

6th July 1998

We are now well back in Denmark from our fabulous one-year journey through North America. This has been a truly memorable experience, not only because of

- the 4th July fireworks in Washington DC,
 - the beautiful American National Parks,
 - our campfires with marshmallows in the forests,
 - our first baseball match in Omaha, NE,
 - the sunrise at the Badlands in South Dakota,
 - the old mining towns in Montana,
 - the Pacific coastline,
 - the weird but exciting town of Las Vegas,
 - fishing in the waters of Baja California,
 - attending a colorful Mexican fiesta in Chiapas,
 - climbing the unique old pyramids and ruins in Palenque,
 - snorkeling in the turquoise Caribbean waters with corals and strange fish,
 - meeting the Danish model Helena Christensen in Tulum – and seeing her pictures from the white beach in the streets of New York,
 - enjoying the Cajun culture in Louisiana,
 - watching the launch of the Columbia Space Shuttle from Kennedy Space Center,
 - meeting with President Jimmy Carter in Plains,
 - the rescue of our daughter Camilla by 911 in the Tennessee mountains,
 - our lunch in the World Bank next to the White House,
 - the eye-watering visit to Ellis Island (where Helge photographed the whole family on 9th July)
- just to mention a few of the many spectacular sights and adventures.

Having enjoyed all this immensely, it is however something else, which has made this trip much more than a collection of fine photographs. It is you, the Americans, Mexicans and friends of other nationalities, who have enriched our lives and provided the flesh and blood to our happy memories. With this letter we would like to thank each of you and at the same time try to describe the entire trip.

June 1997:

We flew into New York and used the first couple of days to introduce the city to our daughters, Anja and Camilla. The first thing we saw was the shooting of a sequence to a movie, right outside our hotel. As a first-timer you know the USA mainly from TV and movies, so it was quite appropriate right away to meet some actors, directors and yellow cabs with screaming tires in this land of Hollywood. Imad, the son in the family of our Arab friends – and true Arab friends are like family – met us in Washington, helped us to buy the motorhome and gave us all kinds of assistance before we went off into this huge and largely unknown continent.

July 1997:

One of the few planned arrangements was a visit to Benthe's relatives in Ipswich, MA. We had expected to drop by for a cup of coffee, but ended up staying 5 wonderful days with what became the girl's Bedstemor (grandma) Hildur and Tante (aunt) Anna. We enjoyed so much your hospitality, our

interesting conversations, the story of your remarkable life, born in the USA as daughter of a Danish father and a Norwegian mother. Thank you for celebrating Camilla's 16 years birthday. Thanks also to Tina for taking us to the beach and letting us try the kayak in the Atlantic.

August 1997:

With the help of Bob Cutler in Albany, NY who together with Linda visited us in Gudumholm some years ago, we finally got in touch with our old neighbor, Helge Mansson. His happiness was assured by marrying Roberta and they have a charming house in the mountains of Vermont. The timing of our arrival was not quite correct, so after having got the permission by the first person we met in the village we camped on the grassy field at the shore of the local creek. This was Jim, who was preparing flowers for sale in the local stores, and who proved to be a good friend during our stay in uptown Sandgate. Actually the site appeared to be quite central: Here the New England style municipality posted for the locals to decide the question of buying a new truck for clearance of snow, here we met Junior, 75 years old, who gave Bente a ride in the back of his truck together with the dog, Ollie – and across the road Sussie, the present mayor, was building a new house from wood cut in her back garden. Later we had the opportunity to speak German with Karl Stucklen, a famous painter born in Leipzig, Germany, who came to the USA in 1950. He has an atelier in New York but is painting his works in the quiet of Sandgate, VT. His wife Jayne is also an artist creating fantasy pieces of art from materials of the nature. In the happy company of Helge and friends we met the German family Ralf and Esther Gelhard with their two kids, who were also preparing for a camper vacation. We hope to keep the friendship and contacts with the Gelhards here in Europe. And I shall not forget dentist Mary Squire, who late Friday afternoon took time to relieve me of a terrible tooth pain – and did not want any payment. After several days of increasing pain it was like coming into heaven. Thank you Mary.

From the Niagara Falls we took the route north of Lake Erie into Canada and back via Detroit. Ahead of us were the Great Plains with hundreds of miles of corn and beans until the landscape changed in Nebraska. The town of Butte, NE appeared rather small, but folks from the large farming area around made the Butte pancake festival quite a show. This is where we among others met Herb Reiser, who showed us his 1500 acres farm, where the red Indians used to have their seasonal camp. In the same area we met several descendants of the Danish Petersen family.

