

Safeguarding Danishness? Ethnicity, Religion and Acculturation among Danish Americans in Three Danish Spaces in the U.S.

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***Abstract:** This paper examines and compares patterns of ethnic safeguarding across the generations in three Danish spaces in the US Midwest. Investigating the extent to which 'Danishness' has continuously been practised and preferred among descendants of the Danish immigrants who settled there at around the turn of the 20th century, it argues that there is a variety in the level to which Danish ethnic identity has historically been safeguarded in the three spaces. Consequently, this is echoed by variations in the extent to which later generations of immigrants seem to have relinquished Danishness as the defining part of their identities. The interviews indicate that a late 19th century dispute within the Danish church in America regarding the relation between religion and ethnicity, manifested in self-perceptions and life practises among Danish American families, echoed through the generations and impacted the acculturation processes to this very day.*

***Key words:** religion, ethnicity, safeguarding, life stories, Danishness*

Introduction

In Europe as well as in other parts of the world, the increasing influx of migrants has triggered discussions about how people can live together in ethnically and culturally diverse societies. In Denmark, current public and media debates revolve around immigrant communities and the measures

that must be taken to integrate immigrants arriving from places such as Syria, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. In the autumn of 2013 and the spring of 2014, however, two documentaries broadcast on Danish national TV, contrasted such prevailing debates. Almost 600,000 Danish viewers saw how Danish immigrant descendants continue to celebrate their Danish heritage with folk dancing, traditional Danish foods, Danish cultural events and the Danish language in the small Danish settlement of Elk Horn, Iowa. Since the broadcast, Elk Horn has received much attention from people who were astonished that Danish immigrant settlements even existed. The documentaries forced many people in Denmark to try to imagine ‘the Dane’ as an immigrant and to mirror themselves in national immigrant narratives.

As research had already highlighted years ago, however, the story of Elk Horn is not unique. To this day, Danish settlements such as “New Denmark”, “Dannevirke”, “Dannebrog”, “Ringsted”, “Nysted” and “Solvang” carry witness of the more than 300,000 Danish emigrants who crossed the Atlantic to the USA with millions of other Europeans in the latter half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (Hvidt, 1976; Sønnichsen 2013).

This paper explores migration and acculturation processes by examining the legacy of a case of Danish migration. On the basis of a number of life story interviews with families of Danish descent in selected Danish settlements in the American Midwest, the paper dwells on issues of ethnic safeguarding and survival, identity and belonging across the generations – from the first settlers in the late 19th century to the present day. The main innovative contribution of this study largely pertains to its intergenerational design. In existing research, tracing patterns of development as far as to the fifth generation of descendants is rare. The hope is that this paper will contribute to new insights into globally significant issues, such as the extent to which migrant ethnic identity is safeguarded and survives over time, and how and where it is safeguarded.

After some initial methodological and theoretical remarks, the reader is introduced to the three locations which were visited, and the history of these Danish spaces is unfolded. Secondly, the acculturation processes are analysed and compared by measuring the extent to which Danishness has historically been safeguarded in the three spaces. The final section of the paper turns to the late 19th century dispute within the Danish church in America, briefly discussing possible reasons for the differing levels of ethnic safeguarding.

Conducting life story interviews

Though some researchers point to the fact that fewer Danes than Norwegians, for example, chose to settle together, others acknowledge that many Danes did nevertheless prefer to do so (Bredmose Simonsen 1990; Jeppesen 2010). This paper investigates the acculturation processes of Danish Americans in three different Danish spaces: Chicago, Illinois; Blair, Nebraska and Tyler, Minnesota. These specific spaces were chosen because the rural, the urban, the Grundtvigian and the inner mission represent diverse ‘types’ of spaces. They therefore allow the measurement and comparison of differences and similarities between these categories.

A number of recruitment strategies were adopted to contact and involve Danish Americans in the three Danish spaces. The most useful approaches were an advertisement in the Danish American newspaper, *The Danish Pioneer*, and the exploitation of contacts with certain ‘gatekeepers’ within the Danish environments. It is important to note that since the aim was to get in contact with ‘people of Danish descent’, the sample on which this paper is based is dominated by people who, to some extent, know about and identify with their Danish ancestry. Considering the limitations of the research, therefore, it is important to recognise that many Danish Americans have lost track of their Danish heritage and have been assimilated. Consequently, this paper is merely engaged with exploring *how* and *the extent to which* Danishness has been safeguarded *when and where* this has actually happened.

In the attempt to recruit respondents during the research trip to the USA, it soon became obvious that the people who were easiest to contact were the ‘archivists’ of the family. They collected family photos, letters, autobiographies and other documents to save them in boxes or to ensure that a ‘real’ archive would secure their survival. Moreover, the ‘archivists’ who were most commonly in their 50s or older, often supplemented this ‘outer’ preservation with an ‘inner’ one; they safeguarded and archived Danishness by internalising it, identifying with it and practising it. They also safeguarded it by (pro)claiming it. Commonly, their ‘archive’ was complimented by a small ‘museum’ of Danish objects or heirlooms in their homes. They were often keen to share their stories.

Altogether, 31 interviews were conducted with people who could trace their roots back to the immigrants who came to the USA from Denmark between the 1850s and 1920s. Of these, a majority of 18 people were in their 50s-70s, six people were in their 80s-90s and seven people were in

their 20s-40s. Within each generation, the interviews were distributed fairly evenly among the three spaces, and the numbers of males and females were roughly equal. Compared to males, a few more female respondents showed an interest, and this could support the notion that females are 'culture bearers'. Young people often had to be persuaded to be interviewed, since they often felt they did not have much knowledge to share as regards their Danish heritage. As we shall see, this supports one of the results of this paper - that youngsters increasingly become detached from their Danish ancestry.

