

# Helen Nordström Mork Oral History Interview, 1989

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Creator</b>	Mork, Helen Nordström
<b>Title</b>	Helen Nordström Mork Oral History Interview
<b>Dates</b>	1989 (inclusive) 1989 1989
<b>Quantity</b>	3 file folders 2 photographs. 1 sound cassette.
<b>Collection Number</b>	t281
<b>Summary</b>	An oral history interview with Helen Nordström Mork, a Swedish immigrant.
<b>Repository</b>	<a href="#">Pacific Lutheran University, Archives and Special Collections</a> Archives and Special Collections Pacific Lutheran University 12180 Park Avenue South Tacoma, Washington 98447 Telephone: 253-535-7586 Fax: 253-535-7315 <a href="mailto:archives@plu.edu">archives@plu.edu</a>
<b>Access Restrictions</b>	The oral history collection is open to all users.
<b>Additional Reference Guides</b>	
<b>Languages</b>	English
<b>Sponsor</b>	Funding for encoding this finding aid was provided through a grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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## Biographical Note

Helen Mork was born Helena Elizabeth Nordström on November 11, 1910 in Hindersön, Norrbotten province, Sweden. Helen's family, which included six brothers and sisters, lived on an island on the northeast coast of Sweden. Helen says she had a very happy childhood and enjoyed celebrating Christmas with the traditional decorations and food. At the young age of 16, Helen decided she wanted to move to America. She met her aunt and uncle in Graham, Washington and then moved to Tacoma, finding a job as a housekeeper.

In 1933, Helen married a Norwegian fisherman named Ola Mork, whom she met at night school; they built a house and settled in Parkland, Washington, where they lived for nine years. In 1934, Helen and Ola had their first child, Erling. Soon thereafter, Helen became an American citizen. The family visited Norway and Sweden in 1937. They had one more son, Harold, and a daughter, Eleanor, before moving from Parkland to Tacoma in 1942. Helen continued to work as a housekeeper until the kids were in school, at which time she catered for wealthy families in the area. When Eleanor was 16 years old, they

returned to Sweden and Norway for a summer. Helen and Ola traveled to Scandinavia themselves in 1962, 1970, 1975, and 1981. All of Helen's siblings still live in Sweden, and she has maintained close contact with them. Helen belongs to the Swedish Club, Vasa Lodge, and Sons of Norway; she can still speak Swedish and reads Swedish magazines.

### Lineage

Full Name: Helena Elizabeth Mork. Maiden Name: Helena Elizabeth Nordström. Father: Helmer Nordström. Mother: Amanda Nordström. Paternal Grandfather: Frederick Nordström. Paternal Grandmother: Johanna Nordström. Maternal Grandfather: Johannes Olofson. Maternal Grandmother: Johanna Olofson. Brothers and Sisters: Hilder Nordström, Henny Nordström, Harold Nordström, Ruben Nordström, Ragnhild Nordström, Annie Nordström. Spouse: Ola Mork. Children: Erling Mork, Harold Mork, Eleanor Schubert.

## Content Description

This interview was conducted with Helen Mork on January 21, 1989 in Seattle, Washington. The interview contains information on personal background, emigration, adjustments, family, and heritage. Also available are two black and white photographs from Helen's life. The interview was conducted in English. See also Ola Mork, T282.

## 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 Laura Schubert 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

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## 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
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Cassette	
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281, side 1	045: PERSONAL BACKGROUND Helen Mork was born Helena Elizabeth Nordstroem on Hindersön, Sweden. Her parents were Amanda and Helmer Nordström. Mother was a housewife, and Dad worked on a freighter in the summertime. In the winter, he chopped wood, which the children stacked in a woodshed the following summer. They lived on an island three Swedish miles [21 English miles] outside of Luleå on the northeast coast of Sweden. They rarely went to town during the winter. If they did, they rode with the mailman on a horse and sled over the ice. The road was staked out with evergreen trees on both sides so the horses would know where to go. There were no landmarks over the 21 miles of ice. In summer, they went to town often via motorboats, and it was a lot of fun.
<hr/>	
281, side 1	115: It was a very happy childhood on the island, although there was nothing fancy. They walked to school in warm weather. In winter, they skied, taking shortcuts, as there were no real roads. There was a one hour lunch break when the kids returned home to eat. School was held six days a week and five hours per day. It was pretty dark except around 11 - 1, but they enjoyed school, skiing and skating. In summertime, they went swimming and had to work at home. She remembers doing lots of dishes for their large family. They had a few cows, sheep, and calves. Sometimes they took the calves to another island and stayed all summer. The calves fattened up and were butchered in the fall; the meat remained frozen all winter. They also ate lots of fish. They would put out

