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Huxley Historical Society honors The Fjord

By Marlys Barker
With the help of Duane and Barb Finch

Published: Thursday, April 21, 2011 11:57 AM CDT

Saturday noon, April 9, at the Nord-Kalsem Community Center, Huxley area residents were invited to a Norwegian Fjord dinner, prepared and served just like the good ol' days. In a recent project to preserve history, Duane Finch has researched and recorded the story of The Fjord of Huxley. This event recognized and honored Daisy Fjelland and Bonny Erickson, who, with their families, helped to make the Fjord a successful 35-year venture that left an unforgettable chapter in Huxley history.

More than 120 people gathered to greet and reminisce with Daisy and Bonny and to enjoy a Fjord dinner of Norwegian meatballs, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, dinner rolls, rice pudding with toppings, Kringla and Lefsa, along with lots of good hot coffee. The delicious meal was prepared by Delila Roberts, Rowena Nord, Darlene Kalsem, Celeste Allen, Diane Cronk, Janet Stoll, Ikey Lee, Harriet Sheldahl and Mary Lou Berhow. Servers were Lucy Shaeffer, Jolene Lettow, Brenda Neville, Nancy Thornwall and Diane Krause.

Anders Dovre, youth pastor at Fjeldberg Lutheran Church in Huxley, gave a traditional table grace – first in Norwegian and then in English. Many with Norwegian ancestry appreciated the opportunity to say the prayer in Norwegian along with Anders.

When the Huxley Historical Society decided to have a presentation of Duane's book about one of their community's best-known former restaurants, The Fjord, Owen John Kalsem suggested to Nels Nord, president of the Huxley Historical Society, the idea of a Norwegian dinner at the time of the book's presentation. This idea became a well-attended event. Duane talked about his research and presented a copy of his book to Daisy, Bonny and to the Huxley Historical Society.

Duane Finch recently sat down at Kelley Historical Hall and shared with me the story of The Fjord. Duane related to me his interview with Yvonne 'Daisy' (Dobbe) Fjelland. Daisy told Duane The Fjord history between the years 1953-1966. During those 13 years, Charlotte Dobbe and Daisy (Dobbe) Fjelland, mother and daughter, owned and operated The Fjord.

In 1953, Finch explained, women could rarely get a loan without a male signature. So Charlotte's husband Elmer, who had a trucking business, went to the bank with his wife and daughter and applied for a loan to buy a little house at the edge of Huxley. With an initial room addition to the front of the house, they created the original Fjord that could seat about 30 people. From a menu they offered Scandinavian food.

On weekends, Finch said, Daisy would set up a smorgasbord displaying the food on a long table using sterno heat. The smorgasbord presentation was so successful that, as shown in a picture in Finch's book, the restaurant began to have lines of people on weekends waiting to be seated. With Charlotte's outstanding food and kitchen management, along with Daisy's energy and management skills in the dining room, The Fjord soon became a tremendous success. Another expansion of the restaurant became necessary. The dining room for 30 could now seat 60.

Daisy was also an artist. To create the Scandinavian atmosphere, Daisy had her female staff wear Norwegian vests and skirts. Daisy designed The Fjord's colorful menus, and in the early years, she hand-printed each one. She designed Fjord dinnerware and napkins using Norwegian designs. Daisy used her energy and creative talents on the artistic side of the restaurant as well as in the planning, management and marketing.



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Daisy and Conny are shown with Duane Finch of Kelley. Duane has worked many hours with the women and on his own, putting together a complete history of The Fjord.

By 1966, the Dobbes were ready to retire from their very successful and much-loved restaurant. Elmer Dobbe approached Fritz Erickson with the idea that Fritz and his wife Bonny should purchase The Fjord. The Ericksons were another Norwegian family from Huxley who knew the Dobbes. Fritz and Bonny had no restaurant experience and were busy with a young family of four children. However, they decided to accept Elmer's offer. A business deal was made with the understanding that the Dobbes would work closely with the Ericksons to train for a smooth transition.

Charlotte worked with Fritz in the kitchen, and she gave the Ericksons her successful recipes. She trained Fritz in using the equipment and how to prepare her delicious food. Daisy worked closely with Bonny to teach her about managing the dining room, training the help and scheduling. Bonny always conveys her deep appreciation for Daisy's help in making the transition and their first holiday season a success.

Duane shared his interview with Bonny Erickson with me. Bonny gave him The Fjord history between 1966 and 1988. During those 22 years, Fritz and Bonny Erickson owned and continued to successfully operate The Fjord.

After Fritz and Bonny were on their own, Fritz began to realize that he had to simplify the operation in order to control expenses and increase sales. His solution was to eliminate a menu and have a smorgasbord presentation only. To accomplish this, he wanted to develop a unique way to display the food. Fritz had the bright idea to design a large Viking ship buffet that would hold the entire smorgasbord. Fritz put his design idea on paper and hired master craftsman Jerry Jennings to build it. When the ship was finished and installed at The Fjord, it became not only a conversation piece and a beautiful way to present the food, but it also became The Fjord icon.

The Fjord's famous Viking ship buffet smorgasbord was featured in numerous articles that appeared in newspapers and publications over the years. Usually, Bonny Erickson was photographed standing next to it, in her Norwegian costume. "Presenting the Norwegian food on this Viking ship buffet was a terrific idea. Fritz hit a home run!" Finch said.

Finch said the Ericksons also redid the seating arrangement in the restaurant rooms to seat up to 150 people at one time. They added a Scandinavian aura to the restaurant with large murals of the Norwegian fjords, painted by regional artists. Some of these murals will eventually find their home at the Huxley Historical building.

Fritz and Bonny were able to serve between 600 and 700 people on Mother's Day and Easter. These were their two largest volume days. The Fjord patrons came from all parts of Iowa. Lots of special occasions were celebrated with dinner at The Fjord and many folks of Norwegian ancestry savored their Norwegian specialties.

In 1988, after 22 years, Fritz and Bonny decided to close The Fjord. Steve Quick, current owner and operator of the Hardware Hank store, bought the property. The old house/restaurant building was torn down to make room for the new hardware store and the Dairy Queen. At the time of the closing, the Viking ship buffet was sold. Sometime around 2005, Fritz and Bonny searched, found and returned to Huxley the weathered Viking ship buffet, which had sat outdoors for some years. Lyle Martin, master craftsman and restoration expert volunteered to repair and restore the beautiful Viking ship buffet. It is now in storage, waiting to take its place in the archives of history at the Huxley Historical Society building in Huxley.

Finch says the event honoring The Fjord, its owners and its history was very successful. Congratulations to the Huxley Historical Society for hosting this memorable event on a beautiful spring Saturday in Huxley.

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