

Danish Windmill Quarterly Newsletter

THE BREEZE

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Director's Message:

Dear Members,

It has been awhile, but we're finally back on track. We apologize in the long wait on getting this out. There has been a lot to do at the windmill and not a lot of time to get all of it done. However, we think you'll find the wait was worth it.

Here you'll find a long-awaited article on the Danish Inn and other news and updates from the first months of the year. The next issue will be out in a few weeks to catch us up, so don't wait too long to dig in! We've got some fun news to share over the next couple of months that you won't want to miss. Don't forget to check out additional resources and content over at danishwindmill.org.



As always, thank you for following along on our windy journey. We look forward to what comes next and thank you for coming along with us.

Mange tak!

Shaun Sayres, M.A.
Manager

 Nørre Snede, DK 1848-1975

Celebrating
49 years in
Elk Horn

Elk Horn, IA 1976-present 

In 1975, local farmer and Danish-American Harvey Sornson approached the Elk Horn community with an unthinkable idea: to relocate a windmill from Denmark to the United States. It was no easy feat, but to the amazement of most, Harvey's "impossible dream" became reality.

During the winter of 1975-76, an authentic Danish windmill from Nørre Snede, DK was dismantled, ferried across the Atlantic, and transported cross-country to Elk Horn, Iowa. Once arrived, community volunteers set about putting together the pieces one by one until eventually, the old Danish windmill towered over downtown Elk Horn where it remains to this day.

For nearly 50 years, the windmill has stood as a tribute to Danish-American heritage, agricultural history, and the power of community.



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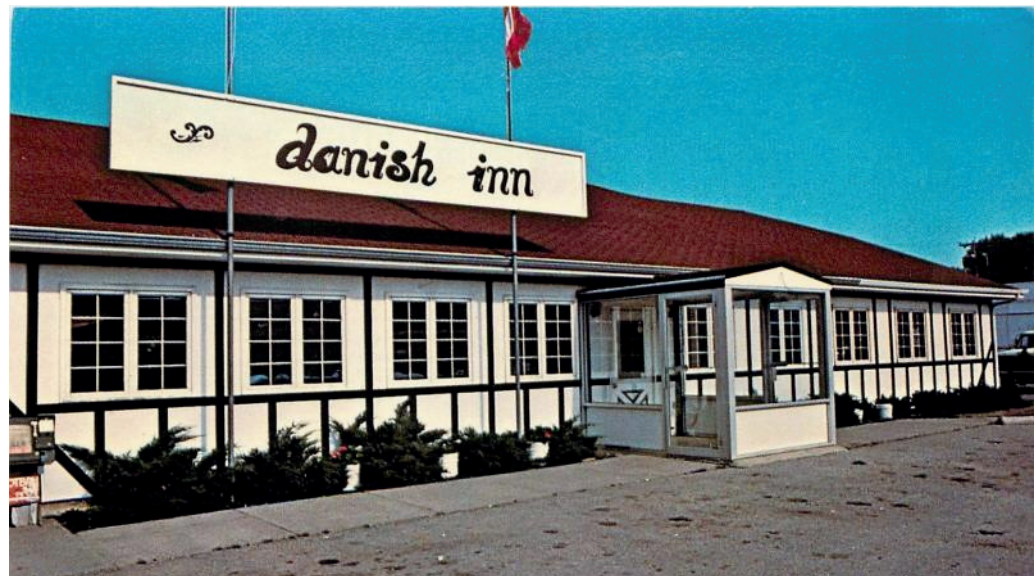
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Feature Story:

The Danish Inn: A Reflection of Our Future

In 1977, Arne Myggen and his wife, Lillian, sat down for an afternoon meal at the Danish Inn. The pair were in the process of immigrating from Denmark to the US, where they could live closer to their children and explore the country in their retirement. They had been driving down Main St. when the storefront for Solskin Grocery caught their eye. From the grocery store to the gas station to the Danish Inn, the couple found themselves pulled into a world both uniquely familiar and peculiarly different. As the couple struggled to get through their food — “frikadeller that were the kind to hurt your toes if they were to fall on them,” and a roast beef smørrebrød that “looked like a cowboy’s belt cut into squares” — the restaurant filled with locals wanting to meet these travelers from the Old Country. And while Arne was close to retiring from his career in journalism and photography, he knew there was a story here in this quaint town, and he found plenty of Elk Horn locals eager to tell it.