Container(s)	Description
	nets at night and pull in fish the next morning. With the fish, they had potatoes, a milk-like yogurt--"filmjök", and tunnbröd.
281, side 1	<p>175:</p> <p>At Christmas, Mother made many cookies. They had a Christmas tree decorated with homemade items. Twenty days after Christmas, the tree was taken out, and they had a party, dancing and singing around the tree. Santa Claus would come, but they never saw him. He just threw things on the floor through the door as the cold wind blew in. They always received Christmas presents: mittens, socks, etc. Once she received a blue coat with a red lining. Grandmother always gave the children a book. When Dad came home from work, he brought a bag of candy. They had Sunday school every Sunday, and a preacher would come to the schoolhouse once in awhile. Later, a mission church was started. Religion--catechism, Bible history, hymns--was taught daily in school. Emigration: When she was 16, she wanted to go to America. None of her siblings wanted to go. An aunt had left when Helen was a baby.</p>
281, side 1	<p>239:</p> <p>She came by boat, had a lot of fun, and ate delicious food. From New York, she got a train to Tacoma. Along the way, she managed to meet Norwegian or Swedish people who also knew English. They helped her buy food, mainly cheese sandwiches. "For a long time, I couldn't eat cheese afterwards because I was so tired of cheese sandwiches". She also bought fruit, coffee, and milk.</p>
281, side 1	<p>266: SETTLING IN</p> <p>In Tacoma, she was met at the old Milwaukee train station by 14 strange relatives. They went to one of mother's cousins for coffee and a visit. She then accompanied her aunt and uncle home to Graham, Washington. Later she found a job as a maid in Tacoma. The lady was exceptionally kind and wrote out recipes for Helen in Swedish. It was also hard work because the family of seven produced a lot of dirty clothes and ate lots of food. Helen washed clothes by hand but had a hand-wringer. She worked for five years beginning with 35 dollars a month plus room and board. After awhile, she got 45 and 50 dollars a month. She worked at different places mainly as a cook.</p>
281, side 1	<p>304:</p> <p>In the evenings she attended English school for several years. Family: In 1933 Helen married a Norwegian commercial fisherman. They built a little house in the country a few miles east of Parkland. They had electric lights and a wood cookstove. A year later, a son was born, so she didn't work anymore. Ola went to Alaska every summer for herring and California in the winter for sardines.</p>
281, side 1	<p>325:</p> <p>In 1937 they went to Sweden and Norway. She and the oldest boy, Erling, stayed 10 months and established relationships with the families again. In April, Ola had to return to Alaska. As they were in Norway at the time, Helen and</p>