Respondents participated in *life story interviews* that typically lasted 1-1,5 hours. One of the earliest sociological works on immigrant ethnic groups was Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, published between 1918 and 1920. It has remained a classic within the discipline of sociology. Thomas and Znaniecki used the life story method to analyse the letters and other personal documents of Polish immigrants which they saw as rich sources of showing how the immigrant 'self' 'becomes' over time and in social processes (Zaretsky 1996). The method re-emerged in the 1970s, especially with the biographical works of Daniel Bertaux (e.g. Bertaux 1981). It is on their methodological legacy that this research ultimately rests.

Whereas Thomas and Znaniecki primarily studied letters, this paper presents results from a number of in-depth life story interviews with Danish-Americans. Since the life story method is an open-ended, exploratory approach, the interviews were typically rich in depth, detail and layers. Biographical narrative interviewing involves a journey into the core of people's identities, unfolding cultural, social and psychological textures. The interviews also resonate with American history since the mid-1800s, through the ages of pioneering, through wars, through times of economic growth, and through crises. Most importantly, biographical narrative interviews provide an insight into the way people form their life stories through their perception of both individual and collective identities. The approach presupposes that individuals constantly construct their biographies through stories (narratives) in order to create logic and order in the actions and incidents of their life histories. For the individual, biographical narratives contribute to a sense of coherence and to an understanding of self and identity (Thomsen and Antoft 2002). It has thus been interesting to see how the perception of 'inner' life, manifests itself in 'outer' life, that is, how self-perception is turned into concrete choices and practices in the course of the respondents' lives.

The work of Thomas, Znaniecki and Bertaux have gone on to inspire many contributions in the field. Researchers have further explored the scope that life-storying has to offer, as well as its limitations. In particular, ‘symbolic interactionism’ has drawn attention as an important aspect of narrative research (e.g. Goffman; Gumbrium and Holstein 2009). Inspired by social interactionism, researchers have drawn attention to the premise that narratives are created in social contexts and specific situational circumstances. Narratives are thus also constructed with an audience in mind. Phoenix (2013) and Hydén (2013) stress that gender, race, ethnicity and age, for example, may affect the stories being told. Others (e.g. Bell 2013, Pink 2004) highlight the importance of ‘non-verbal’ or ‘visual’ interaction. In the present study, non-verbal interaction such as emotional behaviour has significantly affected interpretation, often emphasising the spoken word.

In order to trace patterns of development across generations, the interviews were conducted with people of different generations within the same family whenever possible. According to Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame (1993), families namely remain a source of the primary relationships in which the transmission of various kinds of resources takes place, not only material but also – to follow Bordieu’s terminology - social, cultural and symbolic capital (Bordieu 1986). Families channel the transmission of language, names, religious views, modes of behaviour, social and cultural values etc. Hence, collecting the life stories of several generations within the same family provides an instrument to observe these transmissions and, for example, to detect patterns of ethnic safeguarding. Selected life stories and family histories will be analysed shortly.

Key concepts

Through the concept of safeguarding it becomes possible to investigate the formation and preservation of individual and collective identity. ‘Safeguarding’ is namely done partly by ‘othering’ and partly by identifying, displaying and performing the ‘us’ and is therefore evident in interviews where Danishness is practised and preferred and where other ethnicities are seen as unwelcome or as ‘intruding’ into the Danish spaces. The concept of ‘othering’ stems from various philosophical and theoretical traditions (Jensen 2011). It was based on the observation by researchers that identities are always social constructs, produced and reproduced through interaction (Goffman 1959; Barth 1969). As Richard Jenkins notes, “categorising

‘them’” is an integral part of “defining ‘us’” (Jenkins 2006). He argues that identity is a product of the dialectic relationship between self-image and the image which others publicly attribute to the individual. Identity as such becomes the product of how we define ourselves, and how others categorise us. ‘Othering’ hence becomes part of the identity construction

The central concept of safeguarding is related to that of ‘acculturation’. Following Berry (1997), the term ‘acculturation’ is understood here in terms of both psychological and cultural processes and outcomes of intercultural contact. Acculturation processes depend on the extent to which it is considered to be of value to maintain one’s identity and characteristics and on the extent to which it is considered to be of value to maintain relations with what Berry terms ‘the larger society’, including other ethnic groups (Berry 1997). Measuring processes of ethnic safeguarding will thus also shed light on processes of acculturation.

As displayed in the Elk Horn documentaries, what community members term ‘Danishness’ has survived for over a century in some of these spaces. The concept of Danishness has been explored by researchers such as Adriansen (2003) and Jenkins (2011). However, in this paper, and in the research which constitutes its basis, respondents have been left to determine the concept of ‘Danishness’ for themselves. One may question the ‘survival of Danishness’ since the ‘type of Danishness’ currently practised may not exactly resemble the Danishness practised by the first settlers or agree with current perceptions in Denmark of what is Danish. The intent here, however, is not to evaluate what is Danish but to uncover the extent to which respondents perceive themselves as Danish and safeguard this Danishness across generations.

The conceptualisation of ‘place’ and ‘space’, was initiated in the 1970s by the Chinese American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (Tuan 1977). Certeau (1984) connects space to language and action, seeing space as practised place. In his view, the place of town streets, for example, is turned into space when walked upon. Kayser Nielsen (2005) agrees that space is connected to performance. He argues that since cultural identity is no longer a given fact in the (post)modern age but something which must be constructed and communicated, culture and traditions have become increasingly important when people attempt to understand themselves. This actualises both the cultural and the historical *space*. The historical space is constituted when singing old Danish songs, for example. In such circumstances past becomes present – a space and a community are constituted which are – both horizontal

and vertical in time – shared with both present friends or family – and with your ancestors. Ascribing value and meaning to place, space is hence also connected to the emotional belonging to place (Kayser Nielsen 2005). The following section will introduce the reader to some selected Danish spaces.

