

Hilma Marie Jacobson Nelson Oral History Interview, 1983

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Nelson, Hilma Marie Jacobson
Title	Hilma Marie Jacobson Nelson Oral History Interview
Dates	1983 (inclusive) 1983 1983
Quantity	3 file folders 6 photographs 1 sound cassette
Collection Number	t233
Summary	An oral history interview with Hilma Marie Jacobson Nelson, 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

Hilma Nelson was born on November 29, 1886 in VÃ¡rÃ¡y, Norway to Mathias Jacobson and Sofie Andreason. In addition to Hilma, Mathias and Sofie had four other children: John (Johan), Anna, Harold, and Thorvald. Hilma's father was a fisherman, and he died in a shipwreck when Hilma was only six years old. Hilma's brother Harold also drowned that summer, having fallen in a well at the age of three. Sofie, who was a dressmaker, was left to raise four children on her own. Hilma was confirmed when she was fifteen, after which she remained at home to help with the housework. In 1903, John, who was living in Tacoma, Washington, sent tickets for Sofie, Hilma, and Thorvald to emigrate. (Anna came two years later). John died before they came, but Sofie's brother, who also lived in Tacoma, encouraged them to come anyway. Sofie's brother, Anton Andreason, had never married and said that he would take care of the family. Anton built a house for all of them on Ainsworth Avenue, and Sofie tended to the housekeeping. Hilma herself found a housekeeping job with the Anderson family shortly after her arrival to Tacoma. She had to cook, clean, and do the laundry, earning \$8 a month. Hilma's next job was for Mr. and Mrs. Fross, where she also made \$8 a month, but was helped a great deal

with her English. Following the Fross family, she worked for a Laird McCormick, who was in the steam ship business and paid Hilma \$27 a month. She also worked for Ernest Lister, who later became the Washington State governor. In her time off, Hilma attended a Norwegian Lutheran church and joined the Good Templar Lodge. She met her husband, Albert Nelson, at a friend's house and was married in 1907. Albert was originally from VesterÅlen, Norway and had emigrated in 1903 as well. Albert was a fisherman, and Hilma lived with her mother while he was gone. In 1911, he bought land on 38th Street and began building a house for them there when he came home from fishing. In 1918, they moved into the house. Hilma and Albert had seven children: Alma (Betty), Sigurd, Ruth, Edna, Donald, Richard, and Beverly; Hilma did not work out of the home while she was raising them. Hilma has never been back to Norway but continues to maintain Norwegian traditions in her home. Her children could not speak English until they began school, and Hilma continues to make roemmegroet, lutefisk, fattigmand, and lefse. She also belonged to the Daughters of Norway before moving out into the country and has been an active member of Emmanuel Lutheran Church.

Lineage

Full Name: Hilma Marie Jacobson Nelson. Maiden Name: Hilma Marie Jacobson. Father: Mathias Jacobson. Mother: Sofie Andreason. Paternal Grandfather: Jacob (?). Paternal Grandmother: Eline (?). Maternal Grandfather: Andreas Hanson. Maternal Grandmother: Anne Andreason. Brothers and Sisters: Johan (John) Jacobson, Anna Jacobson, Harold Jacobson, Thorvald Jacobson. Spouse: Albert Nelson. Children: Alma (Betty) Nelson Heroff, Sigurd Nelson, Ruth Nelson Foster, Edna Nelson Center, Donald Nelson, Richard Nelson, Beverly Nelson Leaf.