Container(s)	Description
	Erling returned and stayed with her folks in Sweden. After a real good summer, they returned in September, and Ola came back from fishing in October.
281, side 1	<p>338:</p> <p>They lived in Parkland for nine years, and had two more children. Then in 1942, they moved to Tacoma. There was a gas shortage, and it was difficult for her to live alone in the country with three small children. They lived in Tacoma 24 years, and moved to Seattle in 1956. When Eleanor was 16 years old, they returned and spent a summer in Sweden and visited in Norway. Eleanor liked Sweden very well, and spent a year [1962] at the University of Stockholm during her college days. The Christmas of 1962, Ola and Helen returned to Norway as her sister was married to Ola's brother. They bought a car and returned to America. They've returned to Scandinavia in 1970, 1975, and 1981. In the meantime, all Helen's sisters and brothers visited in America. The Morks now own a cabin near Mt. Vernon and spend a lot of time there.</p>
281, side 1	<p>380: MEETING SPOUSE</p> <p>Helen met Ola at night school. They walked to dances at Normanna and Valhalla Halls, and then they began "going together" and had lots of fun. Ola had a car, which "was a big thing in those days".</p>
281, side 1	<p>393:</p> <p>She adjusted easily in America. In a couple of months she understood English pretty well, and she had many friends with whom she spoke Swedish. Her social life was good: school on Monday and Thursday nights and dances on Saturday.</p>
281, side 1	<p>403: CHURCH</p> <p>She attended First Lutheran in Tacoma. After marriage, they joined Trinity Lutheran in Parkland. Later in Tacoma, they joined Bethel Lutheran with Pastor Larson; the children were confirmed there, but baptized at Trinity. They transferred to Our Redeemer in Seattle where Helen is active in the ladies circle.</p>
281, side 1	<p>419:</p> <p>She also belongs to Swedish Club, Vasa Lodge in Tacoma, and Sons of Norway in Seattle. She likes to knit, and has made many afghans for her grandchildren.</p>
281, side 1	<p>437: SIBLINGS</p> <p>Her oldest sister, Hilder, was a schoolteacher and is now retired and lives in Luleaa. Henny, the second sister was a housewife with one daughter. Her brother, Harold, and an uncle built a garage in Raaneaa; he is a retired mechanic. The second brother, Ruben, was a policeman in Luleaa; he was the head of the state patrol when he retired. Ragnhild stayed on Hindersoan and married. Annie, her youngest sister, is married to Ola's brother and lives in Volda, Norway. They all have children except Hilder who didn't marry.</p>

Container(s)	Description
281, side 1	<p>463: GRANDPARENTS</p> <p>Her maternal grandparents lived far away. Grandma Nordstroem lived next door on a little farm. Helen visited her every day. Her home was "nice and quiet" unlike her own home with so many children. Helen stayed overnight with her during the wintertime, because her mother didn't like the grandmother to be alone.</p>
281, side 1	<p>484:</p> <p>The great grandparents worked for a farmer outside of Hindersoen. They bought a farm for 300 riksdaler, and paid for it by selling fish.</p>
281, side 1	<p>501:</p> <p>The most exciting thing about America was the movies. "Oh, I thought shows were really wonderful and they were really cheap." One could see two good shows for 15 cents at the Temple Theater. She and her girlfriends walked to the shows; it helped her to learn English.</p>
281, side 1	<p>513:</p> <p>Helen became a citizen after Erling was born. She had studied for citizenship at night school and it was very easy for her. She just needed to get her papers.</p>
281, side 1	<p>524:</p> <p>The children attended WSU in Pullman. Erling worked for the city of Tacoma; he's now the city manager. Harold graduated from the University of Washington [husband says WSU]. He worked for an insurance company and then helped form another company of which he became the vice-president. Both sons are married. Erling has five sons and Harold has three daughters. The youngest child, Eleanor, lives in Pendleton, Oregon, is a high school teacher, and is married to a physicist. They have two girls. The oldest, Laura, is 20 and attends PLU, and Heidi is 17 and in high school.</p>
281, side 1	<p>547: CHRISTMAS IN AMERICA</p> <p>"Christmas is a big to-do in our family." It's been spent at the Mork home with a big tree in the rec room and a big dinner on Christmas Eve. Santa Claus comes every year. They've celebrated Christmas Eve the last few years at Harold's in Edmonds and Christmas Day at Erling's in Tacoma. They put on big dinners and good times. Erling's birthday is on the 27th, so she has his family for dinner.</p>
281, side 1	<p>575: REASON FOR EMIGRATION</p> <p>"Well, I just wanted to see the world. It wasn't so sad to leave because I thought I was going to come back in five years. Instead of coming back, I got married." Helen really liked America, even though her first impressions were awful. Traveling across the country by train in the late fall, the trees were bare, without leaves, and terrible. She thought, "if this is what the United States is going to be like, I'm going to hurry up and make some money and I'm going</p>