Introducing the three Danish spaces

In the late 19th century Danes arrived in what they considered a ‘land of opportunity’. While some of them stayed in major cities such as New York and Chicago, many went on to take homestead among other Danes on the prairie farmland. Here they cultivated the soil, built Danish schools, churches, roads and farms on the otherwise deserted prairie and engaged in the cultural life which soon arose there. Blair in Nebraska and Tyler in Minnesota can be viewed as Danish *settlements* because of the large numbers of Danes who initially settled there. From the very outset, Chicago was multi-ethnic, but a distinctive Danish community soon arose in the city. Hence, although Blair, Tyler and Chicago are all ‘places’, each can be said to contain certain Danish ‘spaces’ where Danish cultural belonging and identity are embedded.

Chicago was founded by 200 settlers in 1833. Located on the shore of Lake Michigan, it soon became a transit centre for European migrants on their way to the Midwestern prairie. Wave after wave of migration caused the city to grow rapidly and by 1890, its population had grown to over a million. It had become the second largest city in the US.¹

Many Danish migrants came to the USA to take homestead, to farm and to take a share in the fortune which supposedly lay in the rich soils of the prairie. However, as fate would sometimes have it, some were offered a job in the city instead or returned to the city later on if their farming dreams failed or opportunities arose there instead. Moreover, farmers would sometimes go to the city to earn money during the winter months (Stilling and Olsen 1994).

The first Danish community arose in Chicago’s Loop area in the 1850s and 1860s. By the late 1870s, however, the Danes started to resettle in the neighbourhoods around Milwaukee Avenue and by the 1880s, two thirds of Chicago’s 6000 Danes lived in this area. Apart from the people, Danish

1 World Population Review: <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/chicago-population/>, accessed on Dec. 8 2015.

hotels, clubs, restaurants, shops and churches constituted the city's Danish spaces. A small Danish community also arose on Chicago's South Side (Cutler 2006; Friedman 1985). In the 1890s, the Danish journalist Henrik Cavling characterised Milwaukee Avenue as "the old Danish street". Here, Danish people were still to be found living among Danish hotels, restaurants and shops. According to Cavling, however, the neighbourhood had been increasingly taken over by Italians. Cavling also noted that many Danes had instead retreated to the neighbourhoods around Humboldt Park and Dania Avenue, where 3000-4000 wealthy Danish workers now lived in beautiful houses (Cavling 1897). Following this influx, Danish churches and Danish societies eventually also resettled there. Lovoll (1991) confirms that 70 percent of the residents around Humboldt Park were Scandinavian in 1884, and 21.1 percent were Danes. Lovoll also notes that at this point, Danes already tended to "disperse more widely [than the Norwegian] throughout the city, revealing perhaps a more pronounced move toward assimilation than the Norwegians and Swedes, and occasionally a sense, as the smallest Scandinavian contingent, of disappearing in the general mix of Nordic ethnics." Residential patterns show that no Danish colony replaced the one in Humboldt Park which started to disperse from the 1920s (Friedman 1985). The Danish spaces of Chicago are today confined to just a few. However, some Danish Americans still meet in small places where they practise, celebrate and work for the preservation of their heritage.

The Danish church in America was founded in the 1870s to allow the many Danish settlers to practise their religion in the new country. Correspondingly, the Danish church in Denmark wanted to ensure that the emigrants did not neglect their faith. In 1984, however, an internal dispute developed in the Danish church in America between the inner mission (sometimes termed the "holy" or pietistic Danes) and the 'Grundtvigian' Danes (the "happy" Danes). This led to its division. The dispute concerned the role of cultural heritage in relation to religion. For the inner mission Danes, a personal relationship to faith and repentance was central (Nielsen 2003). The Danish settlement formed in Blair was to gather people towards this necessary mission. P.S. Vig, an inner mission priest and a key inner mission figure, emphasised that it would be a disservice to the Danes in America to try to prevent them from becoming "Americanised" and that such a "violation of nature" would "take its revenge in the long run" [author's translation] (Bredmose Simonsen 1990). With Blair acting as the inner mission headquarters, *Trinity Seminary* was founded there as an inner

mission seminary. In 1989, Trinity Seminary merged with the Elk Horn Folk School, now *Dana College*, as there was a need for academic courses other than theology. In these two institutions, which now shared premises in Blair, many young people found their spouses.² Additionally, many respondents in Blair had been students here, as were their parents and children. At *Dana* they could take Danish classes or be part of its sports teams, *The Vikings*. However, as one respondent stated, “You did not folk dance at *Dana*”.

Blair now has a population of around 8000 citizens and the image of Blair as a Danish community still exists. One respondent for example mentioned that the Danish last name *Jensen* is still supposedly the most common surname in the phone book. Like many other Danish schools, *Dana College* was forced to close in 2010 due to financial difficulties, but a Danish-American archive in Blair has stored pictures and other documents from *Dana*. The archive is a meeting place for many volunteers with Danish roots.

Tyler was founded as the first Danish church colony inspired by the life view and wisdom of the Danish poet, priest and teacher, N.F.S. Grundtvig. In 1884, a land committee which included Grundtvig’s youngest son, F.L. Grundtvig, started to look for land that would be suitable for a new Danish colony. In 1885, the farmland around Tyler was purchased and then sold to Danes in pieces of 80 or 160 acres. Moreover, specific land was reserved for churches and a folk school (Bredmose Simonsen 1990; Mortensen 1985). Today, farms still lie in a circle around the town and some of them have celebrated their 100th anniversary. The town centre of Tyler had functions which served the farmers that lived outside it. Besides the churches and the folk school, grocery stores and smaller firms gradually appeared. Typically, parents would move into smaller houses in town when one of their children took over their farm.