The assembled crowd quickly grew into a ‘who’s who’ of 1970s Elk Horn as more locals learned of the Danish visitors. PK Pedersen, Harvey Sornson, Carl Bonnesen, an unnamed Hansen, and others regaled the couple in stories of Elk Horn and its Danish roots, planted in the Iowa prairie over 100 years ago. Pedersen recounted his own immigration history. His family left Denmark in the footsteps of the “Holy Olav” in 1911, meandering through the Midwest before settling in Elk Horn. Many of the details of his story appear to have stuck with Arne Myggen, who recalled Pedersen’s own disappointment in his visits back to Denmark. “There is nothing left from back then,” Pedersen conceded, before looking around the room and proclaiming, “This is a bit of Denmark, too.” Myggen’s narration of this exchange is as amusing as it is telling: “Slowly we got the story of this Danish colony that could not forget where they



An old postcard image of the Danish Inn

came from.”

There is an air of reluctance in Myggen’s telling to recognize Elk Horn as a Danish place. Some things that appeared to have felt like home were betrayed by American décor or broken language. Describing the Danish Inn, he wrote: “It was a Danish inn with timbered walls and everything. Well, as they say over here, inside however, it was more American than Danish, with the usual bar and stools. However, there were Danish posters from Tivoli [Garden] and Royal Copenhagen Christmas plates on the wall, and a homemade sign with the word “Velkommen” on it. The tension at the center of the town’s Danishness is palpable in Myggen’s dry wit, and in the end, it remains unresolved as his narrative transitions to the windmill. His narrative ends on a curious but doubtful note that he had been inside the windmill once before in his youth during its Nørre Snede days.

When I read Myggen’s article for the first time, I was struck by the thin sarcasm with which he paints Elk Horn’s Danish roots. His narrative is condescending and standoffish, but it forces us to ask an important question: what made Elk Horn Danish? Does calling the Danish Inn “the Danish Inn” make it Danish? How significant are material items (windmills and blue plates) compared to social customs (language, habits, and memory) in determining cultural authenticity?

There are no definitive answers to these questions, but my hope is to engage with them as we discuss a relic of Elk Horn’s not-so-distant Danish past: the Danish Inn. We’re going to set these questions aside for a moment, but don’t forget them.

* * *

Some months ago, an article published by the National Foundation for Danish America imagined the possibilities of a new Danish restaurant in Elk Horn. Responding to the closure of Grace on Main, Elk Horn’s youngest restaurant, at the end of 2024, the article offered a possible alternative, the revival of a Danish-themed gathering place in the form of a brew pub called Elk Øl & Mødested. What followed was essentially a playbook of how a fresh, creative venture could build on the recent momentum in town (the windmill’s repairs, MoDA’s investment into the prairie, and the revival of the hotel) to reinvigorate Elk Horn’s Danish roots and vitality. The author hoped a creative approach might inspire a new kind of investment into Elk Horn and its community. Unfortunately, no one has taken the reins yet, and as I write this, the building which housed Grace on Main is still up for grabs to lease in some capacity. As we wait for our chef in shining apron, I set out to build up a different approach, to take a deeper

dive into Elk Horn's past and what has worked here before. Maybe the wheel didn't have to be reinvented just yet.

