

Cato Torvald Opsal Oral History Interview, 1983

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Opsal, Cato Torvald
Title	Cato Torvald Opsal Oral History Interview
Dates	1983 (inclusive) 1983 1983
Quantity	3 file folders 8 photographs 1 sound cassette
Collection Number	t239
Summary	An oral history interview with Cato Torvald Opsal, a Norwegian immigrant.
Repository	Pacific Lutheran University, Archives and Special Collections Archives and Special Collections Pacific Lutheran University 12180 Park Avenue South Tacoma, Washington 98447 Telephone: 253-535-7586 Fax: 253-535-7315 archives@plu.edu
Access Restrictions	The oral history collection is open to all users.
Additional Reference Guides	
Languages	English
Sponsor	Funding for encoding this finding aid was provided through a grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Biographical Note

Torvald Opsal was born on May 6, 1910 in Vikedal, Norway. His parents were Torkel Amundson Opsal and Kjersti Fatland Opsal, and Torvald had two brothers, Ole and Einar, and one sister, Margrethe. Church and Sunday School were very important in the Opsal family, and the children also received a half hour of religious instruction at school each day. Torvald attended seven years of school and began work at a quarry after his confirmation. Many people in Torvald's area had lived in America or emigrated there permanently, and it came as no surprise when Torvald decided to emigrate as well in March 1929. At the age of eighteen, he traveled across the Atlantic on the "Stavangerfjord" and arranged to live with an Uncle Olaf in Alamo, North Dakota. In Alamo, he worked on his uncle's farm for a month and then obtained employment from a builder in Williston. When he had saved enough money, he purchased a Model Ford, which he used to drive to Olaf's farm on the weekends and later sold in order to purchase a train ticket to Seattle, Washington in late summer. Torvald wanted to settle in the Pacific Northwest, where the environment was similar to Norway and he could find a job on a fishing crew. Torvald had an uncle, Torbjoern Fatland Oernes, in Olympia, and he stayed with him, working in

a plywood factory, until the spring. In the spring, Torvald went to Tacoma and got a job on an Alaskan fishing crew. During the off-season, he went back to work in the plywood factory, until he began fishing year round in Alaska and California in 1936. Torvald met his wife, Oleda Christopherson, in 1938. His Uncle Olaf knew her family, and Torvald had met her uncle and parents in North Dakota. They were married March 4, 1939 at Olivet Lutheran Church. Due to Torvald's fishing schedule, Oleda was alone during the summer and winter and worked as a bookkeeper at Puget Sound Plywood during that time. Torvald decided to quit fishing in 1950 and worked full-time at the plywood plant until 1975. The Opsals never had any children. In 1955, Torvald and Oleda returned to Norway for three months, but Torvald thought so much had changed that it did not feel like home anymore.

Lineage

Full Name: Cato Torvald Opsal. Father: Torkel Amundson Opsal. Mother: Kjersti Fatland Opsal. Paternal Grandfather: Ola Amundson. Paternal Grandmother: Margrethe Roalkvam Amundson. Maternal Grandfather: Torbjørn Fatland. Maternal Grandmother: Ingeborg Espevold Fatland. Brothers and Sisters: Ole Opsal, Einar Opsal, Margrethe Opsal. Spouse: Oleda Christopherson. Children: None.

Content Description

This interview was conducted with Torvald Opsal on March 22, 1983 in Tacoma, Washington. It contains information on Torvald's family background, work, emigration, marriage, church, and return trip to Norway. The interview also includes photographs of Torvald as a child, Torvald as a young man, the "Stavangerfjord," Torvald in Alaska in 1930, Torvald on his wedding day, and Torvald at the time of the interview. The interview was conducted in English and in Norwegian towards the end of the tape.

Use of the Collection

Restrictions on Use

There are no restrictions on use.