September 1997:

Participants of the international organization, SERVAS, are prepared to open their homes for travelers, who want to meet other people. We enjoyed our first experience in Wyoming, when we called the Wallace family to ask if it was convenient to see them one of the next days. "Please come right away" said Mark and Cathy, which was the beginning of a wonderful 4 day-visit. The idea is to participate in the daily life of the local family, and we started by assisting with the cleaning of the tomato greenhouse. We heard son Ian do his homework, which one day included the European peninsulas. It was a great feeling to be in Wyoming, USA, and hear this bright brat recite Jylland, the name of the tiny peninsular, where we live. Luke was doing his physics at a rather advanced level, compared to our norms. We had enlightening discussions, which told us about the life and character of this backbone part of America. It was a great experience to go with the family to church, on that day held outdoors under the old shadowy trees, where the minister told about his recent trip to Europe where he met the Pope. And to learn how to fish with grasshoppers in the clear mountain stream running through the land. And to hike the path behind the house to the Bighorn Mountains. Beautiful, beautiful.

In Montana the sky is high and the land spacious. We happened to camp in a forest, where we had the first thin snow, alone but for a group of wilderness types, who spent their vacation mining for crystals. The next day we went to this open mine and despite the cold got quite agitated in our efforts to find the treasure. After that day I much better understand the gold rush and the wildness of these fortune hunters. Among the team were Rob and son Jake Bleily from Idaho, who had a remarkable teamwork: Rob was digging and Jake made a small fire in the pit where they could warm their frozen fingers. Thank you for the crystals you gave us.

October 1997:

After a rainy trip to Banff National Park in Canada, we came to Portland, Oregon – a beautiful area where we enjoyed the hospitality of SERVAS hosts, John and Bondi with son Jordan. As a former chef John cooked delicious Italian food to us and I had a good discussion with Bondi about the injustice in the taxation of the very rich people. Up to a certain point we agreed, but with my background in the over-regulated and over-taxed Scandinavia I still see the greatness of the USA partly as a result of the freedom, including the freedom and incentive to keep most of the money you earn. Most of the fortunes of the so-called rich people are probably invested in the companies anyway.

The sun broke the day we entered California, into the town of Crescent. In our favorite shopping outlet, Wal-Mart, we met Jim, who greeted the customers and played banjo. He introduced us to Susanne, a Danish student invited by the local Rotary Club to study one year at the local university. Another remarkable example of the different life in the New World: In Europe very few would accept such a job, apart from the fact that our high minimum wages would be prohibitive for the shop to employ people for such (unproductive) purposes. “Shop greeters” is not a profession here that would qualify to membership in the Rotary. And if people were forced into such job they would not tell anybody about it. Jim has a previous CV of being the owner of a radio station in Idaho and a dishwasher in Pizza Hut. In Europe people would never accept such professional changes, as they are being paid social security at approximately the same rate as low-wage workers.

We had a very scenic drive along the coast to San Francisco, where we had a nostalgic “cozy-Danish” evening with Henrik Dahl, including candles and California red wine. He is working as an earthquake specialist for a local consulting company – quite an achievement, as in Denmark we only know the Richter scale tremors as newspaper reports from foreign lands.

November 1997:

We had decided to have a trip with a yearlong summer, so it was now time to travel south into Mexico. Our first destination was Ensenada to meet Benthe’s Spanish teacher, Adriana, who lived 3½ years in Denmark with husband Ricardo and children Jessica and Abraham. Do you still speak your excellent Danish? After a week on the Baja California we entered the local paradise in San Lucas – a small bay at the Gulf of California. We had hardly parked the camper before we had the first invitation from Connie and Jerry from Oregon for a spaghetti dinner. In the warm moonlit evening with the pelicans making silhouettes on their poles and the low bay live with small fish we felt just fine. Another great Oregonian, Ken Brookhose, took me on a boat fishing trip the next day, and we caught a lot of barracudas – combined with those of Bob and Charlie enough to invite the whole campground to fish tacos. It was during that party we heard about Charlie’s career as captain on a nuclear-armed submarine permanently stationed in the Mediterranean, during the cold war, on 24-hour alert. Imagine the pressure on the crew during the frequent tests of alertness.