With around 1,100 inhabitants today, Tyler’s central meeting point is still *Danebod*, a ‘campus village’ containing a church, a folk school, a gym hall and a stone hall. The latter used to function as a gym hall and a church but it now houses a small museum (Mortensen 1985). In contrast to the visions of P.S. Vig, Cavling in the 1890s noted that Grundtvig had “done a great job in preserving Danish language and customs on this foreign soil” [author’s translation] (Cavling 1897). In fact, the Grundtvigians saw cultural prac-

2 Blair Historic Preservation Alliance: <http://www.blairhistory.com/landmarks/dana/>, accessed on April 8th 2016.

tice and belonging as a precondition for religious acquisition (Bredmose Simonsen 1990). Moreover, as the Danish-American priest and historian, Enok Mortensen states: “In contrast to the pietistic attitude that life here is merely a preparation for eternity, Grundtvig believed that man’s entire earthly life was a God-given gift with value in itself” (Mortensen 1952). Consequently, folk dancing, singing and celebrating have been part of the Tyler lifestyle for more than a century. Grundtvig’s key learnings, captured in sentences such as “human before Christian”, “enlightenment” and “life-long learning” are still remembered and appreciated in Tyler today.

In time, a number of institutions and organisations took an interest in preserving the Danish American history and culture for coming generations. The *Danish Brotherhood* and *The Danish Sisterhood* were formed in 1882 and 1883 with the aims of preserving and strengthening the Danish heritage. These organisations still function today. Similar to e.g. The *Rebild Society*, founded in 1912 and more recently established *Danish-American Heritage Society*, founded in 1977, they have members throughout the US. In 1982, the *Danish Immigrant Museum* (now the *Museum of Danish America*) was founded in Elk Horn, Iowa. Archives in Blair, Nebraska, and at Grand View, Iowa preserve documents of relevance to the Danish immigrant history. Whereas the former devotes most of its efforts to preserving the pietistic heritage, the latter focuses on the Grundtvigian heritage. The archives are highly dependent on donations and voluntary work. A number of Danish and Scandinavian newspapers founded in the late 19th century, some which are still printed to this day, have also played vital roles in preserving the Danish communities.

The Danish spaces which had thus formed in Chicago, Blair and Tyler in the late 19th century were vulnerable, however. The interviews revealed the means which had historically been used to safeguard these Danish spaces, strengthening them from the inside – and keeping ‘others’ out. Analysis of the interviews revealed three safeguarding mechanisms: 1) *safeguarding the Danish places through continuous practise*, 2) *safeguarding Danishness through resistance to intermarriage* and 3) *safeguarding Danishness through preference for - and (pro)clamation of a Danish identity*. The mechanisms will be outlined here.

Safeguarding the Danish places through continuous practise

Danish *practise* can in a Certeau-inspired sense be understood as the naming, display and performance of it. A continuous practise of Danishness

can be viewed as a way of safeguarding it, since it is a way of continuously insisting on the ethnic 'us' and keeping that 'us' alive. As Kayser Nielsen (2005) argues, the abstract *imagined* community is strengthened and survives through *practical* bodily activities and sensual experiences. These activities and experiences clarify what constitutes the Danish community by consistently identifying it; they show community members and others 'what we are', for instance by displaying things which signal Danishness. Such signals might include, for example the Danish flag. Similarly, the talk of what *Danes* are like and what is Danish or the performance of what is considered 'Danish actions', also tell a story of 'what we are not' and thus serve to mark 'the other'. Passing on this practice to future generations can be viewed as a way of keeping the Danishness alive and of safeguarding it from disappearance into a general ethnic mix.

The extent to which Danishness has historically been safeguarded through its practice (by naming, displaying and performing it), has varied in the three Danish spaces. It is in Tyler that Danishness seems to have been most continuously practised for generations. Here, the display of what is by inhabitants considered 'Danish' is extensive: On the way into town is a sign that says *Welcome to Tyler, Home of the Nissemaend*. 'Nissemaend' are small Danish Christmas elves. On the sign there is also a small 'nissemand' holding a Danish flag. The folk school is full of Danish symbols; for example, there is a bench on the lawn painted as the Danish flag and there is a museum with folk dance costumes. Folk dancing has been part of the Tyler lifestyle for decades and it is sometimes performed at the folk school or in the church building itself. The dormitory rooms in the folk school building have been given Danish names. In Tyler, one of the annual highpoints is the *Christmas party* with Danish dancing-around-the-tree traditions. Another is *Æbleskiver Days*. 'Æbleskiver' are Danish pastries and the town celebrates every July its Danish roots with a parade and the sale and consumption of plenty of æbleskiver. Danebod also hosts week-long family camps.

In Tyler, Danish culture is strongly connected to the church. This is illustrated by the fact that Tyler inhabitants use the name 'Danebod' to refer to both the church and the folk school – as if the two were a natural, symbiotic entity. Today, a few elderly respondents remember some Danish songs they learned as children. Some of them occasionally meet to converse in Danish. Most young people, however, do not join in.

A Tyler family story:

Anne is a 29-year old preschool teacher and a 5th generation immigrant. Anne grew up on the family farm just outside Tyler – the farm which her great great grandparents homesteaded in the late 19th century. Her father thus grew up on this farm too, as did her grandmother. In 1991 the farm had its 100th anniversary, which was celebrated with a large family gathering. While Anne was growing up, her mother was a ‘stay-at-home mom’ for some years, just as her grandmother and great grandmother had been before her. Anne’s grandparents had moved into town when her parents took over the farm, and thus the children had kept a strong relationship to their grandparents too. Her father now runs the family farm, but he will possibly be the last generation to do so. Anne and her family love gatherings with friends in the small town, and they participate in all the annual Tyler events. Anne and her sister also help teach Sunday school at Danebod after church on Sundays. As they were taught to folk dance themselves as children, they now teach other children how to folk dance during family camps at the folk school.