Administrative Information

Custodial History

The Oral History collection project was started during an experimental course on Scandinavian Women in the Pacific Northwest. Students in the course were encouraged to interview women and learn about their experiences as immigrants to the United States. The project was continued and expanded with support from the president's office and by grants from the L.J. Skaggs and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation, from the Joel E. Ferris Foundation and the Norwegian Emigration Fund of the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The project was directed by Dr. Janet E. Rasmussen. The collection was transferred to the Archives and Special Collections Department.

Acquisition Information

Related Materials

To search and view Pacific Lutheran University's digitized images, visit our [Digital Assets Website](#)

Processing Note

The interview was conducted by Inger Nygaard Carr using a cassette recorder. A research copy was also prepared from the original. To further preserve the content of the interview, it is now being transferred to compact disc. We deliberately did not transcribe the entire interview because we want the researchers to listen to the interviewee's own voice. The transcription index highlights important aspects of the interview and the tape counter numbers noted on the Partial Interview Transcription are meant as approximate finding guides and refer to the location of a subject on the cassette/CD. The recording quality is good

The collection was transcribed by Mary Sue Gee, Julie Peterson and Becky Husby.

Bibliography

Rasmussen, Janet Elaine. *New Land New Lives: Scandinavian Immigrants to the Pacific Northwest* Tacoma, Washington University of Washington Press 1993

Detailed Description of the Collection

The partial interview transcription highlights important aspects of the interview. Numbers may be used as guides to important subjects. Two numbers separated by a slash indicate that the first number is for cassette and the second for CD.

Container(s)	Description
Cassette	
239, side 1	003: FAMILY BACKGROUND Born Cato Torvald Opsal on May 6, 1910 in Vikedal, (Stavanger), Rogaland, Norway. Vikedal is a hamlet on the Sandeidfjorden about two hours north of Stavanger and due east of Haugesund.
239, side 1	033: PARENTS Mother was Kjersti Fatland and father was Torkel Opsal. Both were born and raised in Vikedal. Dad spent six years (1900-1906) in Minnesota and North Dakota. After returning to Norway, he married and took over his dad's place, a small farm. In that area the people had diverse means of making a living: farming, fishing, and timber. The farm brought in money with milk cows and timber. They also raised and sold a few pigs and sheep; had 60-70 sheep at one time. The wool was shorn and sold in the spring. When the sheep were sold to the slaughterhouse in the fall, they were paid for the meat and the wool. His dad also had a boat and nets and did a little fishing on the side.
239, side 1	094: BROTHERS AND SISTERS There were four children in the family: Ole, Torvald, Einar, and Margrethe. Ole went to sea at 14-15 and eventually became a skipper. During WWII he sailed

Container(s)	Description
	<p>on Norwegian tankers out of San Pedro into the South Pacific. After years as a sea captain he went ashore and settled in Oslo, buying one story of an apartment house. Then he took a pilot's course and worked as a ship's pilot in Oslofjorden for 10-12 years before retiring to Elverum.</p>
239, side 1	<p>137: Einar took over the Opsal homeplace; he has since retired and sold it to a relative. His sister, Margrethe, worked as a buyer for a co-op.</p>
239, side 1	<p>160: GRANDPARENTS His paternal grandmother was Margrethe Roalkvam and his grandfather was Ola Amundson. Ola and his two brothers owned a shipyard and built ships. When the shipyard was sold, all three bought farms taking the farm names. Ola and one brother became Opsals and the third became Mo (Moe). The Moe progeny immigrated to the Midwest - Mayville and Finley, North Dakota and Minnesota. Grandma Opsal came from way up at the head of the valley; she died in her early 60's. Ola was blind later in life and Torvald did his reading for him.</p>
239, side 1	<p>210: His maternal grandfather, Torbjoern Fatland, died early. Grandma was Ingeborg, a small, active and healthy lady who lived to 89 years old. She had nine children; one boy, Torbjoern Fatland (Oernes) immigrated to Olympia, WA. Life was simple and quiet up in the valley - but hard. People made everything they needed.</p>
239, side 1	<p>257: SCHOOL Torvald attended seven years of school and had the same teacher his father had - Hegebo(?). Torvald thinks the old teachers were good and considerate; they never embarrassed slower students but realized different people had different talents. They were also multi-talented; Hegebo was the organist and choir director at church and gave music lessons on the piano, organ, and violin. Torvald also opines that the one-room school with several grades has advantages for both fast and slow learners.</p>
239, side 1	<p>325: Times were tough, and after confirmation people went to work - not more school. Torvald worked for a truck driver at a quarry, loading and unloading granite cobblestones at the dock area. "But he was set to go to America anyway."</p>
239, side 1	<p>335: CHURCH The minister had three churches: Imsdal, Sandeid, and Vikedal. Vikedal was the main parish where the minister lived on the state-owned kirkegaard. He was a "riksmål" minister originally, and Torvald's confirmation class was his first "landsmål" group. The minister spent every third Sunday at a different church; in his absence, "bedehus" was held. Church was a must in Torvald's family and</p>