Afterall, Elk Horn had a Danish restaurant not all that long ago. The memory of it still lingers among both locals and tourists, especially among those who venture into town looking for where the Danish Inn used to stand a skip north of the windmill. Sometimes these memories prove too powerful, as it isn't uncommon to have visitors who insist that the windmill gift shop was once a restaurant, or occasionally, call us to ask what today's special is. People around the area recall found memories of the Danish Inn whether they were former employees or patrons. Its legacy is palpable, and asking why might shed some light on the opportunities available for a Danish eatery in Elk Horn today.

Armed with a laptop and about a dozen "he's a character" warnings, I set out to interview Don Larsen, who ran the Danish Inn alongside his wife, Jan, from 1984 to 2006. Don graciously accepted the offer, and we recently got to talking about the Danish Inn, his quirky staff, and the elusive magic that made it all work. Don spoke fondly of his time in Elk Horn which proved to be "the best

years of my life." We spoke about his background, how he came to be part of the Danish Inn, and how the business quickly took on a life of its own. Today he lives with his wife, Susie, nearby in Council Bluffs where the pair have maintained involvement in the restaurant business. Their shared restaurant, Doozie's (a combination of Don and Susie), was sold off recently, and Don has admitted he is getting close to retirement altogether. A lifetime in the business has enriched Don with a well of wisdom for what works and what doesn't. He offered not only a rich telling of the Danish Inn's heyday, but all the glowing parallels that would make a similar restaurant successful.

A big part of that success is the community behind it. Don and Jan didn't start the Danish Inn. It was already an established business with a robust foundation by the time they took over in 1984. Getting the restaurant off the ground was a community undertaking with roots that went back 20 years earlier. In the beginning, it started as an ice cream shop built in 1964 called Dairy Twist. At the time, the land where the windmill and the Grace on Main building stand today was a John Deere dealership run by Dale Young. Dale and his wife, Iola, partnered with Warren and Gudrun Jacobsen to build the ice cream shop. The venture breathed fresh air into the downtown area while also offering a place for local high school kids to work including Dale and Iola's daughter, Trudy Juelsgaard, who runs Country View BnB in Elk Horn today. But in just a few years, what started as a fun addition to the town became much more important.

By 1970, Elk Horn's Elk Café closed, leaving the town without a restaurant and killing a once vibrant Main St. In response, Young and Jacobsen partnered with other local boosters to bring a new restaurant to Elk Horn, transforming the Dairy Twist into a larger sit-down restaurant, the Danish Inn. The original owners included Young, Jacobsen, Lamont Christensen,

Burton Esbeck, Millie Eskov, Paul Hansen, Russell Lange, Kenneth Larsen, Dr. G.E. Larson, Earl Madsen, Dale Petersen, and Ted Wiemann. With so many chefs in the kitchen, this was no small project, but a community-wide investment into what everyone considered to be a necessary asset for the town. Ardis O. Petersen designed the interior with traditional Danish motifs.

The original plan was to build the business and immediately sell it to an owner experienced in the food industry, but the boosters learned that a restaurant had to have established success before they would find a serious buyer. At base level, there was a local need for a place to have coffee, a place to eat, and a place to gather, and they knew they could provide those things. But to see a return on their investment and ensure the restaurant's success, they knew it would take time to build up a reputation that could eventually sustain itself. And after just a few years, the entire focus changed.

It has been said, probably not enough, that it was the effort to open and run the Danish Inn which provided the community with the necessary energy and passion to buy a windmill from Denmark. Without this local revitalization of Danish culture, it's difficult to see how Elk Horn could have pulled it off. And when the windmill finally arrived, so too, did new people, travelers and tourists eager to see the authentic Danish windmill that had made national headlines. Since so many of the boosters of the Danish Inn were also involved with the windmill, including Lamont Christensen, Warren Jacobsen, and Earl Madsen, both organizations were able to function with a shared strategy: a packaging of Danish culture and rural heritage that appealed to locals and tourists alike.