Though neither Anne nor her father speak any Danish, the family keeps many Danish traditions alive; for example her father still makes Danish ‘rullepølse’ (sausage) and rye bread. Anne says: “We were raised going to Bedstemor’s and Bedstefar’s (Grandma’s and Grandpa’s) all the time more than just for holidays and that sort of thing and.. we try to do that now. We have traditions that we do for Christmas that are .. the most important probably being dancing around the Christmas tree. We hide the nut in the rice pudding (...) for the ‘mandelgaw’ (Christmas present), as we call it. We .. [turns to her son in the room] give you advent boxes.. (...) and lights, we decorate everything with lights... (...) and at Easter we hide Easter eggs .. (...) and... [turns to her son again] what do we eat here every Sunday? Son: “pizza!” Anne: “heh, yeah and *ableskivers*. We have that a lot here.”

In Tyler’s neighbouring town Marshall, I talk to Anne’s aunt who also grew up on the family farm. Rose, a 64-year-old retired teacher, spent the past 38 years of her life in Tyler but recently moved to Marshall to be closer to her son and three grandchildren. In Marshall there is a college and better job opportunities for young people with a college degree. These days, young people from Tyler tend to pursue a college degree and move to bigger cities instead of continuing with the family farms around the small town of Tyler. Her son and daughter-in-law now joined a church in Marshall, but Rose and her husband keep going to Danebod on Sundays.

It seems remarkable that Tyler inhabitants have kept their Danish heritage alive to such great extent and for more than a century. As with Anne and Rose, talk of Danishness and ‘being a Dane’ constituted a large part of the life story accounts in Tyler. ‘Being Danish’ is thus still part of many people’s self-perception and hence of their everyday lives and practises. As Anne’s account of her life story reflects, the close family relationships in Tyler have resulted in the strong transmission of capital and values through generations, evident for example in the same gendered work patterns and the persistent practice of Danish traditions. Anne and her sister are thus

still involved in keeping the family heritage alive, and Anne is clearly attempting to pass it on to her son too. Both Rose and Anne realise that the Danishness of Tyler is dwindling, however. Anne herself is now working part-time, and many young people – such as Rose’s son – are continuing already established lines of intermarriage and moving to better job opportunities in larger cities. Although Anne and her sister help teach folk dancing, it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract voluntary youth to assist at cultural events. Rose follows the process sadly. Moving to Marshall was an extremely difficult decision for her. For as long as she can remember her life has revolved around Danebod.

A similar practice of Danishness is found in small places in Chicago. For example, *The Danish Home of Chicago* was founded in 1891 as a Danish old-peoples-home. It has now for over a century provided surroundings for Danish-Americans at the end of their lives. As elderly Danish-Americans reside here, volunteers meet to work for the maintenance of their cultural heritage.

‘The Home’ continues to be a place where what is considered ‘Danishness’ is named, displayed and performed. Residents have Danish food and drinks, and occasionally they sing Danish songs. Pictures of the Danish royal family hang on walls, side by side with Danish landscape images, blue Christmas plates and Danish flags. Occasionally, Danish ‘smørrebrød’ (open-faced sandwiches), akvavit and Carlsberg (Danish brandy and beer) are served for lunch. Although Danishness is still practised at The Danish Home, it mostly engages people in their 60s and upwards.

The Danish spaces of Chicago are today reduced to just a few. The Danish Home is becoming less and less Danish too, which is illustrated in an interview with 96-year old Mary. She is a 1. generation immigrant and current resident of the home. Mary used to attend the Danish Lutheran church and lived on Chicago’s South Side. Mary explains: “The backbone of this place is still Danish immigrants families. Like us, you know.” Her 94-year-old little sister, Olga continues: “Initially you had to be of Danish background to get in here. But they weren’t getting enough people. And they can’t run the home if there aren’t enough people. So that’s.. now we have a mixture of everything.” Mary adds: “Besides, the doorman says you can’t do that. You can’t keep anybody out.” Even though Mary clearly does not clearly comprehend *why*, the rules decree that the community cannot continue to safeguard the Danish space against other ethnicities, even though the two sisters might feel that these other ethnicities are intruding in a space which they cherish. Moreover, the fact that the leaders of Danish Home “weren’t

getting enough people” is evidence of the assimilation of the Danes in Chicago.

Danishness is still present in the Nebraskan town of Blair, though both the naming, display and performance of Danishness all seem more extensive in ‘happy Dane’ Tyler and at the Danish Home in Chicago. There is no longer much that is Danish about the abandoned premises of Dana College in Blair, except for a *Welcome to Dana-* sign with a Danish flag on it. Generally, although Blair still has a substantial number of citizens with Danish roots, the absence of Danishness on display in town is remarkable. Not even the appearance of the archive exhibits Danishness. Here, the talk of Danishness, the engagement with Danish-American history and attempts to preserve the Dana college history, seem to be the final attempt to save the Danishness of the town.

A Blair family story:

In Blair, I meet 70-year-old Carl. To large extent, Carl’s account of his life story is characterised by his relation to religion.

Three out of four of Carl’s grandparents were born in Denmark, but all four of them were, as he says, “100 percent Danes”. His grandfather, for example, came to the Danish settlement of Alberta, Canada from the western part of Jutland in Denmark in 1902 to take homestead and to farm.

As Carl’s uncle took over the family farm in Alberta, Carl’s father, Axel, went to the USA in 1932 to go to Dana College and become a minister in the Lutheran church. Around this time Axel met Carl’s mother; she was raised in Iowa and went to Dana College for some years too.