Container(s)	Description
	also bedehus (lay Sunday school). Community people - like Torvald's granddad and his teacher Hegebo - organized and led bedehus. Besides church and bedehus every Sunday, there was a half hour of religious instruction in school daily - memorization of Bible history.
239, side 1	409: CHRISTMAS IN NORWAY Christmas was one-two weeks long. Presents weren't as important as food. They had a tree at home trimmed with handmade paper decorations and real candles. At bedehus there was an enormously big tree, and a Christmas festival was held for kids and grown-ups.
239, side 1	438: On Christmas Eve they had meat and rice - risengroet. When he was young they had a big bowl on a stand (like a tureen) that was filled with something like "fløtegraut" - only made of rice that was cooked so long it was so smooth and nice. The porridge was topped with butter, sugar, and a beautiful red-berry sauce. Everyone just helped themselves directly from the bowl with spoons. Later on when the kids were older they had their own plates. But this was the custom of the time.
239, side 1	477: He never had lutefisk until he immigrated to America and tasted it at Normanna Hall in Tacoma - and he didn't like it. Nobody had it, nor had he heard of it in his area.
239, side 1	483: They attended church on Christmas Day. Mother left a little early to prepare a regular hot dinner of meat and potatoes.
239, side 1	501: He always liked Norwegian food but then he liked American food also. At his uncle's in North Dakota, "I got into some food there I'd never tasted. Of course I thought I'd never get enough!" He fondly remembers large slices of freshly baked, hard wheat bread placed in a soup plate and covered with fresh separated cream and sugar. In Norway the Christmas cookies - like sandbakkels and krumkake - were stored in tins and rationed out to the family. There weren't parties per se, just drop-in company that was always served coffee and goodies.
239, side 1	539: No troll stories were told in his family.
239, side 1	543: WORK He began working for money as "a little tyke" for a neighbor - cutting grain. This fellow was well-to-do and hired help for haying and harvest. He and his brother wore gunny sacks over their clothing and cut the grain even in rain storms,

