

# Einar Holboll — father of Christmas seals

**By John Denune Jr.**  
Einar Holboll was born Dec. 20, 1865, in Copenhagen, Denmark. His ancestors for several generations had been landowners on a small scale. His father, however, and other relatives were naval officers, and Holboll also was expected to be one.

However, he failed the examination. Subsequently, he entered the merchant marines and spent a few happy years on sailing vessels.

Then, because of his health, Holboll was forced to abandon this vocation, and he entered

esting his superiors in the idea, with the result that by Dec. 6, 1904, there were about 6 million Christmas seals ready for sale through the Danish Post Office.

The world's first anti-tuberculosis Christmas seal bore the portrait of the deceased wife of the reigning king of Denmark (Figure 1).

The sale lasted from Dec. 6, 1904, through Jan. 6, 1905. The price of the Christmas seal was fixed at 2 ore. The tax was not compulsory, of course, but the idea caught the public interest and approval.

In the first year, 68,000 kroner was netted from the sale. Growth was rapid, and by 1907, 250,000kr had been collected. The revenue from the Christmas seal was so great and was increasing so constantly that the Christmas Seal Committee was able to finance projects other than tuberculosis.

In 1916, the annual revenue was 140,000kr; in 1917, 155,000kr; and by 1923, 217,000kr. The committee consequently made contributions to various existing enterprises or social welfare organizations.

Money was contributed to children's convalescent homes, the fund for feeding needy children, the Danish Children's Aid Society, the fund for war sufferers, for a sanatorium for children in Greenland and for vacation camps for children.

The idea spread rapidly to the neighboring countries. Sweden was especially quick to take it up. By Dec. 15, 1904, Sweden was ready for distribution of 8 million seals, the revenue from which was to be used for fighting tuberculosis.

Two years later, Norway likewise prepared seals to be used in the same manner and for the same purpose.

The Christmas seal met with exceptional success in the United States. By 1926, the money raised from seal sales established 800 sanatoriums with 70,000 beds, 600 clinics and 3,000 fresh-air schools, and trained 10,000 nurses.

After a few short years, use of Christmas seals in Denmark



Figure 1. The world's first anti-tuberculosis Christmas seal, released in 1904, pictures the deceased wife of the King of Denmark.

the postal service.

Work at the post office did not absorb all of Holboll's interest or time. He was quite prominent in several philanthropic enterprises, some of them connected with the welfare of his fellow employees.

In 1903, at Christmastime, while thinking about the extra mail that the Christmas season places upon the postal service, it occurred to him that something useful might be derived from it.

For instance, a tax could be placed upon people who had an itch to write at Christmastime, and the revenue thereby obtained could be used for some philanthropic purpose.

Holboll loved children and at once planned that this revenue should be used for their benefit.

He eventually decided that it ought to be used for tubercular children.

Holboll succeeded in inter-

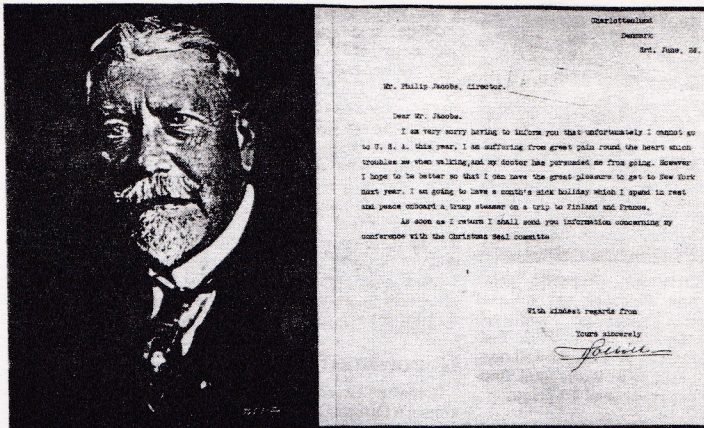


Figure 2. Holboll's letter to the director of the National Tuberculosis Association expressing his regrets for missing the 1926 conference. Holboll is shown in the photo.

had become a well-established custom.

