

Denmark

June 23, 2010

1 Saturday before June 16, 2010

I was excited to explore the peninsula of Denmark since a branch of my family emigrated to the United States from there in the mid 1800's. After lugging my computer across town (Århus, Denmark) I found the Eurocar rental place and reserved myself the cheapest car that they had. It was going to be either 3000 Kr for two separate days (Saturday and again on Wednesday) or 2400 Kr for the whole week. The disadvantage of the whole week plan is that you have to park the car somewhere. I decided to go to the one-day plan of renting the car on Wednesday since, after all, it was already almost 2:00 in the afternoon and there wasn't much left in the day—except for the fact that the Sun doesn't set until midnight.

I stepped back outside and was overwhelmed by a deep sense of laziness. Not wanting to carry my computer and camera all the way back to the hotel I turned around and went for the whole-week plan. Throw in a GPS system for 500 Kr and... well it was an expensive enterprise. I got the car, quickly reoriented myself to driving a stickshift, and tried to get out of the city. This turned out to be the first of two times where the GPS was useful. The GPS had a few issues that turned me off to it in favor of my paper Denmark map: it was speaking to me in Danish, the GPS changes the orientation of the map rather than the orientation of the car on the map, it was already programmed to find some location that I didn't care to visit and I couldn't read the options on the screen to change this, and I didn't know how to get the lovely voice to shut up. The second time the GPS came in handy was when I was behind schedule in getting to the airport for the flight home and I wanted to make sure I didn't get lost leaving the city. It was helpful here even though it was still giving me directions to the unknown destination from five days earlier.

The drive north reminded me of my impression, at the same time of year, of Minnesota; I had driven through Minnesota in 2006 on my way between Seattle and Chicago. The landscape was super-green farmland with rolling hills and clumps of trees (it looks like the golf course for a giant). My first destination was Siem. For the last few months I had adopted Siem as the quintessential small down where my ancestors came from—a dozen houses, three streets, and a church. It turns out that there were more than a dozen houses when you

count those out in the fields. I made my way through Rebild and Scørping and took a wrong turn. The road I was on would have taken me to Store Brøndum. At first I thought this wasn't a bad idea, after all there were almost as many of my ancestors from Store Brøndum as there were from Siem. However, Siem was smaller and I wanted to start small and work my way up.

I turned around and headed for Siem. I stopped at the church and wandered around the graveyard looking at the headstones. There were very few that were old. Generally, the Danes recycle the plots after a few decades so you can't find many with death dates in the 1800's. Since my family left in the 1850's I quickly realized that finding the gravestones for my ancestors was not going to be fruitful. No matter, I went back to the car to organize myself for the rest of the day. I started going through my pedigree to see who came from where and when. Basically, what family names should I look for in the graveyards as the resting place for possible relatives.

As I was engaged in doing this the "grave digger" (the person who maintains the graveyard) appeared and rang the bell. I accosted her and showed her my laptop hoping that she could say something interesting. She pointed to the screen and said "Nissen". Apparently the Nissen family was still around. She then mentioned that the village was having a banquet that day and that a man from the Nissen family would probably be there.

We went over to the local park where there was a small jazz ensemble (including a vibraphone) playing under a pavilion with tables, food, and about 50 or 60 people. I later found out that the park used to be part of the Nissen farm. I waited for a few minutes while Anton Nissen and some associates finished counting the proceeds from whatever activities had happened earlier that day. It was an auction to raise money for the holiday party later in the year—interestingly a GPS system had gone for 400 Kr. I chipped in 50 Kr to show my goodwill (not knowing at the time what it was for—but it seemed an appropriate gesture).

They finished and a gentleman explained to Anton that I might be related to him. We stepped outside and spoke for a few minutes. He told me that a local historian had just finished writing a history of the town and that we could see if she was home. It was a few towns to the west (about 10 km). We hopped into my car and headed for Skøping (the old part of town, just north of the new part). We stopped at a house that he thought was the right one. He went up to the door and knocked, then waved me to join him. At the door was Inger Marie Christensen, local historian and all around good person.

