

Danish Windmill Quarterly Newsletter

THE BREEZE**Inside this issue:**

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Director's Message:

Dear Members,

This is a little unorthodox, but we're doing what we can. We know we're behind on getting these newsletters out, but we're determined to make it happen. If you are reading this and wondering what happened to the Winter 2025 issue, please know it is coming. We wanted to get a newer one out for Tivoli Fest first, but both issues will be sent out relatively soon to get us back on track.

More and more keeps happening and there's only so much space to put it all. We hope you'll find the contents of this issue worthwhile. There is much more to be shared in the next one as well. Finally, please be aware that there are website changes coming and *The Breeze* will have a new location in June.



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



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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50 Years Forward: Building the Future We Want

Hidden beneath the surface of the River Elbe sits a stone with an ominous inscription, “If you see me, then weep.” The message is dark, but clear. For seemingly thousands of years, the river has dictated who lives and who dies along its banks in modern day Germany and the Czech Republic. A low water line signaled impending drought, food shortages, and death. As such, dozens of these “hunger stones” can be found at various points along the river. Their authors gave their time and energy carving messages that would last generations. They understood something we often take for granted today, that knowledge cannot survive on its own. It takes work, commitment, even sacrifice, to ensure the next generations may benefit from our own knowledge and skills, mistakes and triumphs.

This was the leading idea behind our plan to develop our Education & Preservation Center: the preservation and education of skills, crafts, and knowledge that Danish immigrants brought with them when they established our communities a century or more ago. Building a town on the prairie demanded a wide range of skillsets from woodworking, blacksmithing, and masonry to weaving, food preparation, and dairy production. While the days of Main Street businesses run by cobblers and leather tanners are long gone, the demand for those crafts has not disappeared. In different ways, we still depend on the knowledge of our ancestors but figuring out what it is we know and how to preserve it takes work. This is why we believe the Preservation & Education Center (henceforth PEC)



can serve a powerful purpose for our community. It allows for a local space with the practical and necessary equipment to teach some of these skills, and its proximity to the windmill contextualizes its importance.

The opening of the PEC this year, coincidentally the windmill’s 50th anniversary in Elk Horn, offers a unique opportunity on the current position of the organization and where we want to go. Rather than dwelling on the past and the remarkable stories of the movers and shakers that guided us here, I want to use these few pages to entertain a different discussion: what the windmill’s future might look like and how the PEC fits into it. But while I say “windmill,” I really mean something more. Several architectural marvels just within Elk Horn demand a similar call for preservation. The Bedstemor’s House, the Museum of Danish America, the Vikinghjem, and now Fjærd the Troll were all artistically crafted with specialized knowledge of wood crafting. Each of these structures will need their own revitalizations in the years to come, a generation from now or more, and we need to assure ourselves that we will have the resources to take those projects on.

This is where the PEC comes in.

Our goal is to host public programs that open our doors to all age groups, whether our patrons are wearing their last apron or their first. We are especially interested in child-centric programming that can introduce basic concepts of woodworking and other skills to the world’s newest generation of potential creators. With entire worlds now existing exclusively on digital platforms, we must remain vigilant in our efforts to encourage creators to explore what can be built with their hands from physical media. None of this is to say that one world is better than the other, but our organization and others like it depend on both to survive. AI isn’t going to build a windmill, at least not in our lifetimes, and even if it does – it likely won’t turn out well. AI only knows what we know now. It doesn’t have the capacity to consider the centuries of trial-and-error millwrights and millers went through to explain why things are the way they are.

That precise skill and knowledge, how to reset the position of the brakewheel or redress a millstone, requires human-to-human contact. It represents knowledge that has snowballed through generations, accumulating the mistakes and discoveries of newcomers along



Work on the classroom side of the PEC is underway

the way. I've been fortunate enough to have access to a seasoned millwright at my fingertips. Technology today allows us to have conversations with people thousands of miles away, and I've learned more about the windmill through that contact than any other way available to me. Most of our supporters are familiar with Erik Batenburg, our millwright contact in Denmark who has now been to Elk Horn twice to work on our mill. But what most don't see are the endless moments when I reach out to Erik with different questions about why things are done a certain way or pictures/videos of things I identify as potential problems. When it comes to mills, Erik is a wealth of knowledge, not just from his own experiences both those of his twin brother and his father, both of whom established millwrights in the Netherlands. His craft derives, in part, from the centuries of Dutch millwrights who came before him, and we've been quite fortunate that he has been so willing to impasse that knowledge onto us whenever called upon.