Container(s)	Description
	right home where the trees are green". But, she changed her mind when they came to Tacoma; it was really nice.
281, side 1	594: She brought her clothes, a blanket in case it was cold on the train, and a little pillow. The train trip took five days, and it was tiring. The first two months were a little difficult; she couldn't speak English. After she understood and spoke more, she really liked it. That fall was extremely foggy, and she depended on the streetcars with lights to get home. There was more snow when the kids were small; they used to ski on the hills above Pacific Avenue in Parkland. They also ice skated on Wapato Lake and enjoyed outdoor sports like skiing on Mt. Rainier. In Sweden, it was mostly cross-country skiing on six to eight feet of deep snow.
281, side 1	633: HERITAGE Helen still knows Swedish "except my granddaughter, Laura, know it even better!" Helen still writes and reads Swedish. She subscribes to a weekly Swedish magazine, which she gives to Eleanor so she can keep up her Swedish also.
281, side 1	644: Helen and the interviewer [granddaughter, Laura] chat in Swedish.
281, side 1	657: CONTACT WITH SWEDEN Swedish relatives visit them yearly plus some Swedish friends who live in Hawaii but came from Goeteborg and Helsingborg.
281, side 1	665: Helen is very glad she came to America, "cause now we have a really nice family, grandchildren and four great grandchildren". Their names are Ola, Peder, Hans and Marit--Scandinavian names. Helen's second name comes from an aunt; all the girls were named after aunts. Her name was originally Helena, but was shortened to Helen in America.
281, side 2	153: OCCUPATION The first family for which she worked was very helpful. The man was deceased, but had been a judge; the wife was sickly. The daughter was nice and taught Helen how to cook American style. In Sweden they had fish or meat and potatoes with few vegetables. Here they rarely had potatoes, which was strange to her. Her second job was for a doctor's family. Besides her housekeeping duties, she had to take messages for the doctor over the phone; that was a real challenge for her. Then she worked for a family who owned a car dealership. Her working experiences were all very good. After marriage and the kids were in school, she catered a variety of foods to many wealthy people.
281, side 2	205:

Container(s)	Description
	<p>She came to America because she wanted to see the world and an aunt was here. One of mother's cousins living in Tacoma helped her find the first job. People were very nice to newcomers in 1928. When the Depression began, the flow of immigrants decreased because of lack of money for people to travel. They spent a month in New Zealand last year and enjoyed the people and the food, and of course had no problem with the language.</p>

## Names and Subjects

### Subject Terms :

Christmas  
 Emigration and immigration  
 Family -- Economic aspects -- Sweden  
 Family -- Sweden  
 Fishing  
 Railroad travel  
 Swedish-Americans -- Ethnic identity  
 Swedish-Americans--Northwest, Pacific--Interviews  
 Swedish-Americans--Social life and customs

### Personal Names :

Mork, Erling  
 Mork, Harold  
 Mork, Helen Elisabeth --Interviews  
 (creator)  
 Mork, Ola  
 Nordström, Frederick  
 Nordström, Amanda  
 Nordström, Helena Elisabeth  
 Nordström, Helmer  
 Nordström, Johanna  
 Olofson, Johanna  
 Schubert, Eleanor

### Corporate Names :

Bethel Lutheran Church (Tacoma, Wash.)  
 First Lutheran Church (Tacoma, Wash.)  
 Our Redeemer Lutheran Church (Seattle, Wash.)  
 Sons of Norway (U.S.) Leif Erikson Lodge No. 1 (Seattle, Wash.)  
 Swedish Club (Seattle, Wash.)  
 Trinity Lutheran Church (Parkland, Wash.)  
 Vasa Order of America. Lodge Number 233 (Tacoma, Wash.)

### Family Names :

Mork family  
 Nordström family  
 Olofson family

### Geographical Names :

Hindersön (Sweden)  
 Norrbotten (Sweden)



Parkland (Wash.)

Råneå (Sweden)

Tacoma (Wash.)

Volda (Norway)

**Form or Genre Terms :**

Oral histories

**Occupations :**

Cooks

Domestics

Finding aid prepared by Kerstin Ringdahl and Amity Smetzler  
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