Container(s)	Description
	getting soaked clear through. But they stayed on day after day. There was no playing as children.
239, side 1	<p>561:</p> <p>They had to take off a whole Sunday to go high up in the mountains to ski. The climate around his home was quite mild, like around western Washington, due to the Gulf Stream. A snowstorm would be followed by two weeks of warm weather then you walked in the slush". By walking to school in wooden shoes one could feel the cold slush on the open heel.</p>
239, side 1	<p>577:</p> <p>After the farm work, he worked for the truck driver for one to one and a half years. Then he went on a road gang and helped build a road into the valley. Everything was handwork using a pick, shovel and wheelbarrow.</p>
239, side 1	<p>596: EMIGRATION</p> <p>"Just about half of the population at home had been here. You could go down to the stores in the evening and they'd sit there and talk English you know, and even talk Norwegian about the old logging days out here and fishing in Alaska and farming in the Midwest. They came from everywhere. Then, they came home, got married, and settled and took over places - and stayed home." A lot came home just for visits, like his two uncles.</p>
239, side 1	<p>608:</p> <p>His dad thought it was fine that Torvald was coming to America because there was nothing at home. "At that time you had to scratch all over to make a living - if you didn't own something." There were no jobs - no money. Nobody lost their places and there was plenty of food, but it was tough. "Everybody either went sailing or to this country - shipped out. Had to get out."</p>
239, side 1	<p>626:</p> <p>Torvald emigrated in March 1929 at 18 years old after going through the usual quota system: signing up for a farm took nine months and signing up for a city took 18. He sent "guarantee" papers to his three uncles (Dad's brothers) in North Dakota, which they signed and sent back. He took the papers to the American Consul in Stavanger. After notice of his acceptance he went to an American doctor in the Consulate in Bergen. In order to do that he took and sold a cow in Stavanger and used the cash for his expenses to Bergen. The doctor checked his teeth and for hernia and filled out the papers.</p>
239, side 1	<p>668:</p> <p>Mother was pretty good about his emigration until after breakfast on the last day. While his dad prepared to take Torvald and his trunk to the dock, his mother went off to the barn by herself and kept watch. "She just couldn't be there when I left the house."</p>
239, side 1	686: THE TRIP OVER

Container(s)	Description
	<p>He sailed from Stavanger on the Stavangerfjord (b/w picture on file). The trip over was a little rough and took 8-9 days, but he never was seasick. Due to heavy fog, the boat anchored up outside of Halifax on the Grand Banks. "The fishing boats were crawling like an anthill." Even so, the Stavangerfjord hit a halibut boat. The fishermen were brought on deck before their boat sank. When they reached Halifax, there was ice in the rigging.</p>
239, side 1	<p>710: IN NEW YORK After a half day layover in Halifax, they proceeded to New York, passed the Statue of Liberty, and came shore. Torvald had traveled with three neighbor guys but none knew English. Two were sons of carpenters who were working in New York laying floors, etc. They begged Torvald to remain in New York and take a carpenter's job at \$10 a day. But Torvald was too honest - felt obligated to go to his original destination. He didn't realize that once ashore as a legal immigrant, he was free to do and go as he pleased.</p>
239, side 1	<p>736: Torvald gave Tomas (one of the guys) a dollar to buy him some lunch for the train - a bunch of bananas. "He came back with a big paper sack - bananas there for a 100 people. My gosh, they must have been cheap at that time. He shouldn't have bought them. But I wanted a dollar's worth of bananas and I got it." They arrived in Chicago and were met by a fellow from home - talked with him. "We looked like men from Mars"; they had tags all over their lapels with name, address, etc. The conductors were good; came over, read the tag, and put people on the right train. A neighbor girl came and sat with them in Minneapolis where they waited a whole day. The immigrants left Minneapolis one by one, going in many directions on different trains: Iowa, North Dakota, and other places. Torvald boarded later in the day for Minot, North Dakota in the northwest corner of the state. While waiting in the Stanley depot west of Minot to switch trains to Alamo, he was approached by a dark farmer-type in a mackinaw. This fellow inquired in Norwegian about Torvald, identifying himself as the blacksmith from Alamo who had come into Stanley to pick up Torvald and his own sister who was attending the teacher's college in Minot.</p>
239, side 2	<p>022: Torvald wasn't too anxious to accompany this guy. But in the conversation he discovered that the fellow was the brother of Uncle Olaf's wife. So Torvald went with him. They drove the remaining 70 miles to Alamo in an open touring car; there was still some snow on the ground. "It was cold - it was biting. I wasn't dressed for that." It was late at night when they reached Uncle Olaf's who had to talk far into the night even though Torvald was really tired. When he got up in the morning, North Dakota looked just like he expected - flat.</p>
239, side 2	<p>065: SETTLING IN North Dakota. He spent a couple of days distributing items from his trunk around the area to cousins. Worked around the farm for a month and then got a job with a builder in Williston.</p>