Anticipating a flood of tourists to arrive with the official opening of the windmill in 1977, the Danish Inn sought out the help of a professional chef from Denmark. They hired Sonny Lindblad of Copenhagen, Denmark to take over the management and kitchen of the restaurant. The timing



Dairy Twist

"When You're Full of
Knowledge, We'll Fill You
Full of Food"

Elk Horn

Iowa

An original ad for the Dairy Twist



The Danish Inn with view of the original Dairy Twist portion

could not have been better. Sonny and his wife, Ulla, had been living in Newton, Iowa since immigrating in 1976. Lindblad had read about Elk Horn's new windmill in the Danish papers, and after moving to the US, made it a point to visit the site for himself. It was there that he met Warren Jacobsen and the opportunity to run his own restaurant. The Danish Inn itself was expanded significantly to add additional seats and dining space, and Lindblad took over an extensive menu of American and Danish cuisine.

The Lindblads' tenure was short, and the tour buses rolling into Elk Horn demanded a quick replacement. That is when ownership turned towards Harry and Dorothy Mortensen who ran a Danish café in West Des Moines. By now the Danish Inn had a solid footing and the couple purchased the Danish Inn in Summer 1978 recognizing its potential. By then, Don Larsen had moved back to Iowa to help run his father's restaurant supply company out of Council Bluffs. While selling restaurant supplies in Harlan, Don met the Mortensens. Harry and Dorothy introduced Larsen to their daughter, Jan, and the two married sometime after. They purchased the Danish Inn from Jan's parents in 1984 and joined the incredible journey of a town in transformation.

* * *

It took time for Don to find his footing. He had an extensive background working in restaurants, particularly in and around Detroit, but he also isn't Danish and lacked the background in Danish cuisine the job demanded. While Jan made sure the ambience embraced Danish culture, Don spent time learning and developing Danish recipes. He did so with the help of a Danish chef named Torben who spent a couple of years in Elk Horn to help Don develop his skills in Danish cooking. It didn't take long. Don didn't have to reinvent the wheel either. There was already an established demand for specific Danish foods that remain prominent in Elk Horn's Danish culture today: æbleskiver and medisterpølse, frikadeller, smørrebrød, stuffed pork, red cabbage, and cucumber salad. According to Jan, he just had a knack for it, and to win over a town where almost everyone's bedstemor had a recipe to compare to, is quite an impressive feat.

But having Danish food was not enough then, nor would it be today. Don knew he still had to maintain a balance of Danish and American food on the menu that could appeal to the local wanting a burger or the tourist wanting a unique ethnic dish. Even today, Elk Horn doesn't need a Danish restaurant, it just needs a restaurant willing to make Danish food on more than special occasions. For some people, my use of "need"

might seem a bit strong or forced, but the truth is that food is a core pillar in the cultural foundation of any community along with language, clothing, customs, and other elements. Elk Horn just celebrated its 45th annual Tivoli Fest which always includes some signature Danish foods as a highlight of the festival, but critically, only the windmill staff and the folk dancers wore any semblance of traditional dress, and the language is nonexistent. Re-establishing Elk Horn's food culture could go a long way towards revitalizing other facets of the community's Danish heritage, and a firm footing in American-style food would ensure the stability a new restaurant needs as much as it did for Don in the '80s.

In truth, Don wanted to open a steakhouse, but they couldn't make it work. Early on they had to cut back on breakfast to focus on lunch and dinner, and there was still the need to build a base of support among regulars while preserving Danish cultural elements. That all changed once Don took a chance on a deal for a chicken broaster, and the crew switched gears to an open buffet that featured fried chicken. The buffet took off, and it's what most people remember of the Danish Inn today whether it was the Danish specials, the chicken dinners, or the crab legs, people traveled from as far as Lincoln, Nebraska and Sioux Falls, South Dakota regularly to visit the windmill and eat at the Danish Inn. Yet as flattering as the tourism hype was, it wasn't what kept the lights on.