We talked for a while about the various family names on my pedigree. She showed me some of her records (which matched my own and made me think that our information source was ultimately the same). She said she had pictures and other information about the Nissen family from the time that my ancestors had left until the present. We exchanged contact information and she sent those pictures etc. along early the next morning. In the mean time, Anton and I drove back to Siem where the dinner was about to start. We briefly showed me where he was born (a large white house near the church) and another farm house near the park. I later learned that the second farm house was the one I should have

paid attention to. I ultimately went back to get another picture or two a few days later.

I paid my 75 Kr and joined in the neighborhood picnic. Anton had to take care of something so I sat next to the saxophone player from the Jazz ensemble earlier that day. I told him that Mr. Nissen was my uncle (using the word loosely). He questioned me a little and it was clear that, at that time, I still didn't know Anton's first name. He wondered why he should believe that Anton was my uncle when I didn't know his name. I explained that you had to go back 200 years before we had a common ancestor. He was satisfied with that and we started talking. Eventually, several members of the community were gathered around looking at my pedigree on my laptop—pointing out names and places that they recognized. I felt like I fit right in, except for the language issue (though in general they all spoke very good English).

Soon (around 8:00 or so) Anton came over to say goodbye. I took my leave from the community and quickly visited the churches of Terndrup, Lyngby (pronounced loonboo), Store Brøndum, and after some trouble finding the place, Torup—located about 1km off of the main road. I noted the Rasmussen family in Lyngby. I didn't fully appreciate at the time that Lyngby was such an important place in my family tree with several generations living their whole lives there. Unfortunately, I was never able to return to look closer at the neighborhoods. But there wasn't really much to the town so I'm not sure what else I would have gotten out of it other than the satisfaction that I had tried. It had been a great experience, and had I visited Siem and this area on any other day, or at almost any other time, I would have missed the whole thing—one benefit of a heavy laptop.

Store Brøndum had an unusual layout with the church behind several buildings and no easy way to get to it from the main road, Lyngby was laid out on a the side of a hill with the church a ways up the road, Torup was a village with a church way off in the distance, and Siem, of course, was great—essentially all on one road with the equivalent of a business loop, 100 meters of road that looped off of the main road and provided access to a few houses and the park.

I made it back to Århus around 11:00 and tried to find a place to park. I didn't know the rules and eventually talked with the person at the desk at the hotel. They apparently had some parking spaces that guests can use overnight (must be gone by 8:00am—except on weekends so I was off the hook there). The next day I missed church because I accidentally thought that the meeting started at noon instead of 10:00. I drove up to my Kepler meeting at 1:30 and ended up leaving my car at the University until I need it a few days later.

2 Wednesday June 16, 2010

I had originally hoped to spend the entire day out in the countryside on Wednesday. But, a late night before hand and the ongoing conference kept me in Århus until about 12:30. After the last talk before lunch, I bolted. It was much easier getting out of the city now that I had looked more closely at the map. There

were a few towns that I wanted to hit in the southern part of the family stomping grounds, then I wanted to head north to catch the side of the family I had previously missed.

Another intention at the start of the day was to get off at Hobro and follow the road that goes along the southern bank of the Mariager Fjord. That plan would have put me right about where I would need to pick up where I had left off—beginning with Astrup. Well, I missed the turn and was tempted to backtrack. I decided that I didn't come to this part of Denmark to see a Fjord, so I pressed on and made appropriate adjustments to my itinerary.

I drove north to Rold, took a right and headed to Lille Arden. I don't know if "Lille" means "little", but I wouldn't be surprised if it did. Lille Arden was very small and there wasn't much to see other than a few farm houses and barns. I moved on to Astrup. Astrup church was quite different from the other churches I had seen. The tower was much more decorative than most others. I looked in my pedigree and learned that there was only one of my ancestors who had a "life changing event" in Astrup—Kirsten Neilsen died there.

The graveyard surrounding the church was the largest I had seen (and would turn out to be the largest in terms of actual numbers of graves that I would see on my visit). So, apparently other people had died in the area and it seemed to me to be as good a place as any to do so. I would even venture a guess that most people who have ever lived in Astrup had died at some point. I decided that I should concentrate on places where I had more of a connection.