Container(s)	Description
239, side 2	<p>092: Building houses he earned 40 cents an hour, 10 hours a day (\$4), and paid out \$1.50 for room and board. When he had enough cash, he bought a Model Ford, which he drove out to Uncle Olaf's farm to spend weekends. When harvest started, he joined the threshing crew for \$5 a day plus room and board.</p>
239, side 2	<p>124: To Seattle. In late summer he sold his car and used the cash to buy a train ticket to Seattle, Washington. He couldn't stand it back in North Dakota, and had always planned to settle in the Pacific Northwest. It was just like home: climate, water, trees, boats. Besides, he had an uncle, Torbjoern Fatland arnes (Ornes), who lived in Olympia and worked as a boiler engineer for a plywood manufacturer. Torvald was met by his uncle's wife and youngest daughter in Seattle. In Olympia he went right to work for the plywood factory.</p>
239, side 2	<p>187: WORK AND CAREER In the spring, upon his uncle's advice, Torvald took the Greyhound bus from Olympia to the Stratford Hotel at 15th and Market in Tacoma. The hotel was owned by a Norwegian and was the "headquarters" for the Alaska fishing crews. When Torvald arrived, most crews were ready except for a new skipper (from Stavanger) who needed a crew of eight from scratch. Torvald got on this crew and was out in the water before he knew they were fishing for herring. It was his foothold into the Alaska fishing business; the money was good, and he always wanted to go fishing.</p>
239, side 2	<p>249: Instead of working during the off-season some of his friends went down to PLU for two-three seasons. Room, board, and education was reasonable for \$40 a month. But he worked at the plywood mill during winters; paid off his ticket and sent home money to help the family. "In the long run it turned out just as good that I did (keep working)." After 1936, he fished year round, California in winter and Alaska in summer.</p>
239, side 2	<p>282: He never had a problem with employment except in 1931-2. Instead of fishing he shipped out to the South Pacific on a Norwegian tramp steamer. Although the skipper had assured Torvald the freighter would return to Tacoma in time for the fishing season, it was late. That spring (1932) there were absolutely no jobs in Tacoma and he hopped a freight train to ND. He stayed on the farm until the fall of 1933. "Lost two seasons in Alaska on account of shipping out on that lousy boat." But, he saw a lot of places.</p>
239, side 2	<p>315: ENGLISH He didn't attend night school for English but went to citizenship classes in 1937-8.</p>
239, side 2	<p>321: SCANDINAVIAN ORGANIZATIONS AND CHURCH</p>