Carl was born in a small Danish settlement in Michigan where his father was a pastor. His parents were strong in faith and belonged to the inner mission church. Religion became *the* important part of Carl’s somewhat strict Christian upbringing. Carl remembers: “My father was a pastor of two different churches and we had to be two different places on Sunday morning. So when I was about three years old, I couldn’t have been more than that.. my parents decided that it was simpler just to drop me off at the one church when they went off to the other church.. then they came back.. and.. I was just free to wander in and about the church, nobody else there initially and ..they just had the kind of trust that that’s gonna be OK – he’s only three years old, but he’s gonna be in the church building..”

When Carl was about to start college, the family returned to Blair and Carl followed the Danish family tradition by attending Dana college. “Dana College was, I guess, a time of both intellectual and emotional change, and so that naïve, Sunday-school theology just disappeared,” Carl explains. Here he started to question his childhood religion and make out his own notions of what made sense in the world. To some extent during this time, Carl also broke with the Danish tradition. He did not wish to learn the Danish language – he wanted to be an American. Today, Carl is passionately interested in Buddhism and meditates regularly. His interest in his Danish roots has

re-emerged. He and his wife, Charlene, whose ethnic background is part English, are now volunteers at the Danish-American archive in town. Carl knows a few sentences in Danish, and his two sons were partly given Danish names.

I used Skype to contact both of Carl's sons, Jim and Daniel. Jim is a university philosophy teacher in his late 30s and he now lives in Minneapolis. In contrast to his brother, Jim mentions no word of his Danish background throughout his account of his life story. Moreover, unlike his grandfather, Jim is not religious: "I was raised attending the Lutheran church. But my parents were always very open about religious questions (...) they raised us with an awareness of the Lutheran religion but also with awareness of Buddhism and Hinduism (...) I don't picture myself as religious at all."

Generally speaking in Blair, the relatively little reference to any current practice of Danish culture was noteworthy. However, as many were affiliated with the archive, respondents would all know some of their genealogy and proclaim their Danish roots. Instead of descriptions of belonging to a Danish community, descriptions of work life or of the relationship to religion, for example, dominated many life story accounts. Others would organise their life stories in terms of the different places they had lives in the USA, as many had – in contrast to Tyler – travelled widely.

In Blair, Danishness seemed closely connected to the Lutheran church, but the practice of Danish culture was limited. It remains uncertain whether Carl's teenage break with his Danish background was a reaction to his somewhat strict, Danish-style childhood religion or if it was, in fact, more a reflection of a wish to assimilate. Nevertheless, Carl's very open approach to religious questions has been passed on to his children. In contrast to Tyler's Danes, moreover, not even the older generation of Blair respondents - pictured their lives and identity in terms of a core of Danishness. In contrast to Tyler in particular, no one seemed to grieve the fact that youngsters were losing touch with their Danish background; it seems to have already been largely lost in older generations.

Safeguarding Danishness through resistance of intermarriage

Previous research has shown that Danes preferred to marry Danes or other Scandinavians until well into the 20th century (Lovoll 1991). The interviews on which this paper is based, however, reveal the measures taken to safeguard the Danish spaces against the 'intrusion' of other ethnicities. These measures are most clearly evident in accounts of how 'forbidden love' be-

tween young Danes and other ethnicities has led to quarrels, mockery or even the break-up of families. In some cases, such as in the Chicago family history outlined below, parents react strongly upon their children's out-marriage.

A Chicago family story:

At an old people's home in Chicago, I meet 88-year old Ellinora. In anticipating my visit, Ellinora has bought Danish beer for us and put on a sweatshirt emblazoned with the word "Danish"; she has looked forward to the chance of practising her Danish tongue. "Skåååål!" (cheers), she cheerfully utters and, while sometimes bursting into Danish song, she tells her life story – mostly in Danish:

Ellinora's parents came to Chicago from Denmark in the mid-1920s, when Ellinora's mother was expecting her. Her parents kept a very Danish home; her father insisted that the children speak Danish at home. He had been president of the Dania association in Chicago, and the family were also members of a Danish Lutheran church. As her parents kept close contact with other Danes, Ellinora grew up in the Danish spaces of Chicago. She was later sent to the Danish Grundtvigian college, *Grand View*, in Des Moines, Iowa. After that she worked for a few years before eventually marrying, adopting two children and becoming a housewife.

Ellinora maintained some Danish tradition in her own home too and her daughter knows a few Danish sentences. Ellinora's pride in her Danish ancestry and gratitude for it are evident: "I love Danish open-faced sandwiches, a beer and a brandy. I don't know if I have anything very important to tell you, but... I am proud of being a Dane. Because... there is not a country alike where people are so well taken care of. They don't have to be worried of getting old, you know, like here... (...) in Denmark you are more looked after" [author's translation]. Born and bred in a very Danish home, Ellinora has clearly learned how to distinguish between Danish and other ethnicities. She continues: "It [Denmark] also has the reputation of being a very happy nation. And the Danes are wise and have a sense of humour. That's the best part. The Swedish don't have the same. They are more serious people."

Ellinora's nephew, Etler, is 69 and he provides a slightly more detailed overview of the family history. Ellinora's father, Albert, had been quite a man of the world; he had come to Chicago as an apprentice carpenter and had made good money building bungalows. Later he also became a successful banker for city workers. His loyalty towards the Danish community went so far that he cut off all contact to his son (Etler's father and Ellinora's brother) when the son married a German woman. They re-established the contact again later on, however, but the relationship stayed tense.