As Don sees it, the Danish Inn wasn't possible without the local community supporting it. Good food and Danish culture were critical pieces. Don's kitchen stood up against any other in the area, and Jan's exhibition of Danish cultural elements ensured the business always remained grounded in local custom and presentation. And as the restaurant in town, it functioned as a critical meeting place for the Better Elk Horn Club, for festival planning, for class reunions, and even the windmill's volunteer army of flower ladies who once meticulously patrolled our garden beds. It was the cultural hub of the

community as all ideas, conversations, and plans resonated in and out of the half-timbered walls. This was a place where traditions were forged for all to see and experience.

That is because, not only was the Danish Inn central to community life, but it was also the starting point for most young adults in the community. There remains a sizable portion of Elk Horn today for whom the Danish Inn was their first job, and it was always more than just a job. With a restaurant so central to town politics and planning, the restaurant became a filter by which new generations could witness and experience town leadership, civic duty, and event planning at work. There is a common trope throughout western history, at least, that revolutions are born in coffeehouses and taverns. And while not every day at the Danish Inn was going to be an exciting one, it was evident that young people working there were exposed to what it meant and took to be leaders in this community.

Just like at the windmill, Danish Inn workers also found themselves on the front lines of tourism and relished in showing off the cultural strengths of the town. With the windmill standing across the lot, visitors were always able to find Danish options to round out their ethnic tours. Don worked closely with Lisa Riggs at the windmill to ensure that both organizations could handle the rising tide of tour buses that washed over Elk Horn well into the '90s. The buses made for a nice bonus, and Don relished the opportunity to not just put out a meal, but one good enough to make diners come back on their own.

Having good food has always been central to Don's business philosophy. He'd rather invest in good ingredients for a higher price than put out cheap, forgettable food that won't bring a person back. Don always kept chicken and beef stock cooking for sauces that could pack flavor into any dish. Even the buffet, which as a concept was almost entirely buried by Covid, could make a comeback in Don's eyes. He believes it is more efficient and



*Back: Danish Inn Staff, ca 1994, left to right: Jan & Don Larsen, Doris Hansen, Joanne Greving, Clarence Klein, and Maxine Carlson
Front: Don & Jan's children: Tyler, Britta, and Kaj*

productive to put out a buffet of only strong dishes, so that money and preparation is not wasted on lesser quality foods no one is going to eat. He knows from experience that people will still drive and pay for a meal if they know it will be good, and this is something Elk Horn restaurants have always tried to take advantage to get more people on Main St. It's a huge part of what made the Danish Inn so memorable for so many people over the years.

But none of it was easy, either. Don and Jan had the necessary skills to make the Danish Inn a success, but they also worked tirelessly because that is what was needed, and that hasn't changed today either. Aside from the business, Don and Jan raised three children together. When asked about his balance between work and home, Don confessed that the restaurant "robbed me." As rewarding as the work was, it was also exhausting and sapped Don of the energy he would have liked to save for time with his kids. However, Don took solace in the fact that he provided his children with a safe place to grow up, where people were warm and offered a strong sense of community. At the same time, Jan took care to promote their kids' involvement in Danish culture and traditions including folk dancing. It was hard work, but the payoff was well worth their time and effort. The 22 years Don spent managing the restaurant formed "a capsule of my life" and he loved everything about it.

Above all else, Don credited the people around him for the restaurant's success, both the staff and the community. Don took feedback seriously and molded the business around what locals asked for, and working behind the scenes was a lively staff willing to put it all together. In between the bouts of hijinks and drama, the staff got it done when it mattered most. Don credited many of his staff for their dedication to the business, and with all of the names who worked at the Danish Inn throughout the years, it would be simply impossible to list them all. He valued their feedback and support, and how they excelled in building a warm public image. Community made the Danish Inn what it was. Community made the Danish Inn what it was.

Don sold the business to Verne Kline in 2006. Verne and his daughter Jacqui (Christensen) were running a small bakery up Main St and Don approached them with the offer to sell the Danish Inn altogether. The pair accepted, and Don trained Jacqui for a time before stepping away. Jeremy Christensen, Jacqui's husband, joined in as well, and the Danish Inn continued to serve as a staple in the Danish Villages until its final closure in 2015. Food prices and the cost of labor had risen beyond what the business could handle. It was the latest symptom in Elk Horn's spiral as the hotel floundered and the windmill continued to struggle.

