

## A VIKING BOAT ODYSSEY – ET EVENTYR!

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Let me tell you a great story – about a Viking Boat Odyssey!

But let me begin by noting who I am – Carl Sorensen. Many of you who read this will know me. You may know of my interest and involvement in the Danish Canadian National Museum and Gardens in Dickson, Alberta, and that I have been an active member of the Society's Board of Directors for some years. You may also know of my great interest in and affection for Denmark, from which my parents came as immigrants many years ago, and that I have visited Denmark and my family there many times.



The story is therefore not just an account of a Viking Boat coming to the Danish Canadian National Museum and Gardens, but it is also a story which reflects what this “odyssey” has meant and continues to mean to me.

It is truly a personal adventure – et eventyr!

The Danish Canadian National Museum Society is a small organization, not unusually constantly searching for the financial resources to operate and grow, and to fulfill its Mission to tell the story of the Danish Immigrant Experience in Canada. Operational resources are many times the most difficult to obtain, particularly gifts and donations from private individuals and organizations which see it as more “exciting” and tangible to provide funds for projects – “things”. But even major “projects”, even those which would be great to have at the Museum and Gardens, sometimes are on the “wish list” for years until there are funds available for them, or because others are of a higher priority.

But the story of the Viking Boat coming to the Museum in Dickson in 2009 is a story of something which sometimes happens for an organization such as the Museum.

In 1957, Karen and Kresten Sommer and their five children, Tove, Egon, Knud, Olga and Vera, came from Denmark to Canada<sup>1</sup>. They landed as immigrants in Halifax, Nova Scotia on April 25, 1957, entering Canada through Pier 21<sup>2</sup>. In 1959 Karen and Kresten and their family moved to Ponoka, Alberta, and they became Canadian citizens in 1963. Kresten Sommer died in 1992 and Karen Sommer in 2006. In her will, Karen Sommer left a bequest of \$40,000.00 for the Danish Canadian National Museum, to be used “for something special”.

The Museum Board and the Sommer Family together decided that the gift should be used by the Museum to “acquire a Viking boat”.

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the Sommer Family comes from their document, “Immigration Story of Karen and Kresten Sommer & Family 1957-2007”, provided to the Danish Canadian National Museum in 2008. It is included in the 2009 edition of the Federation of Danish Associations in Canada’s [Heritage Book](#).

<sup>2</sup> “Pier 21” in Halifax is Canada’s major museum telling the story of immigration to Canada. The official immigration records of the Sommer family are there.

The Board then started to consider interesting questions: How does one “acquire” a Viking Boat? Does one buy it? Does one build it or have it built? Where? From whom? A Viking Boat for the Museum would obviously be a replica of some sort, but how authentic should it be? The Board researched the possibilities, including having it built by volunteers.

I volunteered that, as I would be in Denmark in the summer of 2007, I would do some research there. In particular, I would go to the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, where there is a magnificent museum, a part of the Danish National Museum, which contains the remains of the five “Skuldelev ships” – Viking boats/ships which in the 1950s and 1960s had been identified and raised from the bottom of Roskilde Fjord where they had lain for some 1,000 years. From their position on the floor of the Fjord, in relatively shallow water near Skuldelev, Denmark, it appears they had been deliberately sunk by Vikings as a barrier to other marauding and invading ship-born Vikings.

The Viking Ship Museum was subsequently built in the 1960s for their display, located in Roskilde, Denmark on the edge of Roskilde Fjord.

