used Facebook, among other things, to find the rest of Tante Hansine’s descendants, and we got together for a family reunion here in Ebeltoft. It was fun seeing them all together,” said Michele , who is far from being finished with researching her Danish roots.

“My grandmother had several siblings who remained here in Denmark. I haven’t been successful in finding their descendants. Yet.”

[Box: read more about the Museum of Danish America on its home page: Danishmuseum.org]