

From Skjødt to Scott: The Story of a Danish Family's Migration to the United States

Ole Melkersen, Elinor Hagen and Erica Hagen

“Scotts” and their descendants live in the United States because “Skjødts” in Denmark left their homes, country, family and friends, took the long, uncomfortable voyage across the ocean and resettled in a new country with a strange new culture and language.

Initially, two of Hans Peter Frederiksen Skjødt and Else Petersen's eight children emigrated from Denmark to the United States at the beginning of the 20th Century. We are not yet sure exactly when Mary Skjødt Nielsen and Petra Thora Bach (Dora) first arrived in the U.S. Mary married a man named Nielsen in 1906 and their son, Andre (Andy) was born in Denmark on June 14, 1909. Mary said that her husband abandoned her right after Andy was born. Mary was 26. Petra Thora Skjødt married Carl Bach in 1908; Carl, a handsome, charming man, had a butcher shop in Tyregod. Their first boy, Carlo Cody, was born in Denmark on November 25, 1910. Elinor Scott Hagen remembers being told by her father, Walter, that Mary, Dora and Carl immigrated to the United States together and that by 1912, Carl and Dora had a farm outside of Schaller Iowa. **

According to the family history, in 1912, Mary and Dora visited their parents in Denmark, taking their little boys with them. The ship took almost 2 weeks to go from New York to Copenhagen, two weeks of rolling and rocking, with both women constantly seasick. At 3 years of age, Andy was full of mischief and too difficult for two sick women to care for properly. When Mary and Dora finally arrived at their parents' house, they begged their youngest brother, Thorvald Valdemar (Walter), to come back with them on the ship so he could watch out for Andy. Valdemar reluctantly agreed and became the third member of that generation to come to the United States.

The ship manifest of the HELLIG OLAV shows *Thorvald Skjødt, Mary Nielsen and Andrew Nielsen* arriving in New York at Ellis Island on May 29, 1912, 10 days short of Valdemar's 20th birthday. Petra Thora Bach was not on the ship manifest. It had been quite an adventure for Valdemar. On the ship, he had a grand time, drinking and gambling. But in the midst of the fun, while he was drunk, he had his papers stolen that showed he was a master baker, and little Andy almost fell out of a porthole. Valdemar arrived in a new country without a word of English and no proof of his 3-year apprenticeship as a baker. The ship manifest said that Mary and Valdemar's nearest relative was Robert Nielsen, Mary's brother-in-law, in Schaller, Iowa. Valdemar later told his daughter Elinor that he went to work for Carl Bach on his farm. It was not an easy life.

Many migrants were leaving Scandinavia and other parts of Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. Like much of nineteenth-century Europe, Denmark experienced a steep rise in population. Better nutrition and medical care had produced a sharp decline in infant mortality, and Denmark's population rose from approximately 900,000 in 1800 to over 2,500,000 by 1910. Denmark's economy was unable to absorb much of this increase, and the result was the rise of restless and dissatisfied people, longing for a better life. The United States was an attractive destination because immigrants could use the Homestead Act or other generous land policies to become farmers in the United States. Emigration agents, often employed by steamship companies and American railroads with land to sell, promoted the virtues of America. At the same time, earlier immigrants, lonely for their families, sent a steady stream of letters, and even pre-paid tickets, asking their relatives to join them.

When people migrate to a new country, they usually go where they have relatives, friends or at least other people who speak their language. Many migrants from Scandinavia ended up in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. While Iowa does not have an ocean, early Danish immigrants were drawn to Iowa because, like Denmark, it is extremely flat and has rich, fertile farmland.

Valdemar and Carl Bach did not get along well so, after a while, Valdemar went to work as a hired man for another farmer. Mary met John (Johann) Carstensen who owned a farm between Schaller and Storm Lake, Iowa. Mary and John were married, probably in late 1912 or early 1913, and John adopted Andy, giving him his name. Mary and John were both very hard workers. Elinor's maternal grandparents, George and Melissa Arthur, were always horrified that Mary worked right alongside John, in the fields, doing farm work.