Some 20 years later that Museum decided to start building replica Viking Boats and Ships<sup>3</sup> (as well as other “traditional” wooden boats used in Denmark)<sup>4</sup>. I had visited the Museum and the Boat Yard on a number of occasions, so I knew there was knowledge and expertise there. My cousin Carlo Sørensen in Farum, Denmark, arranged for me to meet with Søren Nielsen, Director of the Boat Yard at the Museum. Carlo and I met with Søren Nielsen in his office at the Boat Yard on a warm summer day in August. I told Søren about Danes in Canada, about my own personal history and connection with Denmark, about the Danish Canadian National Museum Society and its Museum and Gardens in Dickson, about the bequest from Karen Sommer, and about our project to “acquire a Viking boat”. My objective was to get some advice from him, to hear what ideas he might have about how or who, and to see whether or not there might be plans and drawings that we might borrow or buy from the Viking Ship Museum. It had not occurred to me that the Boat Yard might build such a boat for us.

After listening to me, Søren proposed that the Boat Yard could build for us an authentic replica of a “Gokstadværing”, of which they had already built seven. One of those is on display at the Boat Yard itself, one is in the interpretive centre at the National Historic Site at L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, and one is in the magnificent Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec. The Gokstadværing is one of a number of Viking ships and boats found near

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<sup>3</sup> The Boat Yard at the Viking Ship Museum is a significant element of the research carried out by that Museum, respecting how Viking boats and ships were built, how they were sailed, and the like. It differs from other Viking boat museums in Scandinavia in this respect; the other museums are for the most part more “static” displays of boats and ships and articles associated or found with them, not engaged in research through building and sailing replicas. The museum in Norway which contains the remains of the original “gokstadværing”, while magnificently displaying its collection (which itself is undeniably magnificent) is such a museum.

<sup>4</sup> The largest and possibly the most well-known replica Viking Boat built by the Boat Yard is the splendid, more than 30 metre long “Havhingsten fra Glendalough” (the “Sea Stallion from Glendalough”), one of the five Skuldelev ships, built of Irish oak (from Glendalough, Ireland) as was the original. The remains of the original large warship are in the Viking Ship Museum. The replica Havhingsten sailed from Roskilde to Dublin, Ireland in the summer of 2007 and back to Roskilde in the summer of 2008, to research sailing such a ship and to illustrate the historic connections between Ireland and Vikings in Denmark. Dublin was founded by Vikings. Havhingsten fra Glendalough is currently on display at the Viking Ship Museum.

Oslo, Norway in the mid-1800s – 6.5 metres (about 21 feet) in length and 1.4 metres in width<sup>5</sup>. It had four oars, a rudder and a sail, and was “manned” by a maximum of four people. The Boat Yard’s replica – as with all their replica Viking boats – would be an authentic replica, built of Danish oak and fir, built with replica tools from Viking times, and using the construction methods used then. Moreover, the Boat Yard could build and ship it to Dickson for the funds available.

I was completely “blown away” by this possibility! It had not occurred to me that we might acquire a Viking Boat in this way – and from such a builder. The significance for a Danish Immigrant Museum in Canada is obvious, including the fact that the Viking Ship Museum and its Boat Yard lie in Roskilde, an historic city which pre-dates Copenhagen and was itself once an important Viking centre. They lie by Roskilde Fjord, just down the hill from Roskilde Domkirke (Cathedral), the unofficial “national cathedral” of Denmark where many Danish kings and queens are buried, all the way back to Harald Bluetooth (Blåtand), the Viking king who unified smaller Viking “kingdoms” in Denmark and brought Christianity to Denmark. I sent an enthusiastic report to the Board. In January, 2008, after I had returned to Canada and reported further, including my further discussions with Søren which reduced the price, the Board agreed to contract with the Viking Ship Museum for them to build for the Danish Canadian National Museum a 6.5 metre authentic replica of a Gokstadsfæring, and to deliver it to Dickson!

And, as my cousin Carlo had laughingly warned me when we left the Boat Yard that August afternoon, I had become our Museum’s person “in charge” of the project.