Let me give an example that ties this altogether. While I try to run the windmill throughout the year, including Winter, every

arrival of Spring is a new adventure that must be approached with caution. The chaotic seasonal changes that see temperatures reach as high as 90° F (32° C) only to drop to below 40° F (4° C) the following night can have a significant impact on the wooden machinery that makes up the mill. Every April, I have to slow down, cautiously checking things and running it with extra attention to see what pieces might have moved, what might be rubbing the wrong way or making a noise it shouldn't be. This year, we noticed the brakewheel has a section of cogs rubbing into the iron wallower that it drives, making a considerable amount of noise and uncomfortable amount of contact. After sending Erik several images and videos, he suggested jacking the windshaft forward approximately 5-6mm. I can feel the experience in his words when he says it, but for myself, this is a new and somewhat terrifying experience. Do I want to be the guy remembered for breaking the windmill? What choice do I have?

For these reasons, I've left my trust with Erik from the start. I could not be more thankful for the wisdom and confidence he has

imparted with me between his visits to Elk Horn and from a distance. I'm also thankful for the local support I've been able to call on to take these tasks on. Tim Palmer, Facilities Manager of the Museum of Danish America and enthusiast of all mechanical novelties, volunteered his time on a Saturday to help me move the windshaft forward. And to accomplish this, I was able to borrow a portable hydraulic jack from Mike's Welding in Kimballton, a go-to for so many of the obscure problems that have come my way these last few years. Then, with Erik on speed-dial, we figured it out. We had the tools on hand to move the shaft forward, cut the metal shims we needed, and tighten everything back into place. All of a sudden, a run-of-the-mill day for me sounds like it belongs in a Bear Grylls documentary. After further observation, it does look like the position of the brakewheel still needs to be reset, but I know who to turn to and how to do it when the time is right. I've seen Erik do it before.

Maintaining the windmill is simultaneously the most exhilarating and stressful part of my job. It's unique in ways I will never experience anywhere else, but there are so many nights I have to go to bed wondering what the future looks like for it, be it tomorrow or years from now. That is why I've placed so much emphasis on the PEC, because Erik will not be around forever and neither will I. As a group, millwrights globally are shrinking. It's why Erik's firm in Denmark (run by Morten Petersen), Møllebygger Petersen ApS, is prioritizing the training of new Danish millwrights. This isn't to say that Elk Horn needs a classically trained millwright on call, but we do need people willing to take on the challenges the windmill can and

has thrown our way. The people tasked with taking care of it 25 or 50 years from now will need a wealth of knowledge to draw from.

Working blind, as I have seen first-hand in my time with Erik, can be catastrophic. A great example of this is when Erik and his colleague, Ronald Scheltens, came in 2024 to adjust the position of the windmill's cap on the rail upon which the entire thing turns. I've written about this in other places, but the short of it is that we had to jack up the entire cap, wings and all, adjust the positions of the 12 cast iron feet it glides on, and set it back into place. The purpose of this was to push the feet out as they were pinching on the inner rail when the cap rotated, a typical issue in new cap construction when new wood is still drying and shrinking. All went relatively as planned, thanks to the help of Colton Juelsgaard's milling machine, but when the cap was dropped back into place, the new contact points put strong pressure on the windshaft. Critically, Erik and Ronald drew from enough experience to know to look for this. Had it been left unchecked, the windshaft would have eventually snapped in half, destroying the windmill and hundreds of thousands of dollars of recent work and investment into it. To be sure, we paid for the experience they had, but the other side of this coin is that had we gone with someone else, perhaps an American based contractor, the pressure on the windshaft may never have been caught in time. I tell this story often, both as an example of how daunting work on the windmill can be and as a reason for how we pick the companies we partner with.

The idea that the PEC is going to churn out a new crew of

millwrights might be a bit lofty, but moving in that direction is better than not moving at all. Creating an environment where we can introduce the basic concepts of woodworking is a great first step, and against the backdrop of the windmill, the significance is always within arm's reach. We've rebuilt the woodshop with the windmill in mind, prioritizing equipment that can safely handle the hardwoods that the mill often requires. It houses the tools that will be needed to build new shutters, fantail blades, and other parts as needed. Its proximity itself is an underrated asset, not only for convenience, but also for demonstrating practical applications of classic skills such as mortise and tenon joints or doweling. Participants can learn practical skills in carpentry, cabinetry, framing, and engineering all while building an understanding of how the windmill is built and why.

So, how will this work? While we want to mold our space around what the community wants, we have a basic structure in mind. The woodshop has been revamped in the same space. The retail space is being converted into a classroom with mobile workstations and an audio-video lecture suite. Bigger classes will be suited for approximately 16

participants at a time, while smaller hands-on classes involving the woodshop will be better suited in smaller groups of 2-4. The mobile work benches allow for flexible reconfigurations of the space, opening the floor for kids programs or setting up the space for seminars or board meetings.

