Between November 1975 and March 1977 the proud community of Elk Horn, Iowa turned a dream into a reality – raising more than $100,000 and using over 300 volunteers to locate, purchase, move, and rebuild an authentic Danish windmill.

Recognized today as the largest rural Danish settlement in the United States, the town of Elk Horn began in 1864 with the first European settlers. In 1868, the first Danish settler, Christian Jensen urged his family and friends in Denmark to join him in the Clay Township community named for the elk antlers found scattered on the prairie.

As the Danish settlement grew, community leaders recognized the need for a more formal educational institution and founded a Danish folk school in 1878. In 1882, the community erected a Danish Lutheran Church. The town was officially incorporated on January 10, 1910.

In 1975, Harvey Sornson, a rural Elk Horn farmer, visited his ancestral homeland of Denmark. Upon his return, his fondness for the old and rapidly disappearing windmills led Sornson to propose a “crazy idea.” He suggested to some of the Elk Horn townspeople that they should bring an authentic Danish windmill from Denmark to this Iowa town of 750 people.

This is the story of the Nørre Snede windmill, once used to grind grain in Denmark and now proudly representing the community of Elk Horn, Iowa!

Danish “Møllers” [millers] played an important role in medieval Scandinavian society. Whole grains finely ground into flour and meal provided the most necessary ingredient for daily bread. Prior to windmills, grain was ground by hand, or by using animal power to turn the grinding stones. Mills powered by wind eliminated much of the physical exertion needed to grind grain.

Successful millers were knowledgeable about all aspects of milling: monitoring wind direction and speed, maintaining the mills working parts, and developing a miller’s ‘rule of thumb’: by pinching a bit of flour between his finger and thumb, a good miller gauged the condition of the millstones – a fine texture meant the stones were grinding well, a more coarse texture meant the stones needed ‘dressing’ [resurfacing].

The windmill trade also had many dangers. Violent winds could blow a windmill over. Sails could crush a miller’s limbs if not properly secured while being repaired. Lightning strikes could burn the mill, or fuse the metal machinery parts. Sparks from these metal parts could ignite highly volatile grain dust. Orance of a miller in medieval societies gave him high rank; only the lord of the manor, and the parish priest were held in higher esteem. In the event of untrustworthy millers, or inconvenient mill locations, people in communities could petition the Danish government for permission to use a different miller, or build a new mill. In the middle of the 19th century, this need for fair, reliable milling services prompted the people of Nørre Snede to make such a petition.

The Nørre Snede Windmill case of 1846-1848 illustrates the serious nature of grain mills. Danish zoning laws dictated who was allowed to build a mill, and the location of the mill. Since 1617 Danish kings granted “mølletræng” limiting the number of mills, and ensuring that these mills had enough business to pay royal taxes.

Residents petitioning for new mill construction had to first prove “mølletræng” – that their community was at least one Danish mile [4.68 US miles] from the nearest mill. “Mølletræng” and “mølletræng” provided a zone of protection for each miller.