I was back in Denmark through July and August, 2008. On one of my first days there I went unannounced to the Viking Ship Museum as I wanted to just enjoy the place on my own. And to see how far “our” Viking Boat had progressed. But I could not see such a boat under construction anywhere. So I found Søren in the workshop and asked him about it. He took me outside where he showed me the huge oak log lying beside the workshop, about five feet in diameter and forty feet in length. I was a bit taken aback – but there was our Boat – or at least what would become our Boat! The log had been cut down in Vallø Skov (Forest) the week before<sup>6</sup>, and the Boat Yard was ready to begin work. The log would be split in halves, then quarters, then eighths, then sixteenths and so on until there were wedge-shaped, relatively narrow “planks” which could be hand-shaped by axe and adze and scraper into planks about an inch in thickness. No saws! The final planks would be molded and bent to shape with hot water and heat, and fastened together and onto the keel and two end-stems by hand-forged copper nails and

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<sup>5</sup> The magnificent Gokstad Båd (Boat) was one of the Viking boats found buried, near Oslo, in the mid- nineteenth century. It is displayed in a museum near Oslo, Norway. It had apparently been a burial ship for an important person. In it, in addition to many items indicating the wealth of the person buried, were the remains of three smaller boats, called “gokstadsfæring”. The gokstadsfæring boats built by the Boat Yard are replicas of one of these smaller boats. All these boats are thought to be from around the mid-ninth century, more than 100 years older than the five Skuldelev ships which are in the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde and themselves are from around the year 1,000.

<sup>6</sup> There is a story also behind the oak log. It was cut down in a “royal forest”, one of the many oak trees planted on the order of the King of Denmark, at the conclusion of the disastrous (for Denmark) Napoleonic Wars. The large Danish fleet had either been destroyed or taken captive by the British, and the King decreed the planting of extensive oak forests to provide for the building of ships, so that Denmark would “always” have a supply of oak for the building of ships. Ironically, of course, within 50 to 100 years ships were no longer built of wood, but rather iron. Large areas of these oak forests exist to this day, 200 years later, and are preserved and protected. The trees are cut for only very special purposes.

spikes. The sail would be hand-sewn by the Boat Yard's sailmaker, the rigging made, and the oars and rudder fashioned. I returned a number of times over the summer, and the Boat slowly took shape, crafted by boatbuilders Søren Nielsen, Hanus Jensen (an "authentic" boatbuilder from the Færoe Islands), Erik Jochumsen and Peter Rasmussen. The Museum had made a placard set by the site of construction which explained the Boat was being made for the Danish Canadian Nation Museum in Dickson, Canada.

When the Board decided to have a Viking Boat built in this way, I had also volunteered that, as I was going to be in Denmark again in 2008, I would host, together with the Viking Ship Museum, a small reception at the Museum in Roskilde. The Board agreed, provided that "this would be at minimal cost and that there were funds available". Fair enough! On Søren's recommendation I had connected with Merete Ettrup at the Museum before I left Canada, to start making arrangements. I had also connected with the Canadian Embassy in Copenhagen as I was sure there was good reason for the Embassy to be aware of this event and to support it. In addition I contacted executive members of the Danish Canadian Society, in Denmark (Sven Erik Jensen, Vibeke Mørch and Egil Bruun) for their advice and assistance, which they enthusiastically provided.