Content Description

This interview was conducted with Hilma Nelson on March 2, 1983 in Tacoma, Washington. It contains information on family background, emigration, work, marriage and family, church and community involvement, and Norwegian heritage. Also available are photographs of Værøy, Norway, Hilma's husband Albert with their family, Albert and their youngest daughter on the farm, Hilma and Albert on their 50th wedding anniversary (December 28, 1957), and Hilma at the time of the interview. 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	
233, side 1	016: Hilma Marie Jacobson. Born on November 29, 1886 in VÃ¡rÃy, Norway in the Lofoten Islands.
233, side 1	063: PARENTS: Sofie and Mathias Jacobson. Father was born in Helgeland and mother was born in Raftsund. These two places are in northern Norway, but quite a ways from where she was born. Father was a fisherman and a skipper. Died when Hilma was six years old. He was on a ship taking dried fish to Bergen. Had a shipwreck on the trip home. Mother was left alone to raise four children. There were five but one brother drowned in a well the same summer that their father died. The boy was only 3 years old.

Container(s)	Description
233, side 1	118: BROTHERS AND SISTERS: John (Johan), Anna, Harold (the one that drowned), and Thorvald. John came to America before Hilma, Thorvald, and their mother.
233, side 1	144: AMERICA: Mother's brother built a house. Mother did housekeeping until Thorvald was old enough to work. He was only 11 when they came to the U.S. He worked on the streetcars. John was working in a hardware store. He was only 18 or 19 when he came to the U.S. to live with this uncle. Anna came to the U.S. two years after Hilma.
233, side 1	194: CHILDHOOD HOME: Small, ordinary home. Didn't have much. Mother was a dressmaker. Brother, John worked for a businessman there. Went to a private school with this man's children. Had a good education. Sister after her father died had to live with an aunt. After confirmation, had to do housework.. Hilma stayed home until they came to America.
233, side 1	227: SCHOOL: Went to school in Norway. Was 16 and a half when she came to America. Had to walk quite a ways to school.
233, side 1	234: CHURCH: Was far away. It was on the same island.
233, side 1	242: GRANDPARENTS: Has a picture of them. Maternal grandparents were Anne Andreason and Andreas Hanson. Doesn't remember her paternal grandparents.
233, side 1	267: CHILDHOOD: Stayed on the island. Never went anywhere. Had to travel by steamship if you were to go anywhere. Helped her mother with her sewing. Hilma would overcast the seams. When she put the facing on the skirts, she would pin it and Hilma would baste and sew it.
233, side 1	288: CHRISTMAS: Island was bare. Had no trees. Had to send for Christmas trees. Hilma's family never had a tree. The neighbors did because they could afford it. The mission house had a big tree with candles. All of the children and parents would go there to celebrate Christmas. They would walk around the tree and sing. Didn't get many presents. They were happy if they could get a new pencil. On Christmas Eve, they would have rice mush. Rich people would have r�mmegr�t, lutefisk, and sometimes spareribs. They were satisfied with their

Container(s)	Description
	rice mush. Didn't go to church on Christmas. It was too far away. Missionaries would come to the mission house during the winter.
233, side 1	<p>364: SCHOOL (see also I-227) Learned to read and write. Had an ABC book. Had arithmetic. Had to study religion. Studied the catechism and Bible history. Studied the explanation of the Bible. Had to learn it all by heart. Went to school for 2-3 weeks at a time. Teacher had to move from district to district. Had to study during those breaks. Mother helped them.</p>
233, side 1	<p>395: CONFIRMATION Had confirmation class one or two days a week. Walked to the classes. Was confirmed when 15.</p>
233, side 1	<p>412: WORK Stayed with the family until they came to America. Did housework for 5 kroner a month.</p>
233, side 1	<p>426: CHILDHOOD (See also I-267) Hilma would play with other kids in the area. Mother made her a hook and string. Hilma and a friend would catch small trout. They'd cook and clean them and have a little party. Tells a story about duck eggs. A place called Mostad. There were big mountains there. Birds would lay eggs in the cliffs. People would use ropes to climb up and get the eggs. Hilma and her brother would get the eggs on the beach. Would leave one in each nest so they could have chicks. When ducks left with their chicks, Hilma and Thorvald would collect the down. Mother made a quilt and pillows.</p>
	<p>497: REASONS FOR EMIGRATION John, the eldest brother was in America. Mother was a widow and he was going to take care of her. He sent tickets for them to come to Tacoma, Washington, where he was working in a hardware store. Brother, John died before they came. Mother's brother wrote and said they should come just the same. He was living in Tacoma, Washington. Said he'd take care of them. His name was Anton Andreason. He'd never been married. Built a house and took care of mother. She was his housekeeper.</p>
	<p>527: LEAVING NORWAY Sold the few belongings they had. Mother wanted to go to America. Liked it here although she never learned English. Left from Oslo, Norway. Took a boat from Trondheim and a train to Oslo. This was in June or July in 1903. Hilma, Thorvald, and their mother took the ship "United States" of the Scandinavian-America Line to the U.S. Must have taken 8-10 days to cross the ocean. Got to Tacoma, WA on August 6, her brother's birthday. Trip over the ocean was fun. Hilma was up on the deck dancing with the Swedes and Norwegians. Mother got seasick. Brother came up and told Hilma that mother wanted her. Mother wasn't seasick the whole time. Only when it was rough.</p>