Container(s)	Description
	He joined Bethlehem Lutheran in 1953-4, but never any groups. He was on the move too much.
239, side 2	<p>392: MEETING SPOUSE</p> <p>Back in North Dakota his uncle and her dad were active in tent meetings. In 1932 Torvald accompanied his uncle into Ray to pitch a tent and met her uncle (Ole Oakland ?) and parents (Olaus ? and Karine Christopherson). Her sister (Mildred Dahl) moved to Tacoma in 1935 and that's where Torvald met Oleda in 1938, after she'd finished high school in North Dakota and moved to Tacoma. They married March 4, 1939, at Olivet Lutheran Church (b/w photo). He's been running back and forth to Alaska all these years and he figures that's why "we've been married 44 years".</p>
239, side 2	<p>410:</p> <p>(Talk about the b/w pictures - identification of people.)</p>
239, side 2	<p>416:</p> <p>After the wedding but before fishing season opened, they went to Portland, OR. In the fall they drove back to North Dakota to visit relatives: an aunt (Mother's sister) in the Black Hills, her brother in Stanley, his relatives.</p>
239, side 2	<p>430:</p> <p>They have always lived in Tacoma; his wife was alone summer and winter. He fished in CA three weeks on and one week off. Herring fishing was four months out but salmon fishing in the Bering Sea was only one month. Economically, fishing was a good profession</p>
239, side 2	<p>449:</p> <p>In 1940-1 they bought shares in a co-operative plywood plant, Puget Sound Plywood. He began work there in 1942 when Uncle Sam sent him a letter to appear before the draft board. One of the board members advised him "to stick to your occupation of commercial fishing" to which Torvald responded "Thank you". And, he went back to fishing. All through the war their boat and others carried troops back and forth between the Aleutians and Washington. The boats traveled alone sometimes or in convoys as the Gulf of AK was full of Japanese submarines. "It was no picnic."</p>
239, side 2	<p>486:</p> <p>When he returned to fishing, Oleda went back to work as a bookkeeper at Puget Sound Plywood; stayed there many years. Fishing got bad in CA around 1946, and in 1949 he quit that job. He continued fishing in AK and worked at Foss Launch and Tug during the winter. By 1950 he quit fishing altogether and worked full-time at the plywood plant until he retired in 1975 at age 65.</p>
239, side 2	<p>508:</p> <p>They have no children.</p>

Container(s)	Description
239, side 2	522: RETURN TRIP TO NORWAY They prepared to go for three months in 1955, taking a train to New York and catching the Stavangerfjord to Bergen. Going ashore in Bergen, Torvald thought Norway looked so different - didn't feel like home at all. They spent the first night with Oleda's aunt, visiting and eating dinner. They had walked all the way to her home in a pouring rainstorm and were soaked to the bone. "That was a horrible thing to come into. You almost feel like why didn't I stay on the boat or why didn't I stay home".
239, side 2	568: His mother had died in 1953 of stomach cancer, but his dad (72 years) was in town. So they went home and pitched in with the spring farm work - planted potatoes. Then they took off two weeks and traveled to Stockholm, Oslo, and Copenhagen. Back home it was time for haying so they helped with that. Then they went to the SAS office in the Atlantic Hotel in Stavanger, exchanged their boat tickets for plane tickets, and flew home.
239, side 2	591: CHANGES IN NORWAY Some, not too much. People had moved into the valley and they talked different - not the valley language. The little farms and old houses looked the same. Now (1980's) "they are floating in money". People go to "the Dead Sea and bake out their rheumatism", Canary Islands, Spain, Morocco - all over.
239, side 2	612: SPEAKING NORWEGIAN His Norwegian is "landsmål", and he tells why he's glad he came to America in Norwegian.

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Christmas
 Church attendance -- Norway
 Education--Norway
 Emigration and immigration
 Family--Norway
 Fishing
 Norway -- Social conditions -- 1945-
 Norwegian-Americans--Northwest, Pacific--Interviews
 Norwegian-Americans--Social life and customs

Personal Names :

Opsal, Torvald--Interviews
 (creator)
 Christopherson, Oleda
 Opsal, Einar
 Opsal, Ole
 Ørnes, Torbjørn Fatland

Opsal, Kjersti Fatland

Opsal, Margrethe

Opsal, Olaf

Opsal, Torkel Amundson

Corporate Names :

Olivet Lutheran Church (Tacoma, Wash.)

Pacific Lutheran University

Puget Sound Plywood Company (Tacoma, Wash.)

Stavangerfjord (Steamship)

Family Names :

Amundson family

Fatland family

Moe family

Opsal family

Roalkvam family

Geographical Names :

Alamo (N.D.)

Olympia (Wash.)

Tacoma (Wash.)

Vikedal (Norway)

Form or Genre Terms :

Oral histories

Occupations :

Bookkeepers

Farmers

Finding aid prepared by Kerstin Ringdahl and Amity Smetzler
2004