



My Return to Over Jerstal

April 2013

Our train made its way north out of Germany and entered Denmark late in the afternoon. It suddenly occurred to me that the tiny town of Over Jerstal, where I lived with my grandmother Bodil Hansen for a while in 1960, was on the railroad line and so I began scanning the countryside in earnest for that village, focusing on the east side of the tracks where her house had been and where I had spent most of my time there. Years ago they stopped train service and boarded up the station, so if I was going to see anything familiar I would have to be quick about it this time around because the train was not going to stop.

I had one specific landmark in mind- a railroad embankment just north of town where one set of tracks had crossed over the main line a long time ago. When I climbed to the top of the embankment to watch the trains go by in 1960, there were no tracks remaining on the embankment and no bridge over the main line, and when I came back in 1970 the embankment on the west side of the main line had been bulldozed flat to make way for a new housing development, leaving only the eastern embankment. I had wanted to visit it again on my next trip there in 1985, but my Dad had told me that the east embankment had been flattened too and there was nothing left to see, so I didn't bother then or in 1996 when I passed through again. But there was always the chance that he had been mistaken, and so I searched.

Back in 1960, one of my favorite walks in Over Jerstal had been to head east from Grandma's house along the main drag and turn north on the first side street I came to. This quickly became a gravel road that wandered off into the Danish countryside and took you to the beginnings of the embankment. There was a line of wooden power poles along that gravel road that carried two or three wires on short white insulators and my cousins taught me how to listen to the wires singing in the never-ending wind by pressing my ear against a pole. It was a complex song full of rhythmic buzzing and humming and thrumming and it amazed me.

After a quarter mile on that gravel road, you came to the place where the track had been and on the left the embankment started to climb gently up and swing off to the south. Following the embankment took you towards the main line, where it ended high enough above the tracks below to serve as the perfect place to sit and spot trains. The slope down to the tracks was steep enough that you could take off your parka and sit down on it and zoom down the slope on the grass. One slide was rarely enough- you had to climb back up the slope to the top of the embankment and slide down again a few more times to guarantee that the back of your garment was sufficiently stained with grass juice to give your mom something to scold you for when you came home afterwards.

But the very best place to watch trains from was the west embankment because there was a little pine tree growing out of the top of it. The tree was easy to climb and the extra altitude furnished a better view. In addition, the smaller branches up there could be pulled and pushed like the levers used by the stationmaster to switch trains between tracks. I spent hours up in that tree in the summer of 1960,

diligently switching the trains passing below me to new and unexpected destinations.

Fast-forward now to 2013. I knew the names of the towns where the train had stopped and was going to stop and could thereby judge when we would be passing through my old stomping grounds. I was expectantly poised at the window of the car, waiting... then suddenly we flashed through a town right on the tracks and then a moment later we sped past the embankment. Dad had been wrong- it was still there, 53 years later. I had to visit it.

The next morning, my wife and I and I headed out with my cousin and his wife to return to Over Jerstal and walk the embankment once more. Our first stop in the neighborhood was the cemetery, right next to Vedsted church in which my parents were married in 1950, and where my mom's parents (Jakob and Bodil Hansen) are buried. Their little garden plot looked the same to me as it had in 1996 and 1985. But this time I stooped to pick up a pebble of flint from the raked gravel surrounding their headstone. I put this in my pocket with the intent of placing it on my parents' grave marker in California on my next visit there.

Right down the hill from the church yard is a small lake in which my mom and her siblings had played in the 1930's, and in which I myself had swam as an 8-year-old in 1960. At its edge I put my hand down into the ice-cold water and pulled from the sand another flint pebble which called out to me. It had been just sitting there waiting for the last 53 years for me to come back and take it to California.

Back in the car again, we proceeded down the road to Over Jerstal and parked right next to Grandma's place. It had been remodeled so many times over the years that I could no longer recognize it. In particular, the dormer window that had let the feeble winter sun into the tiny attic bedroom in which I and my brother and sister stayed in 1960 was gone, but a quick phone call to my aunt confirmed that this was the place. From there we set out down the same gravel lane I had first walked along 53 years earlier, to find the path up the embankment.

And there it was. We turned off the gravel and started up the gentle slope to the left. A few minutes later we were at the top, sitting on a bench that the local scout troop had installed. The view was mostly obscured by 53 years' worth of tree growth which put me in mind of the 3rd floor balcony of the college dorm building I moved into in 1970. It furnished a stunning sunset view back then, but when I returned for a visit there 30 years later the view from the balcony was completely blocked by the branches of an enormous tree, which in 1970 had been a skinny sapling supported by three wooden stakes stuck into the lawn below.

This time I didn't slide down the slope to the main line on the back of my jacket. We sat down on the bench and listened to the sounds of jet fighters circling to land at the NATO air base a few miles north. In 1960 they had been flying F-104's, in 1970 they were flying F-4's, but now the fighter jocks were flying something with twin tails that I did not recognize, which made me feel old and out-of-date. Then I heard the sound of an approaching train. In 1960 they had been steam and diesel, in 1970 strictly diesel, but at least they stopped at the station in Over Jerstal. Now in 2013 the train that zoomed by at top speed was electric, drawing its power from overhead wires, and it didn't stop there anymore.