Holboll said about it, "Letters without Christmas seals are simply no good. Fortunately, there are many persons who share my opinion. I know an old woman in Nyboder who received three letters without the Christmas seal. What did this nice old woman do? She returned them to the writers unopened, declaring that she was not going to know people who did not use Christmas seals."

Because the Christmas seal had been such a huge success, an attempt was made to imitate the idea in connection with other movements. For instance, there was a temperance seal and a national defense seal.

had a very large circle of friends and knew much of the intelligentsia.

Holboll originated other ideas for philanthropic purposes. None of them, however, acquired the fame of the Christmas seal. Among them should be mentioned the child's good luck coin.

Holboll had trouble with his eyesight, and on several occasions he was threatened with blindness. His idea was that parents who had healthy children should be grateful and be willing to do something for blind children.

A coin was made that was of nominal cost. These were sold to parents for 1kr. Midwives and doctors were pressed into



Figure 3. Denmark issued this Christmas seal commemorating Holboll in 1927, the same year he died.

In 1909, Holboll was decorated by the king, and that same year he was appointed postmaster at Charlottenlund, a position much coveted, especially since the king had his summer residence at Charlottenlund Palace.

All his life Holboll had financial worries. He found it hard to meet his personal expenses with the proceeds of his salary.

For a good part, the financial stringency was due to the fact that early in life he stood surety for a friend, who afterwards was unable to meet the obligations he had undertaken.

Instead, Holboll had to pay the debt. Not until a few months before his death was he through with these payments.

In the summer of 1924, Holboll was invited to be the guest of honor at the annual conference of the National Tuberculosis Association in Atlanta, Ga. He accepted the invitation and enjoyed what he considered the greatest triumph of his life.

The following is an English translation of a letter written by Holboll during his visit to America.

"It has been a unique experience for me and I shall endeavor to recount the events as well as I can, but the friendliness, the admiration, the applause which I have received, no one in my beloved little fatherland will be able to realize.

"I myself am quite stunned

by it . . . When I arose, the whole assembly became enthusiastic, all stood up and applauded for about a minute — and there I stood — my dear friend, and I thought I must be dreaming! Nothing like it have I ever experienced before.

"There were probably about 1,000 persons present. When finally the applause stopped, I spoke briefly about the great honor it was to me to be there, and thanked them for their kindness; it was, I told them, the most beautiful fairy tale (or adventure) of my life, which I was here experiencing.

"This closed the meeting. When I came down from the platform, they crowded around me. All wished to shake hands and pat me on the shoulder. My head grew dizzy with the prominent names from the various states which were introduced to me.

"At last I got away and was driven to my hotel. I went to bed and could not sleep till morning. To tell the truth I lay there crying. Thank God I could control myself during the meeting."

Holboll also wrote poetry, and at least one volume of his poems and stories was published and well received. He



Figure 4. The 1938 U.S. Christmas seal pane honors individuals who contributed to the fight against tuberculosis. Holboll is depicted on the seal in the lower right-hand of the pane.

service to see that the coin was brought to the attention of the parents.

In Denmark this project met with no special success, but in other countries it flourished, especially in Sweden.

Holboll had heart trouble, and during the latter part of his life it grew very serious. In 1926, he was again invited to America as the guest of the National Tuberculosis Association.

The letter shown in Figure 2 was written by Holboll to the association's director expressing his regrets at missing the event. Holboll's photo is shown to the left of the letter.

He wanted very much to go, as travel had always been one of his chief pleasures, but he

did not dare accept the invitation on account of his health.

Holboll died on Feb. 23, 1927, from a heart attack. A memorial was erected on his grave. Under his name there is carved in stone, "The Father of the Christmas Seal."

The Denmark Christmas

John Denune Jr. is an art teacher in Granville, Ohio, who has collected and promoted Christmas seals for seven years. He also collects some United States and worldwide issues.

Denune states that he enjoys collecting Christmas seals because even the rare seals are not expensive and because there are many discoveries yet to be made. ■