The next day we found an equally beautiful bay and more remarkable people: The always big-smiling Nancy and the race Baja 2000 winner Jerimy. We have kept some of your smiles in our memory, Nancy, for a rainy day, where they will certainly make the sun shine again. It was exciting to hear about your family relations to the Independent Party and your work as a secretary to the presidential nominee. Especially I like your story, in the midst of the state to state campaign, waking up in yet another hotel room and calling your office back home to ask where you are. Thanks for the party newsletters. They are interesting but as I told you not quite in accordance with my picture of a strong, internationally oriented USA with the celebrated individual freedom and social and equal opportunities.

December 1997:

After having picked up Benthés sister, Ulla, in Mexico City, we headed back to the Pacific coast. On the way we visited the old silver mine town of Taxco, a fine place to buy gifts to the family, and then to Oaxaca. Ulla's daughter, Pernille, had been staying there last year with the Cervantes, which she is now calling her Mexican family, and Ulla of course had to visit her daughters other mother. A wonderful family, whose hospitality we also enjoyed, and a very interesting city with its old Santa Domingo citadel, markets, zocalo and inhabitants.

The road down to the coast had been hit by a hurricane a few months earlier, and the 100 miles distance through the mountains took us 2 days to cover, including frequent stops to let the brakes cool off. It was actually an exciting trip, since many roads and bridges had been flushed away so that we had to drive through the streams and gravel detours.

January 1998:

We celebrated Christmas and New Year at the tropical Pacific coast 400 km south of Acapulco – the beaches are great, the sea warm and the temperature around 30°C (90°F). Had it not been for the mosquitoes.... We met a lot of fine people there and shall especially remember the beau famille française Fravallo, Andre, Birgitte, Pierre and Anna. In spite of our lack of knowledge of the French and Spanish languages we had a wonderful time. We wish you luck with your trip all the way down to the Tierra del Fuego. We spent a lot of the time in Zipolite at the Katy campground, a great place with few tourists, no international resorts and correspondingly friendly people. Our camp host Javier Mendez and his family, including the charming daughter Katy, provided palapas for shadow and for hanging up the hammocks, fine fried fish and always with a big smile. It was not a fancy campground, the price was less than 2\$ per night, but we liked the place with the chicken running around, the ugliest dog, complete peace and harmony so you did not count the days any more. No wonder that many of the visitors are staying there all winter.

In Salina Cruz we went to the movie, and Fausto Lopez let us see the control room, from where he is operating the film machine – one of those which make a break in the middle of the movie so that you have time for a cold drink.

February 1998:

We then finally reached the famed Caribbean coast. The first sight in Chetumal was not spectacular, but instead we met here some spectacular fine Germans, Margaret and Hans-Hermann Tombink. Actually we met each other on and off for the next couple of weeks and had a great time. Let us meet in Europe. Further up along the coast the true Caribbean magic appeared with the white beaches, blue-green water, corals and fish looking as much at you as the other way round when snorkeling. This is also where we

met Bent and Jane, who have been enjoying the free life travelling the world for 10 years – and they still, or may be therefore, look so young and active. They showed us the dancing dolphins and we listened to their Danish radio short-wave news. We hope to see you in Denmark when you make a break in your globetrotting.

In the Yucatan we found plenty of old Maya-ruins and cenotes, deep wells in the limestone ground. We decided to camp at one such cenote in Holca, it appeared to be sub-ground and for a change the swim was refreshingly cool. We happened to stay 5 days as the girls attracted a lot of nice boys from the village, and they obviously enjoyed the courting. During a couple of days we had the pleasant company of Linda and Bob with their two kids from Australia, who are planning to spend some years in America and Europe before returning to the Sun Coast. We hope our letter will reach you in England. Also thanks to Santiago and his uncle who showed us the local attractions including a chance to visit a Mayan private home.

After the great carnival in Merida our tires could no longer stand the blazing sun and decided to explode little by little. At the first flat tire in the middle of the empty and flat Yucatan land, Jorge Caceres, the president of the local PAN party, rescued us. He and his wife Patricia arranged for the repair, which in the middle of the carnival was no easy task. We also enjoyed the afternoon entertainment in their home where the local teenagers according to the tradition were spraying each other with paint in the street.