Thus, on another warm summer August afternoon in 2008, August 22<sup>nd</sup>, some 35 people were hosted at a reception in the workshop of the Boat Yard, including Gunnar Kristensen, our Board member from Denmark; Søren Nielsen and the boatbuilders and the sailmaker Harald Rohde and other officials from the Viking Ship Museum; the newly-appointed Canadian Ambassador to Denmark, Peter Lundy, together with his wife and son; the Danish Ambassador to Canada, Poul Erik Dam Kristensen, together with his wife; the Danish Canadian Society representatives who had assisted me; representatives of other cultural and "Danish Canadian" organizations such as the Cultural Confederation of Foreign Societies, the Danish British Society and the Scandinavian Canadian Friendship Society; and various friends and family of all of us. But perhaps most thrilling and important, present also were members of the "Sommer Family": the husband and two daughters and grandchildren of Kirsten Asperud. Kirsten is a daughter and the oldest child of Karen and Kresten Sommer, who had been given up for adoption as an infant and had therefore remained in Denmark when the family emigrated. Kirsten herself was not able to be at the reception, much to her dismay, as she had already booked a trip out of Denmark before I was able to contact them. I had got Kirsten and Knud's 'phone number about a week before the reception, and had contacted them to tell them about the building of the Boat and to invite them to the reception. They were completely surprised to hear from me and to hear about the Boat being built at the Viking Ship Museum; they knew of Karen Sommer's bequest to our Museum in Canada – which they themselves had visited – but they had no idea of how this had evolved. All brought greetings reception, and I told about the Danish Canadian National Museum in Dickson and made a presentation of our Museum "commemorative plate" to the Viking Ship Museum. The wine and cheese and other snacks were graciously provided by the Canadian Embassy (at no cost to the Danish Canadian National Museum, "minimal" as the Board had instructed!), brought to the event in the trunk of Embassy staff Susanne Petersen's car and beautifully set out with white tablecloths and flags and candles as only Danes can do – on saw-horses and rough planks in the workshop!

It was not only a warm day by temperature, but the feeling was of warmth and celebration. It was a very moving occasion!

A few days later I visited Kirsten (home from her travels!) and Knud Asperud in their home in Vedbæk, near Copenhagen.

In the week before the reception I had been interviewed for an hour on the Roskilde waterfront by Claus Vittus, a cultural reporter for “Danmark’s Radio” (Danish state radio), and a ten-minute clip from that was broadcast a number of times. The interview had been arranged by the Danish Canadian Society. Claus Vittus wanted to know about our Museum, about Danes in Canada, and about my own connection to Denmark.

Back in Canada in the fall, I gave a presentation to our Board Retreat in October. Egon Sommer and his wife Norma, and Vera (Sommer) Golley and her husband Scott, all of Ponoka, were there. They were very thrilled by what the Danish Canadian National Museum had accomplished with the gift willed by their mother, Karen Sommer.

Early this year – 2009 – Søren told me that the Boat would be finished by the end of February, and would then be christened (navngivning) and launched (søsætning), and sailed on its “maiden voyage” (jomfrurejse) at the Boat Yard and in Roskilde Fjord on April 1, if we wished that. I agreed. Nothing would do, of course, but that I should be there, so I spent ten days in Denmark through April 4<sup>th</sup>, and was once again at the Boat Yard. (I have become as familiar with the Museum and Boat Yard as I am with many other places in Denmark!). Søren had asked me who should christen the Boat; he suggested Kirsten Asperud, and I could not but agree! And, of course, he needed to know what the Boat would be named on its christening. Our Board chose “Freydis Joanna” – Freydis was the name of the half-sister of Leif the Lucky (Leif Den Lykkelige) and daughter of Erik the Red (Erik Den Røde). Freydis was a strong and fearsome Viking woman who had been an important person in the leadership of the short-lived Viking settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland; Joanna was the second name of Karen Sommer and the name of a number of women in the Sommer family. Søren also suggested, and I agreed, that the name should be carved on a fine wooden name-plate, by a woman near Roskilde who is a wood-carver and a person often commissioned by the Boat Yard to make the name-plate for their boats and ships. The name-plate would then be attached to the Boat, and “unveiled” when the Boat had been christened.

