

Helga Pederson Watney Oral History Interview, 1979

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Watney, Helga Pederson
Title	Helga Pederson Watney Oral History Interview
Dates	1979 (inclusive) 1979 1979
Quantity	2 file folders 1 sound cassette 2 compact discs
Collection Number	t030
Summary	An oral history interview with Helga Pederson Watney, 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

Helga Watney was born on June 14, 1897 in Namsos, Norway, which is close to Trondheim. Her father owned a clothing store, and her mother, Anne Pederson, modeled the clothing for people. By the time Helga was eighteen years old, her father had emigrated and owned a business in Mohall, North Dakota, while Helga and her mother lived with her grandmother in Norway. To further her education, Helga decided to immigrate to the United States around 1915. When she arrived in New York, there was a mix-up with her tickets, and she spent a week on the train before reaching Mohall. At this time, white slavery was a problem, and Helga's family was very concerned about her safe arrival. In Mohall, Helga went to school and housed with a local doctor. After she finished school, she married a contractor by the last name of Watney and had three children. Displeased with the climate in North Dakota, they moved to Tacoma, Washington, where Helga worked for various doctors but not in hospitals since she never became a registered nurse. Helga later became a cook and maintenance person at Pacific Lutheran University. Helga never felt she would benefit from a return trip to Norway and instead invested her money into land and houses that were being sold for tax purposes. At the time

of this interview, she had two renters in her home plus rental holdings in University Place, downtown Tacoma, Park Avenue, and Yakima Avenue.

Lineage

Full Name: Helga Dagny Watney. Maiden Name: Helga Dagny Pederson. Mother: Anne Pederson. Paternal Grandmother: (?). Hanson Brothers and Sisters: There were several children in the family, but she only mentioned one older sister specifically: Esther Pederson. Spouse: (?) Watney. Children: Esther Watney.

Content Description

This interview was conducted with Helga Watney on May 3, 1979 in Parkland, Washington. It contains information on family background, emigration, marriage and family, employment, business ventures, and Norwegian heritage. The interview was conducted in English.

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	
30, side 1	004: FAMILY BACKGROUND Helga Dagny Pederson Watney was born on June 14, 1897, in Namsos, Norway a little area outside of Trondheim. Her father owned a clothing store and her mother, Anne, modeled the clothes for people. In those days, clothes were custom designed and made, what Helga refers to as registered clothes. Customers would select from modeled clothes and order or send for the finished product.
30, side 1	044: One of her grandfathers was a farmer, and the other was a "doctor" and his wife was a nurse.
30, side 1	070: EMIGRATION At age 18, Helga came over to America to attend school. Part of her family was here. Her father owned a business in Mohall, North Dakota. Her oldest sister was also here and was married to a man who became the president of Glidden Paint Company back in St. Louis, Missouri. But Helga and her mother were staying with a grandmother in Norway.
30, side 1	104: She came over mainly to go to school. A lot of girls saved up money to come to America. But sometimes girls were never heard of once they were in Minneapolis which was not a very safe place; girls would disappear at that point. Her parents worried about that so they arranged a safe route for her through the traveling bureau. In New York, there was a mixup in the tickets. She had a first class ticket and was to have her own private sleeper. They put her on "what I would call the bum's car, and there were families with children from different countries.... When I came in there and I saw there, they had babies