This photo was taken circa 1913 in Iowa. Camilla Jorgensen was a Danish friend of Mary's from Minnesota.



John, Andy & Mary Carstensen

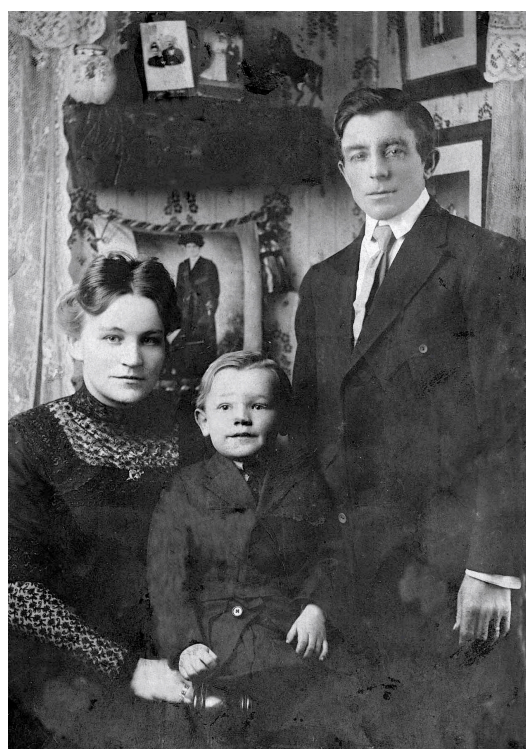


Carl, Dora & Cody Bach

Carl Bach did not like farming – he had been a butcher in Denmark -- so he and Dora sold the farm and moved to Storm Lake, Iowa, a town larger than Schaller. Storm Lake, located in Buena Vista County in northwest Iowa, was incorporated as a city in 1873. It was named for the large lake located just south of the city, also called Storm Lake. The 1910 census counted 2,428 people living in the city. Carl and Dora had two more sons, Clifford and Marvin, but Clifford died in infancy. Eventually Dora and Carl's marriage broke up and Dora, ever practical and resourceful, turned her home into a rooming house. Elinor still often saw her Uncle Carl, whom she loved, around Storm Lake. Whenever Carl saw Elinor, he would give her a candy bar.



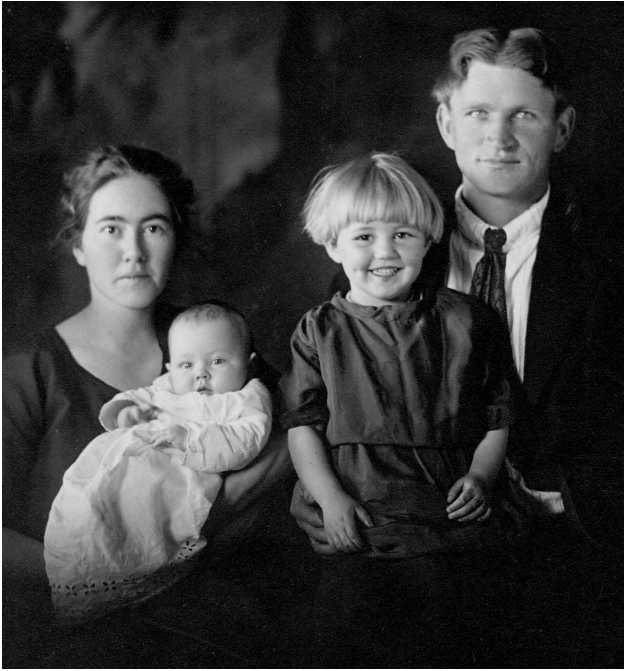
Cody, Carl, Marvin and Dora Bach



Mary, Andy and John Carstensen

Valdemar, by then called Walter, married the lovely, red-haired Myrle Maude Arthur in 1919. In 1921, Walter was able to buy a small farm outside of Truesdale, Iowa. Because Walter had joined the military during World War I (though toward the end of the war, so he did not have to go overseas), he was granted his citizenship in 1923, and he officially changed his name to Walter Scott. The photo below was taken when Walter became a citizen. When Elinor was 9 years old, just before the stock market crash of 1929, Walter borrowed money from Mr. Schaller's bank in Storm Lake, and bought his farm outside of Storm Lake.