As Etler's father had been brought up Lutheran and his mother Catholic, religion did not play a major role in Etler's own upbringing. His Danish heritage is somewhat important to him, though – he has travelled to Denmark a few times and loves to bike – something he connects to his part-Danishness. But, as he states, "I don't consider myself a Dane". Having married a woman of Italian descent, he has not kept any Danish traditions in his home, except his children receive a blue Danish Christmas plate to hang on the wall each year.

His three children grew up in culturally and ethnically mixed neighbourhoods of Chicago. They do not carry Danish names, and they speak no Danish whatsoever. His

daughter, Lily, is a 30-year-old physical therapist who will presumably soon marry her Philippine boyfriend. Lily says: “I don’t feel like being Danish necessarily defines me (...) I mean, there’s definitely little bits of the Danish culture that pop up in my life and that I find nice but ultimately there’s so much more that I think has been assimilated through interacting with people who aren’t Danish...”

The family history indicates how the acculturation process in Chicago has moved from generation to generation. As she uses the word “assimilated” herself, Lily is aware that she is the product of the influence of many ethnic cultures, both infused in her through a mixed family background and the mixed environments in which she grew up. Whereas her great grandfather thus protested strongly when her grandfather married a girl of German descent, her grandfather had not protested when her father married her mother who has Italian roots. Moreover, Lily’s narration of her own forthcoming marriage to her Philippine boyfriend seems unproblematic too. Judging from other stories, however, great-grandfather Albert was seemingly not alone in rejecting his own child due to a forbidden, other-ethnic love.

Sometimes, interviews also reveal that parents set up meetings between young Danes. 81-year-old Rita, whom I meet in Chicago, and whose grandparents were all born in Denmark, met her husband at *Dania*, the large Danish club of which Ellinora’s father had been president. She explains that, as *Dania* was exclusive, the only reason Rita got in was through an arrangement made by her mother and the mother of her friend, Anna. Supposedly the two mothers had conspired to have their daughters married to some of the well-off young, Danish men in Chicago. Rita explains: “My mother went to the [Danish] doctor and she met Anna Hansen’s mother and they were talking (...) and she says ‘Oh Anna go to the junior league at *Dania* – there’s a bunch of young Danes’, and .. you know, Anna is single too, she says ‘There are a lot of young men there – Rita should go!’ .. and I went with an American at the time (...) his background was German and he still thought Germany should have won during the war. And we would argue, so I dropped him and so my mother said ‘Well, Rita’s not dating anybody’ and so Mrs. Hansen said I should come! So I went there and met Anna and joined the junior league [of *Dania*].”

Interestingly, Rita explains that her own mother had probably had an affair with an Indian man as a young woman. Rita’s account of the family mockery and her mother’s silence indicate that this relationship had not,

however, been accepted by the mother's family. Yet, the issue of ethnicity also becomes important to Rita's mother when Rita reaches the dating age. For Rita's own part, it seems that the European enmity between Denmark and Germany had been transferred to the American continent; she did not wish to marry a man with German roots who still supported Hitler. A story similar to Chicago's 'forbidden lovestories' surfaces in an interview in Tyler. In Blair, however, there were no stories of 'forbidden, other-ethnic love' and consequent quarrels between any of the generations.

Hence, a way to safeguard Danishness was to have young people find Danish spouses in clubs for young Danes. Young people's groups, such as Dania's junior league, was also promoted by the Danish church. In Chicago, for example, Rita was also a member of the *Luther League*. In Tyler, the 4H's club (Head, heart, hands, help) has helped rural youth to learn farming and home-making skills for generations. Like Chicago's Junior and Luther leagues, according to a respondent, this youth club was also a wonderful 'match-making' club. Many marriages resulted from youth get-togethers there. Additionally, young Danes could meet through Danish schools. In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, many young people from both Chicago and Tyler, like Ellinora, went to the Danish Grundvigian *Grand View College* in Des Moines, Iowa. In Blair, Grand View's inner mission counterpart *Dana College* was also an option. Though none of the respondents from Chicago or Tyler, nor their ancestors, had gone to Dana College, many in Blair had found their life companions there. With Dana no longer being an option, however, a respondent in Tyler also noted that youth today choose other colleges than Grand View. The interviews indicate, therefore, that safeguarding Danishness through encouragement of mono-ethnic marriage and resistance to intermarriage is a strategy that belongs to the past. Today, late-generation Danes in all three spaces seem to choose their other-ethnic spouse without any regret or disapproval from their Danish-American families.

Preferring and (pro)claiming a Danish identity

One could also argue that Danishness is safeguarded through being (pro) claimed and preferred in cases of more 'ethnic options'. The *naming* of Danishness and talk of 'being a Dane' was always described positively by respondents. Typically, 'the Dane' would be characterised as a stout, reliable, good-hearted, religious, hard-working person. In Chicago, 'the Dane' would to greater extent be seen in terms of the successful businessman, like

Ellinora's father, Albert, for example. Moreover, with stories describing the Danes as 'the happiest people in the world' and Denmark as a place with a welfare system of solidarity and world-leading sustainability and green energy, the absence of more negative stories was remarkable.

As was the case with Ellinora, who proudly put on her Danish sweatshirt and talked of Denmark as a nation of happy people, many expressed sincere pride in their Danish heritage. Indeed, many would care for whether they were 100 percent Danish or not. If they were not, then some would only if asked directly 'remember' that their ethnic background was, in fact, mixed. Similarly, most respondents would not hesitate to proclaim their Danish background to the interviewer. It seems plausible that such prideful proclamations could be biased by the interactional circumstances of the interview, in particular by the fact that the interviewer was white, Danish and held a very Danish surname. However, the fact that this 'narrative of the Dane' appeared so fixed and established indicates that preferring and proclaiming one's Danish roots was also common in other daily social encounters. The fixed 'narrative of the Dane' was however more pronounced in Tyler and Chicago than it was in Blair.