Elk Horn has been struggling to fill the gap left by the Danish Inn ever since despite the glaring demand. Two years ago, the windmill began putting together ‘Throwback Thursdays’ which centered on Danish-themed meals at Norse Horse Tavern and Kringleman Bakery. These meals, typically frikadeller or stuffed pork, have always sold out in less than two hours. Community banquets are always Danish meals, and when we have bus tours, Danish meals are frequently requested. The point though, isn’t just that we need a restaurant committed to serving Danish cuisine, it’s that the loss of the Danish Inn has left a larger void than recognized.

* * *

The Danish Inn, after all, had been the iconic center of Elk Horn’s social fabric for decades and its legacy is remembered fondly by those who worked and ate there over the years across generations of owners and patrons. To this day, we still get visitors at the windmill who are either convinced they are in the wrong town or swear on a loved one’s grave that our gift shop was once a restaurant. Whether it was the crab legs, the fresh-baked kringle, or the Sunday buffet – the Danish Inn left a lasting impression on a lot of people and successfully developed an impressive following that pulled regulars from over 100 miles away. Between the

local coffee gatherings and bus tours, the Danish Inn was almost always the most lively place in town. It was also the meeting place where local organizations and volunteers planned festivals, fundraisers, and gatherings that preserved Elk Horn’s Danish heritage and decided its future.

There are opportunities today to fill the void that the Danish Inn has left behind, but it will take a lot more than a new owner willing to work to make it happen. The community will have to rally, and Elk Horn will have to embrace its present challenges. In Don’s view, as well as my own, the playbook is there for a successful venture that can rejuvenate Elk Horn’s unique cultural blend and build on the recent moment being generated by the windmill, the Museum of Danish America, and a newly opened hotel. Collaboration is key, and Elk Horn’s local businesses have been getting very creative in how they work together over the past few years. Whether it’s the Grace on Main building or another altogether, there is an opening in Elk Horn at this moment for something special. The community has the means to make it happen, but we need to work for it. A reflection of the Danish Inn’s legacy in our collective memory offers a revealing framework for how delicate culture can be and the amount of work it takes to preserve it. We don’t have to reinvent the wheel, but it won’t turn if we don’t push.

This rambling essay began with a

series of questions about culture and how it sustains itself. What makes Elk Horn Danish and how might the Danish Inn have contributed to that? I’ve tried to leave the answers to these questions open for readers to decide for themselves, but I do want to make a final point that relates back to Arne Myggen’s story. Myggen is very reluctant to concede that Elk Horn is in fact Danish, but he leaves town with the understanding that Elk Horn is “this Danish colony that could not forget where they came from.” The most compelling evidence Myggen finds is not meatballs, surnames, or even the windmill, it’s the people. Elk Horn’s Danishness shouldn’t be written off as insignificant. It made the Danish Inn possible, made the windmill possible, and with the help of those two achievements, made the Museum of Danish America possible. These things should make us wonder what else is possible.

- Shaun Sayres

*Thank you to Jan Fajen for providing additional materials referenced in this article.

In 2017, the building was purchased by Mike & Lou Howard who hoped to preserve Elk Horn’s only Danish restaurant. However, given the condition of the building and demand for modernization, the style of the building was copied east where the Grace on Main building stands today.

Everything looked promising in 2019 when the Danish Table opened with a refreshed Danish menu influenced by Danish chef, Stig Hansen. But then COVID hit and the new ownership in Minnesota couldn’t hold the line.

Grace on Main took over during the pandemic and remained open with a modern, New-American menu until the business closed its doors for good in 2024.

As of now the building is on a temporary lease for this Summer. Call 712-304-1764 for more information.