Container(s)**Description**

608: ARRIVAL

Happy to be on land. Landed in New York. They were led like sheep from Ellis Island to the train. Didn't have any problems. They were vaccinated before they left Norway.

625: TRAIN RIDE

Agents were there every time they had to change trains. They were gathered like sheep and taken to the appropriate train. Somebody came and gave them candy. A lady told them not to eat it because somebody would be by to collect money for it otherwise. They brought food with from Norway to eat on the boat. They ate at different stops along the way while traveling on the train. Got off the train in Seattle. They were lost. They were put on the steamer to Tacoma. Mother had the address of her brother. A man with a horse and a wagon took them to their uncle's house. Remembers seeing the beautiful old courthouse on 11th Street.

695: TACOMA, WASHINGTON

Stayed with an uncle's friend until her uncle found a place for them to live. A year later, he built a house for Hilma's mother. Uncle's friend was Sofus (?) Ellertson. Uncle built a house on Ainsworth Ave. on the 1600th block. The house is still there.

718: IMPRESSIONS OF TACOMA

Thought it was wonderful. Had never been in a city before. The climate was fine. Had a problem after first coming to Tacoma, Washington. She was missing her periods. Didn't bother her but she told her mother and her mother took her to Dr. Christian Quevli. He said that happened to lots of girls when they came to the U.S. Gave her iron pills and that fixed her problem.

741: WORK

Got a job doing housework almost right away. It was hard because she couldn't understand English. Had to guess what they wanted her to do. Had to cook too. The first place she worked was the Anderson's. He was a printer in Tacoma. His wife wasn't healthy. She was in a wheelchair. She'd come in the kitchen and point out things. They had three sons, James, Clyde, and Emmet. Emmet became Lt. Governor of the State of Washington. Only earned \$8 a month. Had to cook, clean, and do laundry. Had to heat the iron on a wood stove. Got another job with Mr. and Mrs. Fross (?). He was German and she was English. She was very helpful. Was in the kitchen often and taught Hilma many things. He was a cigar salesman. They had three children. Two of the girls went to school. They had ABC books. Hilma learned some English from them. Started at \$8 a month. Got a \$2 raise as she learned more. Didn't have to wear a uniform until she worked for Laird McCormick, a millionaire. He made his money in the steam ship business. Stayed for a year. Earned \$27 a month until they had financial problems. Then she got \$25. One girl working for them took care of the children, another cooked and Hilma took care of the bedrooms and the downstairs. Waited on the table. Nursemaid and cook quit. Hilma had

Container(s)**Description**

the whole job to herself for a month. They were stingy. Didn't give her a penny extra. They both told her she was doing a nice job. Worked for Ernest Lister, a sewer and sidewalk contractor. They had two children. They were really nice people. He became Washington State governor after Hilma got married.

879:

Learning English was the most difficult thing.