Another possibility we are exploring is the production of simple wood creations to be sold in the windmill's gift shop. We will source materials, or participants can bring their own, and will offer classes or free time for participants to build from plans we have for specific toys or other items we can sell. Profits from these items will be spun back into the overhead of the PEC, allowing participants to gain experience and support its upkeep at the same time. We've already carved out a section of the gift shop with this in mind.

At the same time, the PEC's structure is intended to be flexible. We hope to empower local craftsmen to share their own knowledge and skills with others. There is a wealth of skill and knowledge already established in our community, and we hope this building may serve as a means to spread it further. We welcome input on this and would like to offer programs there is public interest in.



A view of many of the mechanical pieces of the windmill when the parts arrived in February 1976

For the sake of the windmill's preservation, we must look forward. We must think of the challenges that come next and who will be here as they appear. Focusing our efforts on a basic introduction into woodworking and woodcarving is our way in, but how far it goes will require a greater amount of dedication and passion community-wide.

The timing of this is critical for environmental reasons as well. The enormous white oak beams this windmill is made of, including its cap frame and fantail assembly, are getting more expensive and difficult to source every year. In order to avoid costly repairs down the road, we have to set plans in place now that, in my view, should operate on the basis that we are stuck with what we have. We don't know what timber markets will look like 50 years from now, particularly at this moment as more old growth forests have been opened for commercial logging and extraction. The most logical thing we can do right now is take care of what we have as best we can.

That is why we are still fundraising for part of our Grind Campaign this Summer when we will be covering parts of the exposed timbers on the cap frame and fantail with copper plating.

This technique is commonly used on windmills in Denmark to reduce wood rot, significantly expanding the lifespan of the existing structure. And this project isn't cheap. The prices of copper (and tariffs on it) have gone up, as has rates for the life equipment we need. Of the \$12,000 needed for this project, we have so far only received a \$2,000 grant from The Society of Preservation of Old Mills (SPOOM). If the project is not completed by August, we lose that grant. However, the more important message here is that \$12,000 now is much cheaper than the hundreds of thousands of dollars it could cost to replace these timbers again in 20-30 years. Iowa's climate has not been kind, but it's our reality.

We're thankful to have local partners capable of doing this kind of work, and the connections in Denmark advising us on how to carry it out. The knowledge that holds the foundation of this project is vital.

With 50 years of experience behind us, we can better anticipate the road ahead for what this windmill will need in order to remain a windmill. It will likely need new sails in 20-25 years. It will also eventually need new shingles. The pine and cedar will be around for some time,

but the oak might not be. We've come a long way in maintaining what we can, but Iowa's weather will take its toll. The wind will wear away at gears and joints, bolts will shake loose, and the plywood used for the shutters and fantail blades will all eventually rot. Even the chain we use to control the wings is overdue to be replaced after 50 years of wear on the links.

Listing these issues out like this sounds exhausting, but the reality isn't so bad if we plan accordingly. We've already invested in the materials, and now we must invest in the people that will be here to take care of them. They will need the knowledge and skills that we have, and ChatGPT isn't going to be all that helpful.

This is what we're building the PEC to be available for. The windmill has a great story with inspiring heroes, but we need a place to turn that inspiration into action, practice, and growth. Part of building the future we want is simply preserving what we have. And whether we are building or preserving, the knowledge and skills needed are same.

Shaun Sayres

Another update on the Center will come out in the Summer issue.



Shown here are examples of how the copper will be applied to our windmill. These plates are shimmed with hardwood to allow the wood to breathe naturally.

News & Updates

We started off our 50th year in Elk Horn with a bang at our annual membership gathering in January. As a thank you for their support, members were treated to a free meal while Shaun presented a review of 2025. It was a great night we hope to repeat again next year if we can.

For those following along, we have secured a Danish *postkasse*! We wish to thank Brenda Nelson and Tony Hough for their assistance in getting one purchased for us at auction as well as all of those who donated. The mail box has been installed near our entry way and will be converted into a donation box (despite what it might say on the box about leaving money in envelopes). A sign will be installed soon that recognizes all of those who donated for the project. And, yes, some people are trying to leave us their mail.



Our new Danish postkasse



Our New Millstones and Erik Batenburg



Fjord Færgemand

We're thrilled to announce we received some grants this first quarter. We received contributions from the Scan Design Foundation for our new website (see next page). The Shelby County Community Foundation awarded us \$4,989 towards the new roof on our Education & Preservation Center. And, our new millstones have been quarried and manufactured thanks to an HRDP Grant from the State Historical Society of Iowa! The stones are now finished and stored in Denmark until we are ready financially to have them shipped and eventually installed.

Finally, as many have already heard, Elk Horn now has its own Thomas Dambo troll over at the Museum of Danish America. We sincerely wish to thank Mike & Lou Howard for their sponsorship of the project and all of the volunteers who devoted time to work on it. The troll's name is Fjord Færgemand. It stands in a viking ship out on the prairie where its paddle has already sent ripples through town.