I headed out of town toward Siem again. Now that I knew the park where the banquet was held was actually the Nissen family farm, I wanted to get some better pictures (between adventuring days, I received an email from the historian with interesting facts and pictures). I thought I had taken the main road out of Astrup, but it kept getting smaller and smaller. Turning into a thin, dirt path. *It reminded me of the time when Bob (Elder Woods), along with Elders Davey and Blodgett, took the Twingo up into the Voges mountains near Guebwiller—we found a lake with some wild blueberries. As we were running out of gas, and as the road evolved into what looked more like a deer run than anything else, we popped out of a bank of trees onto a main highway that ran along the ridge of the mountains right near the Grand Ballon. We saw an alpine slide on the top of the mountain and, of course, took the risk to get up to it, go on the slide, and then make it down to Thann on fumes (we felt safe enough since it was downhill). Circumstantial evidence suggests that the lake was the "Lac du Ballon" and the road we emerged onto was D431.*

At any rate, the road out of Astrup got smaller and smaller. I was thinking that it was at least an adventure, and at worst it would lead me into the gaping maw of Hell. Eventually the road came to a crossroads, I took a right, and I soon arrived in the soft underbelly of Hellum. Hellum is a more recent addition to the local countryside. All my ancestors had left before it became established as a town. I think I left Astrup on the road called "Søvej". I took off toward Siem and arrived at the church to find the grave digger working on the yard. I wanted to walk around there one more time after having had such a good experience a few days earlier. She asked me if I wanted to see the inside of the

church; to which I responded in the affirmative.

We went inside and looked around. There were only a few rows of pews. Siem turns out to be one of the smallest churches in Denmark; so my family came from the smallest farm in Siem—have I mentioned that?—and went to church in one of the smallest churches in the country. What could be cooler than that? I saw the altar that had been around for almost a kilo-year. It was great to see. Several generations of my family members were married right where I was standing. I had decided that since the Danes recycle the grave plots that I was much more interested in seeing the churches where my family members went to church and were married rather than where they were once buried. It kills two birds with one stone also since both sides of the family would, presumably, have been at a marriage. I snapped a few more pictures of Siem and headed north again.

Blenstrup was the next town. I noticed a few familiar names in the cemetery. As I wandered around the cemetery I noticed a gravestone where a recently placed flower pot had been blown over by the wind. I replaced it and dusted off the debris. The gravestone was for Elly and Harry Nissen—the only Nissen's that I had seen in the graveyard and only recently buried ('94 and '08).

After Blenstrup I headed for Håls. It was exceptionally small with only a few houses and nothing that stood out for picture taking. I was tempted to talk to a local or two, but decided to press on to Gunderup. When I arrived at the church there I caught one of the graveyard workers right before she left. She took me into the office at the church and we looked through some old records. Another person (a man) came in and they started making phone calls to the local historical society. It turned out that at 7:00 that night there was going to be a tour of the Gunderup church, after which there would be some refreshments at the town hall. Great, I'll be there. It turned out that the historical society goes on a circuit and they get to Gunderup church about once every 10 years or so. Incidentally, given its small size, all of my family from Håls (a fairly large number) would have gone to church, gotten married, and been buried, at Gunderup. So, I didn't feel so bad about leaving Håls so quickly. I did notice a grave with the family name "Steffensen"—an interesting mix, but probably not any relation since the Steffen family is from the Kassel region of Germany.

I kept moving so that I could see all the other places that I wanted to see before I needed to be back in Gunderup. Next stop, dinner in Sønder Tranders. Well, so I thought. I came to a food stand off the side of the road and made the mistake of passing it by. It took some time to find Sønder Tranders since the University (almost the same geographical size) is right next to it, it is basically a suburb of Aalborg so it wasn't isolated like all the other villages I had been to, and I was super hungry. Once I finally arrived at the church there. This one had the largest graveyard, but most of it was empty. It reminded me a little of Teotihuacan.

While there was a significant chunk of my family from Sønder Tranders, it had apparently changed a great deal over the last two hundred years. It was a nice enough town, but since it has basically been converted to a suburb it didn't have many notable features—even the church was hard to find. At any rate,

I had expected that this would likely be the case since it was so close to the city and the University so it wasn't really disappointing. I asked a local woman where I could get some food. Nowhere. So I began to regret passing the food stand and headed into Aalborg.