884: TIME OFF

\$8 a month wasn't much money. Got time off on Sunday afternoons when they were through with the dinner. Had Thursday off from lunch until 5pm. Would visit her mother in her spare time. Went to church at First Lutheran on 12th and I on Sunday evenings. It was a Norwegian church. Went to young people's meetings once a week. Joined the Good Templar Lodge. Met twice a month. Hilma knew a lot of Norwegians in Tacoma.

928: MEETING SPOUSE

Met him at a friend's house. He'd come to Wisconsin in 1903. Came to Tacoma in 1905. His name was Albert Nelson. He was from Vesteraalen, Norway. He had a girlfriend when Hilma first met him. He had a friend with him who also had a girlfriend. Albert's girlfriend met another guy and then Albert found Hilma. Hilma says that sometimes they went to church on Sunday evenings just to meet their dates. Her husband was singing in the choir. She had lots of fun when she was young, but it was nice, clean fun. Boys they went out with didn't drink. Husband worked in the warehouses. Would bring wheat (from back east) from the warehouse to the ships. Quit that and started to longshore. Did this in the winter. Fished in the spring. "They all came over here so they wouldn't have to go fishing, but they'd go fishing just the same. It was just like it was in their blood."

988: MARRIAGE

Got married in 1907. Married in a friend's house. Minister and kids came to the house. After the wedding they went to a restaurant on Tacoma Ave. Had a big turkey dinner. Went to Columbia Hall and had a nice dance. Had a long white dress. Didn't have a honeymoon. Rented a house on Park and 50th until he went fishing. She lived with her mother while he was gone. Was gone often. The summer they got married, he bought five acres on Collins Road. Didn't build a house there. Stumps and trees on the land. In 1911, Alfred and his friend, Olaf Johnson, bought three lots on 38th Street. Built a nice house there. Was working on a house in the country during the time he was home from fishing. They moved there in 1918. Lived there about 25 years. Transportation wasn't very good. Had to walk from Collins Road to Johnson's crossing to catch the streetcar. The house had a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, and a bedroom when they moved in. A few years later they built on.

1066: CHILDREN

Alma changed her name to Betty. Moved to town and did housework. Went California and married Miles Heroff. He was a chef. She's a good cook too. Can

Container(s)	Description
	<p>cook American and Norwegian food. Sigurd worked in a logging camp before he got married. Went to California. Worked for General Motors in Los Angeles. Ruth worked at Annie Wright School. Married Harry Foster and moved to Steilacoom, Washington. Edna stayed with Hilma's sister most of her life. Her sister felt sorry for Hilma because she had so many children. Edna worked at Annie Wright too.</p>
	<p>SIDE II:</p>
	<p>034: Edna married Ernest Center. Six years between Ruth and Edna. Donald had a machine shop down on the tide flats. Had to go in the service. So did Sigrid and Richard. Richard was a plane and auto (?) worker. Learned his trade in the Navy. Hilma has 15 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren. Beverly the youngest daughter was born 10 years after Richard. Stayed home until she got married. Was 11 when they moved into their house in town. Worked for five years before she got married. Lives in Shelton. Married Edward Leaf (?). He's a Swede and she's a Norwegian but they've compromised. When she makes pancakes, they're Norwegian. When he makes pancakes they're Swedish. Hilma didn't work out of the home while raising her children.</p>
	<p>165: CHURCH Went to church but didn't hold any offices.</p>
	<p>172: SCANDINAVIAN ORGANIZATIONS Belonged to the Daughters of Norway until they moved out to the country.</p>
	<p>187: TRIPS BACK TO NORWAY Hasn't been back. No reason to go. All of her family came here. Would be nice to go back and see. Cousins from Norway visited her. Norway was a poor country when she left. They have everything now, even on the little island where Hilma was born. They have electricity. Have a helicopter service twice a week. Telephone and telegraph service.</p>
	<p>222: NORWEGIAN LANGUAGE The kids couldn't speak English when they started school.</p>
	<p>239: NORWEGIAN COOKING They make r�mmegr�t, lutefisk, fattigmand, and lefse. Hilma and her family ate a lot of cod and cod liver while living in Norway. Hilma says that this is why Norwegians are so healthy.</p>
	<p>286: CHURCH (See also I-928, II-165) Was active in Emmanuel Lutheran until she broke her hips. Can't go anymore. Used to have a sm�rg�sbord when Pastor Davidson was there. Mrs. Berglund and Mrs. Davidson were in charge of it. Martha Nelson would make</p>