Mary and John lived on their farm until Mary developed heart problems. John then sold the farm and they moved into Storm Lake, as well. John and Mary had bought a farm for Andy, but he did not care for farming. He became a police officer and, later, Chief of Police in Storm Lake. Mary, Dora and Walter lived near each other all of their lives and saw each other often. When Walter went into town to do business, he often took Elinor and they would visit one or both of his sisters who would insist on cooking them a meal with homemade cake for dessert. Elinor adored her aunts. Elinor's "Tante Mary" accompanied Elinor and Bill Hagen to the marriage license bureau to vouch for them so they could get their marriage license. After a difficult period of adjustment and the hard times of the depression, all three of these Skjødt siblings were happy with their decision to become Americans.



Walter, Myrtle, Elinor (3) & Elsie, 1923 – Citizenship Photo



Dora Bach, Mary Carstensen & Walter Scott

In 1919, Mary Carstensen took her son, Andy, then 10 years old, to visit her parents and siblings in Denmark. Mary's older sister, Ane Cathrine Skjødt Andersen, the oldest daughter of Hans Peter and Else Skjødt, had two sons, Hans Peter Richard and Arne Anders. Arne was 17 years old. On September 2, 1919, Arne applied to the US Consulate in Copenhagen for a visa to immigrate to the United States, saying that his Aunt Mary Carstensen was visiting and that he was moving to the US with her, sponsored by her husband John Carstensen. Mary and Andy stayed in Denmark over a month, departing with Arne from Copenhagen for Philadelphia on October 18, 1919 on FREDERIK VIII.



Passport photo, Mary and Andy Carstensen, 1919



Mary & Andy Carstensen; Arne Andersen, 1919

Richard Andersen, Arne's older brother, emigrated two years later, sailing on the HELLIG OLAV on April 8, 1921 and arriving at Ellis Island on April 20, 1921. Like Arne, Richard named his sponsor in the United States as his uncle, John Carstensen. Richard arrived just before his 21st birthday.

Arne and Richard must have both left the Carstensen farm for a period of time. Elinor remembers both young men coming to her father when she was a little girl and asking if they could stay and work for him. Walter took them in. However, neither of them wanted to do the terribly hard work required on the farm which included getting up at 4:00 AM to milk the cows, plowing the fields with horses and breaking wild horses brought in from the west.

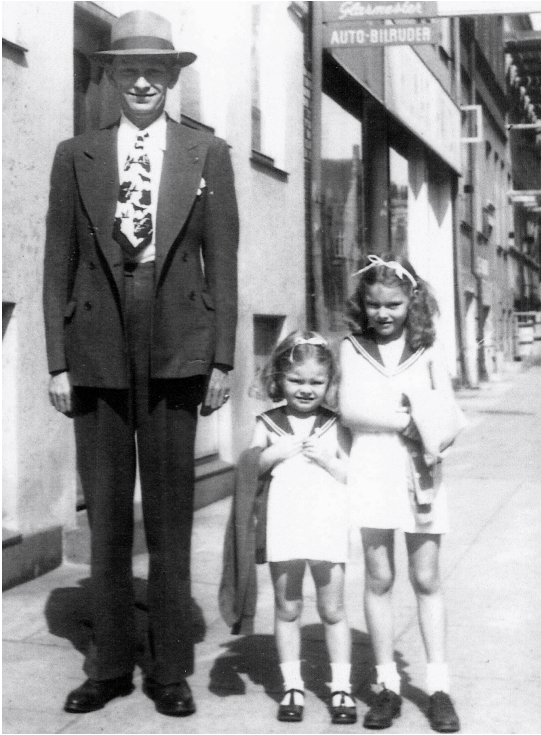


Ike Arthur behind the plow and four horses on Walter Scott's farm.