So again we gathered at the Boat Yard, just recently on April 1, this time hosted by Søren Nielsen and the Viking Ship Museum. The as yet “unnamed” Boat was set out on the slip – elegant and beautiful in black with gold trim, with sail and a carved and decorated rudder, and the name-plate carved and decorated. Ready to sail! She was christened by Kirsten Asperud with water from one of the springs near Roskilde, and Kirsten said the traditional words: “Jeg døber dig Freydis Joanna. Gid lykken må følge dig på din færd.” (“I christen you Freydis Joanna. May luck follow you on your travels.”) Then the proud boatbuilders launched her into the waters of Roskilde Fjord<sup>7</sup>. Again we had Canadian wine, brought by M Claude Charland, a

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<sup>7</sup> Søren Nielsen had explained to me that this launch of a Gokstadfaering from their own wharf had a special significance for them all at the Boat Yard. The last few such boats they had built had been christened and launched elsewhere, by the purchasers; the Boat boatbuilders therefore had not had the recent opportunity to see how these

Counsellor at the Canadian Embassy, and his wife. About 75 people were present – Kirsten Asperud and her near family, Egon Sommer and his wife Norma from Ponoka, and some 25 other Danish members of the Sommer family; the boatbuilders who had built the boat for us; Gunnar Kristensen; some 18 members of my Danish family; various friends and people who had heard this was going to take place, including a few who had contacted me because of having heard my radio interview last summer; and a number of passersby. Media representatives were present, and there was an article with pictures on the first page of the local daily newspapers, “Roskilde Dagbladet” and “Roskilde Avis”, the next day. The Viking Ship Museum’s photographer was everywhere present, recording it all. I brought a brief greeting, thanking the Sommer family and the boatbuilders; I was almost unable to speak for being so overwhelmed and moved by the event and by what had transpired since 2006! M Charland brought a greeting, and Søren told about the five Skuldelev ships in the Museum, about the Gokstadfæring boat, and about our Boat.

Then I was given the honour of being one of two people on Freydis Joanna’s “maiden voyage”. I and Erik Jochumsen, the young apprentice boatbuilder who had worked most consistently on the Boat over the period of its construction, rowed her out on the still waters of Roskilde Fjord for about a half-hour. We were accompanied by others in other boats. Out on the Fjord, sailing in Freydis Joanna, Erik and I toasted Freydis Joanna and each other with mjød (mead) brought by a relative of mine, Bjarne Larsen from Kalundborg. “She’s my boat!” said Erik proudly. Members of the Sommer family and others rowed out in her after we came back to the wharf.



Then the magical event was over, and a host of us went to the restaurant “Snekken” by the Boat Yard, for coffee and cake and “hygge”.

A great day! Many great days! And a great story!

Freydis Joanna is now finished, quietly waiting in Denmark amongst the Danish Viking spirits in Roskilde, waiting for shipment to her new home at the Danish Canadian National Museum and Gardens in Dickson, Alberta.

But the story is not finished!

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boats would sail in the water, or even to sail in them, themselves. This launch and sailing would therefore also be special for them.

The contract with the Viking Ship Museum was for the building of the Boat and its delivery to the Danish Canadian National Museum and Gardens in Dickson, Alberta. But I realized, and the Board agreed, that the Boat's coming to Canada and eventually to Dickson could be made into a fascinating cross-Canada "tour", from its port of arrival on the eastern seaboard, then crossing Canada just as many Danish immigrants traveled. There could be stops at some of the many places along the way where there are Canadians of Danish background or other Scandinavian background, or others simply with an interest in boating and sailing. Not only that, but I was sure there would be other established museums which might be interested in hosting the Boat if the opportunity were made available. Such a tour would be a cause for celebration and excitement, and the source of no small amount of publicity and good will for the Boat and for the Danish Canadian National Museum and Gardens.

Our initial discussions with Danish immigrants and people of Danish immigrant descent attending the 2008 Annual Conference of the Federation of Danish Associations in Canada, in Ottawa, and with staff of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec<sup>8</sup>, confirmed that this was feasible. Freydis Joanna could arrive in Halifax, possibly to be a part of the Tall Ships Festival there in July, 2009 [and, suppose, if the Danish training ship "Danmark", ("Skoleskibet Danmark"), was going to be there for the Festival, it could be shipped across the Atlantic on that beautiful sailing ship?], to finally arrive at the Danish Canadian National Museum in Dickson by land.