April Fools!

In case you missed it, the following story was published on April 1st this year. Needless to say, the windmill is not going anywhere anytime soon:

The Danish Windmill is moving back to Denmark following the unexpected discovery of a secret basement underneath the windmill. It was always known that the concrete foundation of the mill descends 14 feet into the ground, but no one could have expected the secrets hidden inside. Its contents include a large pile of elk horns, 2 mermaid fountain sculptures, the hull of a viking ship, and an old bank safe with a broken lock.

Researchers determined the lock had been smashed with a large axe, but what they found inside was more puzzling. Sifting through dozens of stock certificates for the Atlantic Northern Railroad, they discovered a document that no one could have expected, a lease agreement between Nørre Snede, Denmark and the town of Elk Horn.

As it turns out, the windmill was never purchased but was loaned to Elk Horn under a 50-year lease. This unexpected twist comes at a rather awkward time as the windmill celebrates its 50th anniversary in Elk Horn and has left the organization scrambling on what to do next.

When asked for comment, the windmill's director, Shaun Sayres, had this to say, "I mean, looking back at the windmill's history, it's moved a few times before, so this is something we're used to. I'm more surprised by the fact we have a basement. Do you know how many blue plates we have? We really could have used that storage space." While most of the mill's staff plan to follow the job to Denmark, Joni had this to say: "I'm getting too old for this."

What happens next is anyone's guess. Some Elk Horn residents are passing around a petition to have the lease extended, but others seem less concerned. "We really want a Dollar General," some said.

As for the future of the windmill, Sayres does see one benefit from move: "At least we won't have to deal with tariffs anymore."

New Website Coming Soon





Go Inside the Windmill

Stand inside something seriously powerful while it actually moves. It's bigger, better and more dynamic than you expect.



A Living Danish Tradition

This isn't history behind glass. It's wood, weight, motion, and stories you can feel. Make a meaningful connection to the past.



Your Kids Won't Forget This

Gears turning, stories unfolding, mechanics, history, and culture brought to life. Screens can't compete with this.



Step into Hygge

A warm, welcoming place to slow down, explore, and enjoy a truly memorable day.

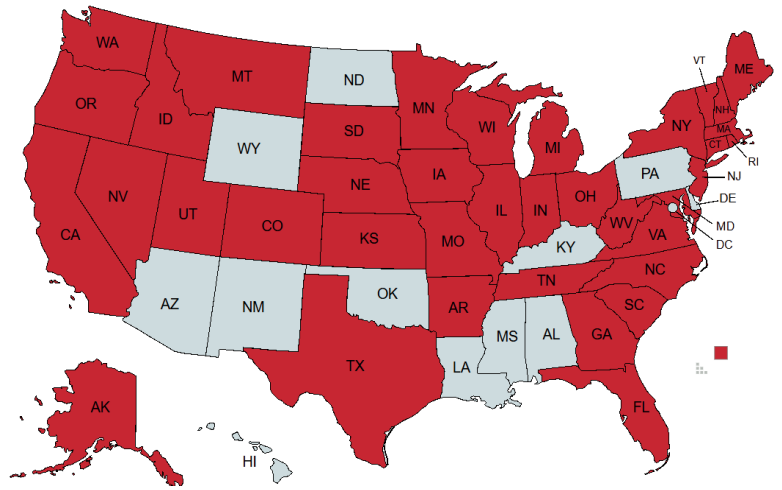
We're excited to announce that **danishwindmill.com** is getting its long-awaited facelift! We received a grant from the Scan Design Foundation for \$10,000 earlier this year to begin redesigning the website and merge with danishwindmill.org. We anticipate the new site being published in June. There is still work to do, but we could not be more excited for what's coming. This change also means that the .org site will be phased out, so all materials will be moved over to this site in time.

Visitor Information

From January to March, we are up in our visitor count:

- 1,609 visitors signed our guestbook including 9 from Denmark
- Visitors from 38 states and 11 foreign countries are represented

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



We wish to thank Iowa Western Community College for partnering with us this year on the production of a guestbook software which will help us simplify our data tracking going forward and allow us to develop better insights into where our visitors are coming from.

This isn't going to be a public-tool, but we always want to highlight some of the partnerships we make behind the scenes. This software will help us tremendously.

Are you a member?

Become a member today and receive direct copies of *The Breeze* by mail or email. Scan the QR code to learn more.

Family memberships now available!

Additional benefits include:

- Free tours of the windmill & vikinghjem
- 10% off in the gift shop and online
- Direct access to news, updates, and catalogs
- Access to our digital archive
- Pride of supporting a local museum

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