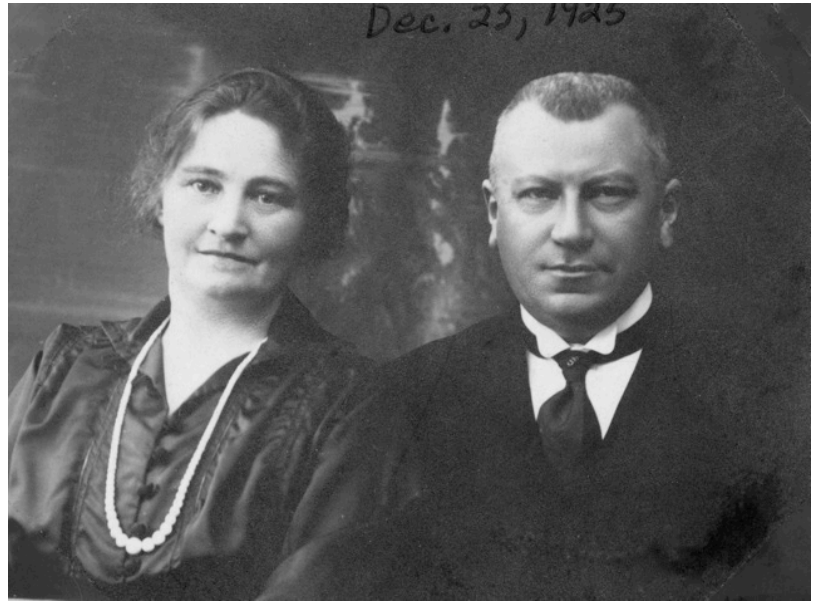
While not suited to farming, Arne took his adventurous spirit and Danish talents to multiple U.S. cities, among them New York City, Pontiac, Michigan, Chicago, and Wichita, Kansas. His entrepreneurial gene manifested itself in owning and managing restaurants. Arne was married 4 times and had 3 children. His first wife, Katerine, died of cancer. His second wife, Dorothy, had 2 daughters, Ann Smith and Sally Seufert.

After his second marriage broke up, Arne took his little girls, ages 8 and 4, to Denmark to visit his parents. The girls had a wonderful time visiting their grandparents. Ann and Sally remember that they liked to drink out of straws and their grandmother did not have any straws. Cathrine applied Danish ingenuity to use long pasta with a hole up the middle as straws so the girls could feel more at home. Arne and the girls returned to the US on the Norwegian ship, STRAVANGERFJORD, in November 1946 and Arne never returned to Denmark. The girls adored their father and appreciated his devotion to them while raising them as a single parent.

In 2014, Ann and Sally found their half-brother, Jerry Andersen, from Arne's third marriage to Shirlie. They had been looking for each other most of their lives and are thrilled to have been united after 65 years.



Arne, Sally & Ann Andersen, Denmark, 1946



Ane Cathrine Skjødt Andersen and Peter Andersen, 1925

Not all of the Skjødt immigrants were happy with their lives in the U.S. A fourth sibling, Marius Skjødt, left Denmark and came to Iowa with his second wife, Dagmar, and their 3 young boys. They landed in New York on July 26, 1926 on the ship, FREDERIK VIII. Elinor was 6 years old. She remembers the day that she and her parents and her younger sister, Elsie, went to meet Uncle Marius at a tiny, country train station. It was summer so the girls were barefooted. The boys, Aksel, Henning and Faultmar, found a shovel and ran after the girls, trying to cut off their toes! Marius opened a bakery in a small Iowa town, but he and Dagmar were never happy. He was 51 years old, no longer young. After one year, they returned to Denmark.



Marius and Dagmar Skjødt, Faultmar, Henning & Aksel

Walter and Myrle had seven children:



Back row: George, Elinor, Elsie, Glen. Front row: Gerald, Myrle, Ellen, Walter and Evelyn Scott, 1942.