In the interviews, moreover, it was apparent that some spouses had adopted the Danish culture even though they are not of Danish origin themselves. Carl's wife Charlene, for example, is involved in Danish history at the archive in Blair even though her own background is part English. In Tyler, moreover, 70-year-old Dennis Nielsen explained that even though he and his siblings had married spouses of Irish and German descent, the Danish culture had prevailed and had largely been adopted by their spouses. This phenomenon has been referred to as *affiliative* ethnicity (Jimenez 2010).

Recent research has examined the historical placement of Scandinavians within American ethnic hierarchies (e.g. Blanck 2014, Brøndal 2014). Jacobson (1998) shows how Scandinavians at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century aspired to become part of an advantageous Anglo-Saxon heritage and succeeded in placing themselves in favourable positions in America's hierarchy of whiteness. Mary Waters (1990) analyses the identities of later-generation white immigrants to America. She states that the extent to which ethnicity is removed from discrimination and prejudice impacts how ethnicity evolves over generations. The number of people of mixed background tends to increase in later generations, and for them, the more salient one ethnicity appears to the individual, the more it will

be the preferred or chosen option. In other words, the more prestigious or popular an ethnic identity is, the more people will tend to claim that ethnicity. Moreover, as Alba (1990) notes that ethnic identity can be a type of cultural capital, one could also argue that its popularity could relate to what has been termed 'status passage'; the passage and access to certain structures and privileges due to the status of the (pro)claimed ethnicity (Glaser and Strauss 1990).

Taking Jacobson's research into account, one could thus suspect that proclaiming a Danish ethnic identity thus becomes related to anticipated passage and prestige – and perhaps, as Taylor (1992) would say, to recognition. Such outcomes could hence motivate the preference and (pro)clamation of Danishness. Thus, it could result in its safeguarding.

Concluding discussion

In analysing the life story interviews of people of Danish descent in some selected Danish spaces in the USA, three mechanisms of ethnic safeguarding have been identified and analysed. 'Safeguarding' has thus been evident where 'Danishness' has been practiced, preferred and (pro)claimed within these Danish spaces, and where 'othering' and keeping others out has served to strengthen and preserve collective Danish identity.

The analysis points to a variation in the extent to which Danishness has historically been safeguarded in the three spaces. As argued above, although both are small, rural settlements, the safeguarding of Danishness seems historically to have been much more extensive in "happy Dane" Tyler than in "holy Dane" Blair. In Tyler, Danishness continues to constitute a large part of people's self-perception, which manifests itself in the practice of Danish culture and the celebration of heritage. Here, the transmission of both cultural and religious values has been strong throughout generations. Only in Tyler did respondents, like Rose, become emotional when speaking of their Danish community; a sign, presumably, of a sincerely deep-felt belonging and perhaps a grief that the Danish community now appears to be dwindling. This presented a contrast to life stories in Blair.

The different acculturation processes in Tyler and Blair lead to speculations about the church's impact on processes of ethnic safeguarding. It seems a paradox that Danish-Americans in the rather conservative, inner mission environment of Blair appear to have historically safeguarded their Danishness to a lesser extent than the Danish-Americans in the more lib-

eral, Grundtvigian Tyler. However, whereas the Grundtvigian church has traditionally been highly supportive of *cultural* belonging and practice as a precondition for religious acquisition, the pietists weighed the community with other *Christian* ‘brothers and sisters’. Paradoxically, therefore, the inner mission church encouraged assimilation. There are thus indications that the 1984 dispute in the Danish church in America reverberated through the generations and has continued to impact the level to which Danishness has been safeguarded in these two spaces to this very day.

It is moreover noteworthy that even in a large multicultural city like Chicago, Danishness seems to have been safeguarded in small places to a larger extent than in Blair. This could however also be due to the more liberal church here, “allowing” its congregation to practise and preserve their Danish heritage. Overall, however, the interviews indicate that through engagement with other ethnicities and through intermarriage the large Danish communities of Chicago have gradually vanished, leaving only small spaces such as the Danish Home of Chicago. However, as Mary and Olga noted, even this is becoming a “mix of everything”.

On the overall, though many later-generation respondents thus did indeed both practise and (pro)claim their Danishness – perhaps due to the anticipated status, passage or recognition of this particular ethnic option, Danish belonging still seemed to be dwindling among the most recent generation. The fact that young people were altogether difficult to get in contact with bears witness to the fact that even among families who have safeguarded Danishness the longest, the number of young members who consider it a constitutive part of their identities is decreasing. As we see with Jim and Lily, for example, and with Rose’s children in Marshall, young family members, some with a family history of interethnic marriage, increasingly lose track of language, traditions and cultural awareness as they intermarry themselves, move away from the Danish spaces and engage with others. As Gans (2015) claims, “many and perhaps most [late-generation European immigrants] are the product of several generations of ethnic intermarriage; have little memory, if any, of their immigrant origins; and have not made any use of the ethnic social structures and cultures of their ancestors.” Thus, as with Lily whose father and grandfather both intermarried, the multiple ethnic options among late-generation immigrants may make simpler to choose none (Gans 2014). Ultimately, therefore, what remains is what Gans terms symbolic ethnicity, and thus ethnicity in the final stages of acculturation where it is reduced to its symbols (Gans 1979). For Lily, what remains

of 'Danishness' in her life are some nostalgic family stories and the blue Christmas plates which she hangs on her wall.

Alba (1990) and Gans (2015) argue that late-generation European ethnicity in America is coming to an end. Correspondingly, it appears that even in these spaces where Danishness has seemingly been safeguarded and survived the longest, it is now dwindling. Hence, as towns, families, schools, churches and 'homes' become increasingly mixed, what seem to remain are 'museums' and 'archives', both personal, institutional and organisational.

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