Aalborg was pretty interesting, though I only spent a few moments there. If you want a picture, try Wikipedia. The sandwich I got was quite bad. It was supposed to be a Doner Kebab, but had french fries and some sort of sweet ish pickle in it. I took as many bites as I could stand and tossed it. I crossed the fjord on a bridge, got back to the highway, and headed south toward Ferslev. There had been a recent funeral and one of the graves had flowers piled up to a depth of about 24". I noticed a gravestone with Kjær, which I believe is a family name of ours as well—though from Lyngby (Anders Jensen KIER or KIAER which are probably misspelled versions of Kjær). The name I was looking for was Mortensen since it is quite unusual and would be easy to identify (as opposed to Christiansen which is relatively common).

No luck on that part, so I left for Nøvling (pronounced know-ling). Nøvling had some interesting markers at the entrances to the town—kind of like wooden castle towers. This town appeared to be quite well off compared with some of the farming towns from further south—where there was a lot of junk and old construction debris everywhere. In Nøvling, I saw a Mortensen gravestone which made me happy. Not because someone with that name had died, but because the Mortensen family had ties to Nøvling in addition to Ferslev, so I was probably on the right track. I wanted to find someone to ask if there were other Mortensens still around (the two at the cemetery were buried in '93 and '00 so it was likely that there were others still poking around the town). I couldn't find anyone and I really had to go to the bathroom. Back to Gunderup for some gas, a bathroom break, some better food, and my tour of the church.

Around the church yard in Gunderup there was a grave of a Frenchman (obviously a Frenchman given the large, full color, French flag on the gravestone). He had apparently been shot by the Germans a very long time ago and was still regularly celebrated by the town. I don't recall, but I don't believe it was WWII; sometime in the 1800's sounded more like it. At any rate, we eventually went inside the church. It was divided with two sets of benches oriented at right angles to each other, both facing the pulpit. The shorter wing was dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus. There were many old paintings on the ceiling. Apparently these things are well preserved because they were painted over with a thick paint when the protestants took over from the Catholics (no images in the churches for protestants). That coat of paint had protected the artwork underneath.

One of the images showed Mary with the baby Jesus sitting on her lap. Not to be irreverent, but it looked a lot like Jesus was offering Mary the rest of his jelly donut. In the weapon room (the room just inside the entrance where you used to store your weapons, but now store your coats and umbrellas), there were two large runestones. That was cool to see as well. The pews and the alter were again where my family had sat for church and been married. It was great to reconnect with them, even if they had been dead since before the Boston Tea

Party.

It turns out (just looking at this at the time of writing) that Jens Vaever from Siem—probably spelled Væver—had at least two sons: Jens Jensen and Christian Jensen Vaever. The former was born in Håls, was married in Gunderup and was part of the northern family tree. The latter, settled in Siem and spawned the Nissen family after a few generations. The two family branches didn't recombine for three generations: 1841, over 70 years since the death of the two sons of Jens Vaever. After the lines reconnected at the marriage of Anders Larsen and Maren Nissen Jensen in 1841. Lars Christian Andersen was born in Guendumlund (the one place I didn't visit, though I think it is Gudumlund) in 1842 and the family departed shortly afterwards for Utah.

After the tour I enjoyed some pastries with the locals and talked a little about where I'm from. Then, I headed back to Århus to prepare for the flight home. A few notes. I found it interesting that the women sat on one side of the church in Gunderup and the men on the other. I wished I would have had time to see Gudumlund and to spend more time in Lyngby. I did see the Fjord that I had missed earlier as I rode home that evening. I'm glad I didn't turn around earlier in the day. It was nice and all, but it isn't the kinds of Fjords with mountainous sides like you see in pictures from Norway or Greenland. Besides, I would have missed out on a lot of stuff had I taken the extra 15 minutes to find my way back. Meeting the two grave diggers, in Siem and Gunderup, was what made most of the adventures of the day meaningful since it got me into both churches.