While waiting for the repair we stayed at the local campground in Campeche. Among others we met here Bud and Joanne from Florida, a lovable couple who were among the first to travel through Mexico at a time when there was hardly any roads. Bud is an inventor, and is still meeting children who remember him repairing their mother's sewing machine or radio a generation ago. We are impressed that Bud has seen Buffalo Bill in his Wild West Show. We were invited to see them in Florida where Joanne served a real good Mexican chili.

March 1998:

In the narrow streets of the vanilla town of Papantla we could not find any parking for the 26' camper. Suddenly Michelangelo, the owner of the local chicken grill, came as an angel to help us. Follow me, he said, and took us to his neighbor who has a small furniture factory, and where we could park among the timber. And his chickens are just delicious.

Back in the USA we stayed some time in Brownsville, TX where we met Jack Hester, a universal talent who has tried almost everything. He is also good in story telling and our girls are still quoting some of his sometimes controversial articulations. At the same place we met Maurice and Brenda Lee Gratton from Quebec, two of the many winter Texans, who showed us the huge dead tortoise on the beach. Also thanks from the girls for the nice shells you gave them.

Another acquaintance from Brownsville told about his son Dennon being married to a Danish girl Dorthe up in Galveston and suggested we visit them to show the flag. When we arrived in the afternoon the huge BBQ constructed by neighbor Al was steaming with turkey, roast, game and sausages. A wonderful hospitality by this overworked couple, where Dorthe is taking special lessons for her nursing career and Dennon along with his full time job as security executive at a chemical plant is working hard to become an engineer. The next day they showed us Galveston where we had a great picnic at the beach wall protecting the city from the sea. Thank you for your hospitality.

April 1998:

While we were waiting for the Columbia Space Shuttle launch at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida we parked at an empty site at the river separating the island from the mainland. We had a good time with our neighbors, Gary and Carol Kent, who helped neutralize a guy, who claimed to be the son of the Walgreen's pharmacy, who owned the land – a strange claim by a man who came to cut the grass and position his hot dog stand. The point was that on behalf of Walgreen's he claimed the right to collect a huge fee for those who wanted to watch the launch. After Gary went to Walgreen's the sausage seller turned red and did not want to collect any fee.

In the Ocala National Forest in central Florida we met Helen Sutton from Maine. Helen used to be a pilot's assistant during the 2nd WW, turned journalist and is now writing about her thoughts and sights. A remarkable woman with whom we enjoyed interesting conversations. Among the information we were missing is the following: Sigrid Undset is best known for her historical novel *Kristin Lavransdatter* (3 vol., 1920-22; trans. 1923-27), for which she received the 1928 Nobel Prize in literature. Good luck with your new house in Maine.

May 1998:

At the Sunburst Camp in the beautiful North Carolina mountains we met Bill and Donna Parton. I had an interesting discussion with Donna, who is a devoted Christian, and now probably volunteering as a missionary on Hawaii. Two days after you prayed for us Camilla was rescued by helicopter after having lost her way in the dark. Thank you for the bible you mailed to. Again we stayed much longer than planned, also because of the wonderful camp host of Norwegian origin, Edar Alseth and wife Peggy. Let us help you plan your trip to the old land.

We had a fine buffet at Pizza Hut in Christiansburg VA. Good luck to Aaron on his 5 months hike on the Appalachian Trail and thanks to Dough for his excellent service. The world is small: The following day we gave a lift through the Shenandoah National Park to Tom Vannoy, who had lost his brother on the trail, and who had met Aaron a just few days before. I envy those who have the guts to hike the entire trail of 2155 miles from Maine to Georgia.

June 1998:

Back in Washington DC Imad was again immensely helpful to us. All the best to you and your kids. In New York Helge gave us the full treatment as guide from Ellis Island to Harlem while we enjoyed Roberta during her few spare hours from the demanding job as psychiatrist.

Each of you has contributed to making our trip unforgettable, such relations are dear to us and we hope to stay in touch with you. Send us a letter or a postcard, contact us if you need any help from Europe and promise to let us know if and when you plan to be on this continent. We look forward to the opportunity of returning some of your generous help and hospitality.

We are not exactly enjoying the Danish summer here, which so far has been rather wet and windy. While the girls are vacationing with the grand parents we have been busy planning an extension of our small summerhouse. This includes clearing the ground of some big trees, which definitely gives warmth several times before the wood ends up in our stove.

Love from Benthe (who also traveled under the name Jessica) and Søren