Container(s)	Description
	bread and lefse for it and Hilma and her sister, Anna would make rullep�iser. Hilma is the oldest person going to church.
	<p>360: DAUGHTER, ALMA TALKS ABOUT HER MOTHER</p> <p>When they lived out in the country, father had to work overtime at times. Came home at 2 or 3 in the morning. Mother was always there with the coffee pot on, a warm house, and a big dinner. She'd get up at 4:30 in the morning to light the fire in the old wood stove. She'd got to bed until the coffee was ready. Would get up and serve father coffee, sugar lumps, and cookies or a piece of cake in bed before he got up. She'd go out to the barn and feed the cows and chickens while the kids were getting ready for school. Was always singing and whistling, full of fun. Would crochet for the kids. She inserted lace on their petticoats. Their good dresses always had pretty embroidery. She has made Hardanger aprons for her daughters and daughters-in-law. Has knitted beautiful sweaters for the whole family.</p>
	<p>417:</p> <p>Speaks Norwegian to Alma.</p>
	<p>421:</p> <p>Alma lived in California from 1929 to 1965. One night her mother called and asked Alma to come home and help. Father had had a stroke and couldn't do much. Alma's brother had brought over a big of large halibut heads. Mother was trying to split them. They walked into the kitchen and mother had newspaper spread all over the floor. She had a hammer, an axe, a butcher knife, and the bloody halibut heads all over the floor. Father was in a wheel chair and couldn't help. They helped her chop them up. She froze some of them and they ate the rest. Norwegians love them. To prepare them, you clean them really well. Boil them with a little seasoning, a bay leaf and a little vinegar.</p>
	<p>472: SPEAKS NORWEGIAN</p> <p>Hilma asks if the interviewer has seen a Norwegian Bible. She has her mother's Bible from Norway.</p>

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Christmas
 Confirmation
 Education--Norway
 Emigration and immigration
 Family--Economic aspects--Norway
 Family--Norway
 Marriage service
 Norwegian-Americans--Northwest, Pacific--Interviews
 Norwegian-Americans--Social life and customs

Ocean travel
Railroad travel

Personal Names :

Andreason, Anton
Center, Edna Nelson
Foster, Ruth Nelson
Hanson, Andreas
Heroff, Alma (Betty) Nelson
Leaf, Beverly Nelson
Lister, Ernest
Nelson, Albert
Nelson, Donald
Nelson, Hilma--Interviews
(creator)
Nelson, Richard
Nelson, Sigurd
Andreason, Anne
Andreason, Sofie
Jacobson, Mathias
McCormick, Laird

Corporate Names :

Daughters of Norway (U.S.) Embla Lodge #2 (Tacoma, Wash.)
Ellis Island (N.J. and N.Y.)
Emmanuel Lutheran Church (Tacoma, Wash.)
First Lutheran Church (Tacoma, Wash.)
United States (Steamship)

Family Names :

Andreason family
Center family
Foster family
Hanson family
Heroff family
Jacobsen family
Leaf family
Nelson family

Geographical Names :

Tacoma (Wash.)
VÃ¡rÃ¡y (Norway)
VesterÃ¡len (Norway)

Form or Genre Terms :

Oral histories

Occupations :

Domestics
Housewives

Finding aid prepared by Kerstin Ringdahl and Amity Smetzler
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