Container(s)	Description
	<p>and the diapers--. You know we dress our babies; everything is neat and nice, really--superior to what I found when I came here. Honest to goodness, when I came here it wouldn't have taken much for me to turn around and go back home. But once you're here, you want to see the sights, see how far this all is going to go".</p>
30, side 1	<p>173: Helga spent a week on the train to reach Mohall, North Dakota. She shared quarters with German and Russian families who had come from poor economic circumstances. She couldn't take it, so at the first stop, she picked up her suitcase, got off the train, and waited on the platform. She held the train up because she refused to board that car again. They finally took her to a better car. The boat trip was fine, but Ellis Island--"I'd never seen such a shabby place. There's no place in Norway, I don't think even out in the country; I'd never seen anything like that". From all the talk about America, she thought it would be "just as good as what you're leaving...only to find you have everything nice." But there was no way around Ellis Island; all emigrants "have to spend a night overnight in there and they give you an ugly blanket and all. There was a huge big hall and all they had was chicken wires for beds. There was no mattresses, no nothing". She figured farming men lived a little rougher, but even they couldn't like it.</p>
30, side 1	<p>310: "The emigrant next--must have been Russian--they were twins, girls, and they were bugging and looking for lice in their hair, talking. And of course, I was just sick by the time I got home. And then in Minneapolis, you see, men come in that are dressed exactly like a train conductor. And the only thing the girls are not aware of, is they don't have that ribbon--Northern Pacific or something. They're plain and you're so busy looking at everything and there are always those, for instance, even the news media? want to come and talk and wonder where I get the shoes and so on. It didn't mean anything to me, because the patent leather shoes--they come in there a year early from France--styles do. And it would be just like my parents would have it, you see". The men would approach her and "they'd act like a conductor that would take my suitcase. They'd take my suitcase and I followed them and of course, all of a sudden I heard a holler and an uproar in the depot where I was waiting. ...This is where I was lucky my parents had arranged for that. Now when I came to a certain place, they knew my name, they knew exactly to watch out for me".</p>
30, side 1	<p>344: Helga knew a neighbor girl, lovely and from a good home, whose parents never heard from her after she arrived in America. "They had what they called white slavery over here. I was told, I was educated about all the bad and even--of course, they didn't say much about food. They saw to it that I had meals and I was taken care of. But I thought he was a conductor and then the uproar. Then you see, the traveling agent that had been stationed there for the time when my train pulled in, she was on the job there all the time. And I can remember, she gave me bananas and told me-'go over there and sit still. Don't you leave here.</p>

Container(s)	Description
	<p>I'll come and get you.' So you see, there I was. Of course, I started, and he went clear downstairs. He was a kidnaper, you see. It's that easy to get lost. ...I had no idea. I could not, because you see, all we ever do--, in school, we had a Bible everyday. And we were raised--on Sundays we had our Sunday clothes and everything fine. On Monday morning we went into our weekday clothes. It was such a close relationship; just nothing but good".</p>
30, side 1	<p>372: At Ellis Island, everyone had a physical exam. If they didn't pass, a white cross was put on the back. On the boat, there were humorous times but on Ellis Island, everyone was separated. The Germans had already planted mines in the water [in 1915]. They didn't bother Norway until after she was in America. But her home was flattened, the grandparents died, and some cousins were handicapped because of their work in the Underground. She received a letter saying her mother had passed away. [This appears to be World War Two information.]</p>
30, side 1	<p>415: SETTLING IN Mohall was about the size of Puyallup at the time, and Father's store was on the main street. Helga went to school and then lived with a medical doctor. Dad went back home, but her sister was here and married. She had a home in St. Louis and raised three children. The son is now in charge of Glidden. The doctor moved back to Norway and after that, she lived with a doctor-friend of his in Minot, ND. Helga was married back east after she finished school, but the climate was so bad. Norwegians just got tired of the climate, "the lightening and thunder". Helga and her husband had friends here with whom they corresponded, and since she didn't like ND, they came West on a train. She's lived in her present home for 25 years, and her girls attended PLU. Esther built a house on 121st St, and she taught school; Helga cared for her children during the school year. She also worked nights at PLU, beginning at 4 pm. That way she could take care of her daughter's family during the day.</p>
30, side 1	<p>485: Her husband was a contractor. She had her children to raise, and she worked in school kitchens as a cook. What she really liked was building maintenance "I don't know where I got that, but it was something that I loved. I didn't want to stand behind cooking and I didn't like office work, although I had credentials as far as a nurse. I never bothered to get my RN--stuff like that. They didn't have the training in those years". She somehow associated with doctors. Some female cousins were nurses. She used to tell her kids "whatever you do, don't marry a doctor, don't marry a minister...and there was one more, but I forget what it was".</p>
30, side 1	<p>518: She had three children of her own and a large place with lots of room. She bought property for tax title and then sold most of it to pay for her own place. In Norway, she and the other children were taken care of by hired help because both parents worked at the business. When she was older, she would</p>