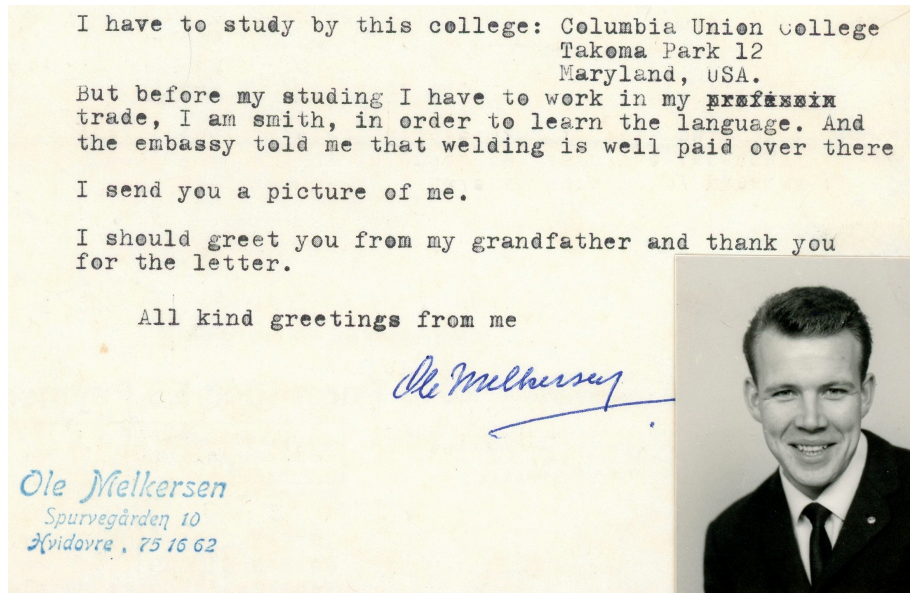


Myrle & Walter Scott, just married, 1919



Myrle & Walter, still in love after all these years

In 1964, at the age of 22, Ole Skjødt Melkersen, inspired by the *Skjødt adventure gene*, obtained a green card from the US embassy in Copenhagen Denmark. Ole is the Grandson of Johan Skjødt, the older brother of Mary, Dora and Walter. Johan Skjødt's oldest daughter, Vivi, was in contact with Elinor, Walter's oldest daughter. This was the only family contact between Denmark and the USA. Ole needed a sponsor in order to emigrate from Denmark to the USA. When he contacted Elinor, she suggested he contact her Dad, Walter, to see if he would be his sponsor. Walter, after his experience with Richard and Arne Andersen, hesitated, but he agreed. Ole arrived in the USA on July 15, 1965 and went directly to Maryland to attend college.



Part of a letter that Ole Melkersen wrote to Walter Scott

In 1968, Ole went to visit Walter and other families in Iowa. Ole discovered that he had a lot of family in the USA and a desire arose to get to know all of the American families and to get them together with the Danish families in one great FAMILY REUNION. Ole was very busy with his steel construction business for many years, so it was not until 1998 that Ole found the time to research, work on and schedule a Skjødt-Scott Family Reunion in Denmark in the year 2000. That Reunion became a reality. Ole took American families all over Denmark, staying in family hostels and being hosted in Danish families' homes for wonderful meals and conversation. Since then, every five years, the Skjødt and Scott families have been getting together, alternating between Denmark and the USA. In 2005, the Skjødt family met in Storm Lake Iowa, even visiting Walter Scott's farm. In 2010, the Scott and Skjødt families met again in Denmark at Ejstrupholm, where it all started. Ejstrupholm is the small town where Hans Peter & Else Frederiksen Skjødt lived and worked, raising eight children. Those children were all taught the values of independence, self-reliance and hard work. The entrepreneurial gene was passed on to many in the Skjødt and Scott families, as many have been and are successful entrepreneurs.

Thanks to Ole, the Skjødt and Scott families have had wonderful opportunities to meet each other and learn about our family history. This year, 2015, thanks to Mark Hafkey, who has organized the Skjødt-Scott family reunion in California, the tradition continues!

** (Family stories told many years after the events are often imprecise. A ship manifest on the OSCAR II shows Carl Bach, age 30, Petra Bach, age 25, and Carl Bach, age 1½ arriving in New York from Copenhagen on June 10, 1913, sponsored by their brother-in-law, John Carstensen. Whether this was their first trip to the US or they were returning home from a visit – which would have been expensive - is unclear. For now, we are sticking with the family story.)