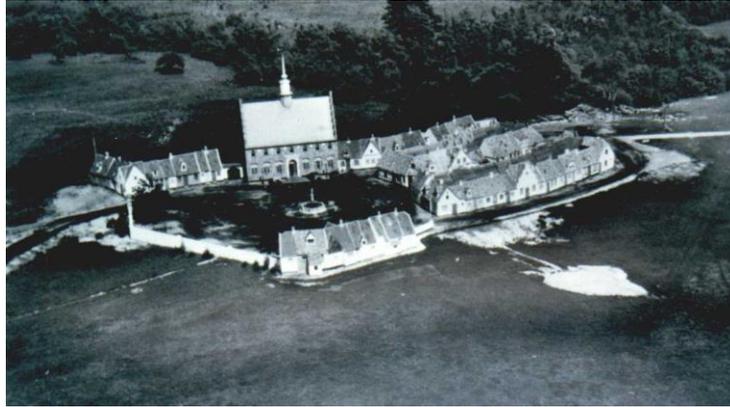


The Danish Village

By Frank Hodgdon



Just a couple of years ago the last vestige of a unique Maine landmark was demolished. The "Town Hall" of Scarborough's Danish Village, just to the rear of The Big Twenty Bowling Alley, had towered majestically over the weed-choked town square for nearly 62 years.

Den Danske Lansby was built in 1928-29, the brainchild of Portland hotelier Henry Rines and Boston architect Peter Holdensen. Rines was the owner of the brand new Eastland and modernized Congress Square hotels. Holdensen had designed the then new State Theater, which had replaced the luxurious Libby mansion at the corner of High and Congress Streets. The Eastland was famous for its Danish Tearoom, and the Danish Village became the more ambitious projection of a similar theme.

It was designed to replicate a typical antique Danish village replete with 100 cottages, no two of which were alike, clustered along four principal streets. These cottages of stucco, roofed in artificial red tile, were a wonderland of balconies, cupolas, weather vanes, and fanciful birdhouses. The lofty-spired Town Hall restaurant had a row of wooden shoes decorating the entryway to the dining room, a cavernous space with a heavily timbered ceiling and beautiful frescoes. It overlooked a crushed-stone grand courtyard complete with fountain, flower beds, and a concrete wall facing Route One to form a backdrop for a profusion of exotic plantings. Centerpiece of the fountain was an imposing statue of Danish patriot Neils Ebbenson.

All of the employees were outfitted with period costumes. Even the groundskeeper, Peter Nelsen (better known as Peter Fish), wore a brass-buttoned and gold-braided cutaway coat and broad-brimmed black felt hat, giving him the role of "burgomeister" or mayor. (As a five-year old in 1936, I recall seeing him alight from his Model T in this regalia as he reported for work.)

Throughout the 1930s, business flourished. At our Willowdale Road home, in the shadow of the Town Hall spire, I remember the familiar sounds of dishes being washed, trash being dumped, and the help on the kitchen steps conversing as they had a quick smoke.

Then along came World War II with gasoline rationing and tire shortages; automobile traffic fell to a trickle and the motel closed. In due course, the advent of the South Portland shipyard created a housing shortage, so the government took over the motel and did extensive renovations, converting single-room units into suites of several rooms. The cottages, never intended for winter occupation, proved uncomfortably cold and drafty even with a newly installed steam plant, and tenants did not stay long. (The forties are remembered for their unusually cold, snowy winters.) After the war, the motel was returned to the Rines family.

In 1947 a fire swept through the restaurant, completely destroying the kitchen ell and eating the roof deck beneath the sheet copper roofing, forever destroying the lofty spire with its magnificent weather vane. A year later or so, the Rines family decided to sell and ownership passed to Professor and Mrs. Evelyn Byron of Evanston, Illinois.

The former restaurant became a gift shop. Many of the units, lightly built, began to show signs of structural decay; the entire section extending beyond the main building on the first street became unlivable, although its facade continued in its "movie set" role. The Milestone Foundation, an organization for recovering alcoholics, bought the village in 1967. The following year a fire claimed another 22 units. By 1970, all the cottages had been either destroyed or demolished and the five-plus acre site with the Town Hall was for sale.

Today, nothing remains except the brick arch which once topped the sidewalk, and the ruins of the fountain. Hancock Lumber Company has announced plans for a retail lumber yard on the site. The Danish Village was among the very first "motels" in the country, that is, to have connecting units and an integral restaurant. It was the subject of a National Geographic article in May, 1934. It saw some famous guests, including Eleanor Roosevelt on her way to her cottage at Campobello. Some days when I pass the site, I can still see burgomeister Peter Nelsen in his blue greatcoat with the brass buttons, the broad-brimmed hat, the shiny Model T...