The Danish Inn during demolition in 2018 with the new building (blue) behind it

News & Updates

Although this issue is a bit late, we're going to focus on news from January - March and cover more recent events in the next issue. As usual, the winter is a bit of a slow time and not everything we're up to at the mill is all that interesting this time of year.

In January, we focused on getting our late shipment from Denmark into the store. This involved moving things around and adding some new shelving and displays to maximize our space. The t-shirts were moved to the back of the store to make room for the new Thames & Kosmos toys up front. Our candle section was remade into a very colorful and organized display including a rustic display window for our Danish Iron pieces. What we're really excited about, though, is the new set of displays on the center counter where the Danish Iron sat for years. Local woodworker Darryl Nissen constructed some new wooden fixtures for us to build up, and on the base counter, we've added a LEGO train which can run during events including the special holiday train for Julefest.



Our new candle corner



The new LEGO train



We picked up a new Havarti cheese vendor!



Faye Farley & Phyllis Hoegh



Lisa Riggs & Faye Farley

February was more of the same, shuffling things around in the store and also taking some time to update some of our office space. We also began scanning in and archiving our boxes and drawers full of old photographs and slides. Some of these have been featured on our #FlashbackFriday posts on Facebook, but there are hundreds of images to go through and we'll continue to share more.

We suffered some high winds in March which tore down an evergreen tree behind the mill and damaged our old aeromotor mill by the shed. We hope to get it fixed this Summer.

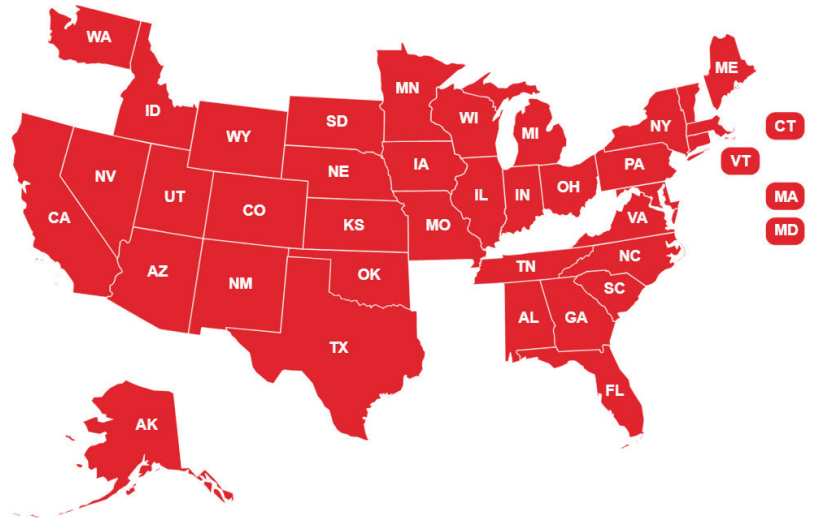
Finally, we celebrated a well-deserved retirement for Faye Farley who has stepped away from the windmill after nearly 40 years of service. She is dearly missed, but we're fortunate that she continues to come in here and there to help with displays and keep the gift shop looking sharp.

Visitor Information

From January to March, we are down in visitors compared to last year:

- 1,388 visitors signed our guestbook
- Visitors from 39 states and 7 foreign countries including 20 visitors from Denmark

Top 5 states: IA, NE, MN, WI, IL



VIEW THIS ISSUE ONLINE

View this issue and past issues of *The Breeze* online at danishwindmill.org

SHARE YOUR MEMORIES

We anticipate this issue bringing back plenty of memories about the Danish Inn and the good times had there. With the next issue of *The Breeze* coming up shortly, we're inviting readers to share their favorite stories of their times at the Danish Inn with us. These will be published in the next issue on a first-come, first serve basis. Submissions will be due by July 15 and can be mailed to us or emailed to

info@danishwindmill.com.

So if you have a favorite picture or story, feel free to send them our way!



Every Tuesday, Lisa took the windmill's volunteer flower ladies to the Danish Inn for coffee.