

On the shores of Little Butternut Lake, an enduring tradition of Danish Folk Camp

West Denmark's annual Family Camp is a mini "school for life"

by Joe Bjordal

Luck, Wisconsin—For three days each summer, members, friends, and supporters of West Denmark Lutheran Church, a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in rural north-west Wisconsin, welcome people from the area and around the country to its annual Family Camp. This year the camp celebrated its 47th anniversary with over 100 people of all ages participating.

The mission of the camp is based on a concept envisioned and espoused by N. F. S. Grundtvig, the 19th-century Danish theologian, politician, and social innovator. (Grundtvig, also a prolific hymnwriter, is commemorated on the ELCA Calendar of Saints on September 2 as a renewer of the church.)

Grundtvig created the concept of a folk school or "school for life" with a curriculum focused on personal development and community engagement. According to the Folk Education Association of America, Grundtvig's educational philosophy sought to "connect heart, hands and mind through oral dialog, communal singing, and community engagement." Dozens of residential folk schools were started in Denmark in the mid-19th century. Today, in the United States, several summer folk camps carry on the tradition, including Danebod, started in 1948 by the congregation of the same name in Tyler, Minnesota, and Skovsøen, at the Concordia College Language Villages in Bemidji, Minnesota.

Continuing the folk school legacy

The program at West Denmark's 2025 Family Camp, held July 1-3, reflected Grundtvig's folk school vision—as it has done for nearly 50 years—through a variety of offerings for adults, teens and young children.

Educational sessions included a conversation with immigration attorney Anne Carlson of Minneapolis; personal stories of peacemaking and earth stewardship by 89-year-old West Denmark member Al Zook; and a unique story-telling experience which invited campers to share a one-minute story, facilitated by Lisa Kramme of Midland University in Nebraska.

Craft learning included nalbinding—an ancient, Nordic method of knotting yarn to make tough garments, taught by Christy Wetzig; rock balancing, taught by Peter Juhl; carving traditional Finnish wooden cups (kuksa), taught by Kevin Bevis; and the basics of solar electricity, taught by Kris Schmid.

A unique "craft activity" at this year's camp was the deconstruction of the congregation's old pipe organ for recycling. West Denmark's new digital pipe organ was showcased in an inaugural recital by parish organist Chuck Parsons.

The days were interwoven with communal experiences including singing, folk dancing, meals (overseen by head cooks Barb Kass and Mike Miles) and, of course, coffee breaks.

Hospitality is the key

The congregation's interim pastor, the Rev. Shawn Mai, said that a lot of warmth and hospitality make the camp successful and enjoyable.

"It's like a family reunion," said Mai. "And there are also people whom you have never met but instantly feel like family."

"In a time when people are hungering for community and connection, the camp brings the Grundtvig philosophy and theology forward around nature, music, culture, dancing, and hospitality."

Congregation president Terry Speiker said that hospitality is something the congregation's members and friends know how to do up right and that it draws people from all over the country to events on the West Denmark campus.

As an example, this year's annual Aebleskiver Dinner, held each May, drew 250 guests to partake of the ball-shaped Danish pancakes, cooked and served by no less than 50 volunteers.

"I think a lot of what makes this place endure is the spirit of the Danish people who founded it over 150 years ago," said Speiker.

"There is a real connection with history and a connection with people's families. You'll hear people say, 'Oh, that's my cousin there or that's my cousin over there.' We have people come from all over for events here because, somehow or another, they're related—literally related to this area."

Enduring tradition; enduring memories

For some West Denmark families, the annual camp is a longstanding tradition. Indeed, five people at this year's Family Camp were there at the beginning—47 years ago.

Selma Christiansen brought her three young daughters to the first camp back in 1978. They've been coming ever since.

"I think we had a good leader at the time in Pastor Paul Anderson, who got really swept up in the idea of the folk camp," said Christiansen.

She explained that Andersen got the idea for Family Camp by experiencing another Danish folk camp in Tyler, Minnesota.

"He came back with the idea that we could do that here, on a smaller scale, and we did. He cooked breakfast in the morning and led dancing until all hours of the night. He just had boundless energy and I think the success of this has a lot to do with him"

Her daughters are now passing on their longstanding camp experiences to their children.

For daughter Betty Christiansen it's all about the music.

“It’s the folk music we all grew up singing even before family camp began. We’ve just come to love singing the same songs year after year. A lot of us know them by heart. We’ve learned parts to them. It’s something we are so glad to be able to pass onto our kids,” she said.

“And they are touchstones, too. You hear those songs, and you are immediately sent back to a specific time and place where there is love and joy and creativity.”

Daughter Gwen Sarya said learning brings everyone together.

“It’s the Danish idea of a folk school or school for life with discussions that bring the whole community together. And then you add in the folk dancing and the folk songs and the Danish meals and it just brings everyone along for the ride,” she said.

Daughter Sue Christiansen said the camp speaks to the power of intergenerational community.

“This is a place that is a safe haven where people of every type can come together and be themselves and enjoy each other’s company. There’s something for everybody,” she said.

“I think of when I was a child, I got way into the singing and folk dancing—the lectures not as much. But now, as an adult, I’m still into the singing; not so much the dancing; and I love the lectures.”

Peace and healing

Elizabeth Anderson, who was also there in the beginning and now serves on the planning committee, says the camp is an integral part of her year.

“I remember the very first year and not knowing if this was going to go or not because it was a big leap of faith. And now it has just mushroomed,” she said.

“It’s the concept of life-long learning—from the elderly down to babies. Everybody gets along great. You can take part in as much or as little as you want. It’s just a place to be peaceful. Especially in the present time, it’s a place of healing.”

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