Container(s)	Description
	<p>accompany her mother when modeling. She was a "critic"--had a very good eye for making sure skirts were sewn and hanging properly. Her mother had students that she trained. Helga worked in hospitals during the flu epidemic around 1917. She liked the work, and would be called on cases where people didn't have money to pay. In Tacoma, she worked for doctors, but not in hospitals. Tells a story about a person having a heart attack on Pacific Avenue whom she helped.</p>
30, side 1	<p>650: Tells another story about a girl at PLU whom she helped.</p>
30, side 1	<p>680: If she continued in the medical field, she would have liked to be a medical missionary.</p>
30, side 1	<p>696: She's never returned to Norway. She has two daylight apartments that she rents, has good Social Security, and has worked out. At PLU, she did a lot of odd jobs because she'd learned a lot of things when she was young. But she didn't feel like spending her money on traveling to Norway. Her sister had visited Norway, and when she returned there was always so much crying on both sides, leaving and arriving. "The first time she stayed three weeks, and then she comes home just to wake up to sorrows. You don't understand, because you've never lived in another country. You see, your new country is never yours, never will be. This country is a place where I can--well, you adjust to it, to live with it". Her husband never bothered to get his citizenship. She went back and successfully got her papers.</p>
30, side 1	<p>746: DO YOU REGRET COMING OVER HERE? "What's the use of regretting it? You can't have your cake and eat it, you say over here, and that's pretty true. And then, I have children over here". She has a daughter in Tacoma and a son in Seattle; both have nice homes. Helga has been very healthy; it's been 50 years since she's had a cold.</p>
30, side 2	<p>049: Discussion continues on health.</p>
30, side 2	<p>060: NORWEGIAN TRADITIONS She thought the trip to Norway would cost about two thousand dollars, and she really didn't have the money for it as lives on the interest of her investments. She also felt she wouldn't derive much benefit from the trip. Her husband was raised on a farm in Norway. He didn't like to work outside, but she enjoyed garden work. Talks about the property she owns on Garfield.</p>
30, side 2	<p>162: Her son is married and lives on Mercer Island.</p>

Container(s)	Description
30, side 2	172: Helga believes she is a sincere person about religion; she was baptized and confirmed in the Lutheran Church in Norway. She doesn't attend church much anymore, but thinks that doesn't lessen her relationship with God and religion. She thinks peoples' dress in church is not very proper; women look like "Broadway" women.
30, side 2	229: Respect for prayer and Bible teachings has decreased. Even at PLU, praying is not encouraged. "It used to be a good school under Eastvold". She feels PLU is still her "stomping ground". She worked there and felt very comfortable about and responsible for the school. Talks more about how she invests her money into land and houses that are being sold for tax purposes. She either sells the property for a quick turnover in cash, or rents it out; the renters then pay for the property. She feels she is fair with tenants. She now has two renters in her home plus rental holdings in University Place, downtown, Park Avenue and Yakima Avenue.
30, side 2	353: She and her daughter attended land auction sales, and were creative with their lives. She isn't greedy, just knows how to help herself to make and save money while helping others to have what they want also--like a good home. She has college students help her around the house and yard, and she pays 5 dollars an hour--better than anybody around because she believes in treating people fair.
30, side 2	438: SPEAKING NORWEGIAN When writing to family in Norway, she has to ask about some words It's been hard to keep up with the language. She can't understand some of the dialects nowadays, because she feels a lot of slang has entered into the language. It embarrasses her to have Norwegian-speaking people talk to her, if she's not able to understand.
30, side 2	506: Story about visiting Mexico, buying eye glasses for less money, having a good vacation too. Helga has strong beliefs about expenses, health, and nutrition. The remainder of the interview consists of her opinions on laetrile and cancer, oleo, saccharin, restaurant foods, vitamin C, etc.

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Emigration and immigration

Family--Norway

Naturalization

Norwegian-Americans--Ethnic identity

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<http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv17787>

Norwegian-Americans--Northwest, Pacific--Interviews
Norwegian-Americans--Social life and customs
Railroad travel
Women slaves

Personal Names :

Watney, Helga--Interviews
(creator)
Jacobs, Esther Vatney
Pederson, Anne

Corporate Names :

Ellis Island Immigration Station (N.J. and N.Y.)
Pacific Lutheran University

Family Names :

Jacobs family
Pederson family
Watney family

Geographical Names :

Mohall (N.D.)
Namsos (Norway)
Tacoma (Wash.)

Form or Genre Terms :

Oral histories

Occupations :

Contractors
Cooks
Domestics
Dressmakers

Finding aid prepared by Kerstin Ringdahl and Amity Smetzler
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