Under the bench I extracted from the gravelly soil another pebble of flint that had my name on it and put it in my pocket with the others. This one, when placed on my parent's grave, would serve to correct my dad's impression that the embankment had been levelled. Presently we all got up and started making our way back down the embankment, because we were grownups with places to go and people to see. After a minute I stopped and ran back to the bench to stick a 25 cent piece into the dirt where the pebble had been waiting for me. It seemed like a fair trade. I took one last look down the tracks and then jogged down the trail to catch up with the others, and return to 2013 with my pocket of pebbles.

There are only two kinds of rock that figure at all into Denmark's geological and cultural history: flint and granite. At this point in the narrative I have only flint in my pocket but granite will enter the picture after a bit. So, let's take out a pebble of flint and hold it in the light where we can examine it. Where did this piece of flint come from, anyway? And why is the dirt in Denmark full of it, everywhere you go? The answer lies in the White Chalk Cliffs of Dover.

The flint in this part of the world comes from the silicate skeletons of marine microorganisms that lived, died, and sank to the bottom of the sea at a time when dinosaurs bigger than whales (which didn't exist yet, but that's another story) were swimming around the place. The Silicate Syndicate was vastly outnumbered by the Carbonate Clan, another sort of marine microorganism that built its teeny skeleton out of calcium carbonate and lived, died, and sank to the bottom of that same sea in such overwhelming profusion as to build up carbonate sediment layers thousands of feet thick down there, separated here and there by a few inches of the Silicate Guys.

Weird chemistry then took place, rendering the remains of the Silicate Guys into a gel-like mass that balled up into lumps and clumps that formed around bits and pieces of sea shell, sea urchin skeletons, and any other junk that happened to be lying around at the time. Then these bulbous excrescences of silicate gel got buried by more of the Carbonate Guys, and time and temperature then worked their magic and converted the gel balls into cobbles of extremely hard flint embedded in a matrix of pure blackboard chalk, which when combined with sheets of slate and fingernail material would then furnish generations of schoolkids all around the world with the means to drive everyone within earshot nuts with the noise. But we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves here.

Anyway, western Europe is underlaid by these flint-bearing carbonate layers, and here and there the Earth's crust has folded and formed up in such a manner as to expose the carbonate at the surface. The British Isles sit on top of the carbonate strata, which pops up out of the soil there as the White Cliffs Of Dover. The layer of chalk then dives under the North Sea and re-emerges in southeastern Denmark as the White Cliffs of Moen, only to dive down under the Baltic Sea and pop out again and make yet more cliffs near the seaside town of Sassnitz in Germany. God knows where it goes after that.

The chalk is easily washed down by rain and waves and dissolved in today's sea water, but the flint cobbles embedded in it are hard as hell and so accumulate at the base of these cliffs as huge piles of round flint rocks. And get this: the flint cobbles that petrified themselves around the sea urchin skeletons are occasionally hollow (just like a sea urchin skeleton) and sometimes contain a little chunk of fossilized sea urchin goop that breaks loose inside the ball of flint. Pick up one of these off the beach and shake it, and you can hear the flint nugget rattling around inside! Big fun. But I digress.

Whoops! Watch out- here comes an ice age: glaciers, sea-level shift, ice caps thousands of feet thick, crustal deformation, the whole package. Run for your life! The crust gets shattered, squished and shaved by moving ice into everything from house-sized boulders all the way down to gravel and sand and dust- gigantic quantities of glacial till that the ice sheet pushes hundreds of miles across the globe. Anywhere it hits a patch of the Carbonate Guys, the chalk gets ground into geologic oblivion and the tough, hard flint cobbles then go into the till. After a few hundred thousand years of this kind of action, the ice then melts, stranding the till, and anyone who happens to be hanging around the neighborhood at that stage of things is then free to invent agriculture in the thin, rocky soil- and to pull out hunks of flint from it and figure out how to make tools out of them.

So Denmark is basically a big flat expanse of glacial till with lots of bays and inlets. What's above sea level is covered with a thin surface layer of greyish dirt that is full of shattered flint cobbles. Oak trees will grow in that dirt, as will rye, barley, and any potato seedlings you happen to bring by from Peru and

so you tend to accumulate stone-age farmers in that place who eventually invent boats, beer, aquavit, boiled potatoes, pickled herring and agricultural co-operatives, and hence become Danes.

Since our people in Denmark were farmers who tilled the soil, my family has accumulated a hand-me-down collection of hollow flint rattles and stone-age axe heads that all the plows wielded by generations of farmer Nielsens have turned up over the years. The San Francisco Bay Area Branch of the extended Nielsen Clan has a wicker basket of such things sitting in the living room of the Fremont homestead which up until now represented the only bits of genuine Danish rock in the region, but soon I will bring down my flint pebbles and leave them not in that basket but on my parents' grave marker at the San Joaquin Memorial Veterans' Cemetery outside of Santa Nella, not far from where Highway 152 meets I-5 and Highway 33. It's about 6000 miles from Denmark and hence far out of range of the Glacier Transport System, Inc. so if there are going to be any pieces of Danish flint there, they'll have to be brought in by hand and pocket. And that's just what I'll do on Friday this week.

That's Slim's story for a Monday morning, and he's sticking to it.