As it turned out, Danmark was not participating in the Tall Ships Festival. Nor did it become possible for Freydis Joanna to be a part of the Festival itself. But because of the keen interest of the staff at Pier 21 in Halifax and of the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, also in Halifax, she will be on display at that prestigious Maritime Museum on the historic Halifax waterfront and in the midst of the Festival, for three weeks from the end of June. And the Canadian Museum of Civilization has agreed to have her on display there for a few days in the summer. So, together with other members of the DCNMS Board and enthusiastic individuals in various places in Canada, we are now engaged in organizing the details of Freydis Joanna's trip across Canada, starting from her planned arrival in Halifax in late June: a three-week stay on display there at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, then west through the Maritimes (including New Denmark, New Brunswick, important in the history of Danish immigrants in Canada!), to Quebec (Montreal) and Ontario (Ottawa and Toronto), north of Lake Superior through Pass Lake Ontario, across the Prairies through Winnipeg and Gimli, Manitoba (for a stop there at the Icelandic Festival), southern Saskatchewan and Alberta, to Calgary and Edmonton, arriving at the Museum a few days after mid-August. We are working on providing good media coverage – local and regional, and possibly even national – including the opportunity for "Danes" in all these places to add their stories.

And the connection with Karen and Kresten Sommer will continue: Egon Sommer, son of Karen and Kresten Sommer and born in Denmark, will supply the truck and trailer and be the driver for this tour!

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<sup>8</sup> The Canadian Museum of Civilization is Canada's première "national museum", owned and operated by the Government of Canada, and Canada's equivalent of national museums in other countries. It lies on the banks of the Ottawa River in Gatineau, Quebec, directly across the river from the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa.

We will celebrate when Freydis Joanna arrives at the Museum – celebrate our acquisition of a Viking Boat and its demonstration of the continued growth of the Danish Canadian National Museum and Gardens; we will celebrate the history of Vikings in Canada, celebrate Karen and Kresten Sommer and their family and their embodiment of the Danish immigrant experience; we will celebrate because Danes love to celebrate! And, because the permanent facilities for the Boat at the Museum will first be in place next year, 2010, we will have the opportunity to gather once again in a more celebratory way around the Boat’s permanent placement – to look, for example, at the possibility of involving the Viking Ship Museum and others in Denmark in that celebration, or finding a group of “actors” who could be on site for a period of time to play the rôle of Vikings, or, as has been suggested, to stage a musical event. All “blue sky” ideas which take some time to bring about. Not to mention the fact that 2010 will be the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the Museum – a milestone deserving special recognition.

As I noted at the beginning, the story of this project has not only been about acquiring a Viking Boat for the Danish Canadian National Museum in Dickson. It has also been about what I have experienced as the person who has been involved in all the major decisions and momentous events surrounding that acquisition. Because of that involvement I have gained many new friends and acquaintances in Denmark and have come to know much about the Viking Ship Museum and Viking boats.

And I have been moved to tears on numerous occasions, with pride in my Danish (and Viking!) heritage, and amazement at being a part of this representation and demonstration of that heritage!

Carl V. Sorensen  
Edmonton, Alberta  
May, 2009

(There is a personal “family” post-script to this story. I discovered in meeting and talking with Søren Nielsen’s mother and father, Hans and Lis Nielsen, that they are all from Branderslev, just north of Nakskov, Lolland. Branderslev is not far from where my mother, Lilli (Nakskov) Sorensen, was born and raised, in Ullerslev just on the other side of Nakskov. The Niensens know of my aunt, (Moster) Ellen Larsen from Nakskov, and know my two cousins who have had bicycle and moped businesses there. And my aunt, now 98 years of age, had in her young days worked for Lis Nielsen’s parents, Søren’s grandparents! What fun!)

CVS