

# Olivia Karoline Floathe Petersen Oral History Interview, 1983

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Creator</b>	Petersen, Olivia Karoline Floathe
<b>Title</b>	Olivia Karoline Floathe Petersen Oral History Interview
<b>Dates</b>	1983 (inclusive) 1983 1983
<b>Quantity</b>	3 file folders 1 photograph 1 sound cassette
<b>Collection Number</b>	t219
<b>Summary</b>	An oral history interview with Olivia Karoline Floathe Petersen, a Norwegian 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

Olivia Petersen was born on October 21, 1888 in Skodje, MÅre og Romsdal, Norway. She was the youngest of six children and was born prematurely, weighing only two pounds. Olivia's father, Ole Knutson Floathe, died when she was young, and her mother, Marie Johanna Midtlid, had to work very hard to support the family. After her confirmation, Olivia's uncle sent her to "handelsskole" (business school) in Orest, which lasted for six months. When she was finished, she began working for her sister, who owned a big restaurant in Ålesund, but did not like it and instead found a job as a bookkeeper for a large bakery. Olivia worked there for eight years, then decided to immigrate to America in September 1912. At this time, she was engaged to Lars (Louis) Petersen, but he could not join her until several years later. In America, Olivia stayed with her sister, Kari Anderson, in Spokane, Washington. She stayed with Kari for two years, helping her run a rooming house, and then began to work for an elderly Christian Scientist woman, which lasted for two years. Her second job in Spokane was for a family with four school-age girls. The girls and their German governess helped Olivia with her English, but when World War II broke out, it

was discovered that the governess was a spy, and she was sent to San Quentin for twenty years. Olivia then moved to Portland, OR, and Louis went to Seattle, Washington with some Norwegian friends to become a fisherman. After the first few years of their marriage, Olivia discovered that Louis was a heavy drinker, which she did not take very kindly to since she came from a family of avid church-goers who never drank. Olivia and Louis had three children: Myrtle, Lawrence, and Paul, and Olivia had to work hard to support her children through the hard times while Louis was out fishing. The Petersens eventually separated due to another woman and a disagreement over a business dealing. Olivia never returned to Norway nor was she involved in any Scandinavian groups because of her strong Christian faith and objection to "too much of the dancing and hopping around." She also never got very involved with making traditional Norwegian foods since she had begun training as a bookkeeper early on. Olivia moved to Foss Home in 1971.

## Lineage

Full Name: Olivia Karoline Floathe Petersen. Maiden Name: Olivia Karoline Floathe. Father: Ole Knutson Floathe. Mother: Marie Johanna Midtlid. Paternal Grandfather: Asmund Liete Glomset. Paternal Grandmother: Johanna Glomset. Maternal Grandfather: Tormod Midtlid. Maternal Grandmother: Camille Midtlid. Brothers and Sisters: Anna Floathe, Knut Floathe, Laura Floathe, Kari Floathe, Tomas Floathe. Spouse: Lars Petersen. Children: Myrtle Gudrun Petersen, Lawrence Petersen, Paul Petersen.

## Content Description

This interview was conducted with Olivia Petersen on January 14, 1983 in Seattle, Washington. It contains information on Olivia's family background, emigration, employment, marriage and family life, and Norwegian heritage. Also included is a photograph of Olivia 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.

### Preferred Citation

[Collection Number, Collection Title] New Land New Lives Oral History Collection. Scandinavian Immigrant Experience Collection. Archives and Special Collections Department. Robert A.L. Mortvedt Library. Pacific Lutheran University. Tacoma, WA 98447

## 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

Olivia Karoline Floathe Petersen Oral History Interview, 1983  
<http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv44463>

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

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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
Cassette	
219, side 1	003: FAMILY BACKGROUND Born Olivia Karoline Floathe on October 21, 1888, in the Skodje (prestegeld), MÅre og Romsdal, Norway. Skodje is three Norwegian miles east of Ålesund.
219, side 1	080: Her father was Ole Knutson and her mother Marie Midtlid. Father was " a man of everything" fisherman, carpenter, farmer. Olivia's last name Floathe was the name of the place where she lived - not born. It was a small place - three acres - and they raised enough cows, pigs, sheep, and oats for family use.
219, side 1	138:

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Container(s)	Description
	<p>Mother was from Midtlid, a big farm 21 English miles across a bay (by Volda, south of Ålesund). Her father had 18 milking cows; two girls in the barn took care of everything milking, calving, etc.</p>
219, side 1	<p>158: GRANDPARENTS  Her maternal grandparents were Asmund and.....? Midtlid. Olivia liked to visit them because their farm had lovely orchards and fruits like gooseberries and black and red currants. As a small child she picked wild tyttebaer. "I used to go all by myself. Mother didn't like to have me go because I was small. I was a premature kid, two pounds. And it took so long to grow me, and so hard." Everyone, especially her aunts, liked to help raise her and do for her family.</p>
219, side 1	<p>212:  Tells a story about binding grain and "hesje". Their family used soft birch bindings to tie up the hesje [hay drying rack] poles because they couldn't afford to buy twine.</p>
219, side 1	<p>245:  Mother had lots of relatives around; her father and uncle moved into the area early on and had big estates with 30 cows that lived in "baas". The wooden flooring in these stalls were covered with squares of sod for cushion; the animals were like pets.</p>
219, side 1	<p>272:  Olivia didn't know too much about the paternal grandparents; they lived farther away. He was John Knutson and she was Camille.</p>
219, side 1	<p>291: BROTHERS AND SISTER  There were six children, two boys and four girls Anna, Laura, Kari, Knut, Tom and Olivia. Both Knut and Tom immigrated to America before 1900, working on the ore docks in Two Harbors, Minnesota. One sister, Kari, eight years older than Olivia, emigrated about 1910. Knut returned to Norway after six years. Her father died in 1888 when Olivia was five weeks old. She was raised under doctor's orders; so many spoons of food were cooked, set aside to cool, and fed to her as a premature baby.</p>
219, side 1	<p>349: SCHOOL  School was close, about six blocks away. Church in Skodje was two Norwegian miles east across a big bay. They rowed to church except when the water iced over, which was infrequent. Then they drove over with horses but that was dangerous.</p>
219, side 1	<p>371:  Their family house had three-four rooms a big sitting room and one bedroom downstairs and more beds upstairs. Mother was left alone, but Grandpa used to come with the horse and buggy and help them. She tells a story about one</p>

Container(s)	Description
	<p>such occasion. Olivia, about 12-13, was sharpening all the "sliper" (blade edges) on the "ljaaer" (scythes) under her grandfather's supervision. She became tired and drew too fast; the grindstone began heaving so the ljaa would barely stay on the grindstone. Her grandfather told her to slow down - "vil du dra sikkerlig(?)". But she didn't; she just wanted to finish the job and be done. He took the "orv" (handle) and "peeked me a couple of little knicks on my rump. I didn't like that. Then I left everything, ran down in the beach. I ran away and never came back before he had left. I was mad. I couldn't stand he got after me, because he always was so good to me."</p>
219, side 1	<p>425: CHRISTMAS IN NORWAY  "Beautiful. That was the highlight of the year." Two or three of the kids hunted for just the right tree, cut it and dragged it home. They made woven paper baskets for decorations, had hazelnuts to eat, and had presents. Mother would knit upstairs away from the children. One year Olivia really wanted a pair of red and white mittens that her mom was knitting for sale. Olivia had seen the "hespe" (skein) dipped in color, and the mittens were so cute. Olivia went to the bazaar with all her money - 15 cents - and bought those mittens.</p>
219, side 1	<p>503: A SAD STORY IN HER LIFE  When she was very young (about three) she remembers waking up and crying because her mother was gone. Walking out to the kitchen she found her breakfast laid out on a towel on the table. Her mom had to get up at 5 am and walk six miles to work to a farmhouse. This large estate had a family of five boys plus hired people. Mother was the baker and made excellent rye bread; for two bakings in the brick oven she used 25 pounds of rye flour, a gallon of sour milk, water, syrup, salt, etc., mixed together in a big trough. When Olivia started school, a cousin from across the road came over to help her dress. Her brother Tom was half given away to her mother's sister to ease the load. The older brother was able to get out and work; helped a man make barrels.</p>
219, side 1	<p>568: OTHER CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS  Mother prepared for Christmas because it was "hÅ,ytid"; Grandpa gave them extra stuff. For Christmas eve, the specialty was lamb chops and potatoes. Mother was such an excellent baker; made good lefse on the grill on the big open stove in the kitchen. They went to church Christmas Day at 9 am dressed in best clothes. Since she's older now, she's not able to do Christmas anymore. Besides, the children were grown and married, and her daughter had a stroke and died in 1969 at age of 50. She was wonderful in music, but married a high-ranking military man who drank too much.</p>
219, side 1	<p>625: WORK  After confirmation, her uncle - an unschooled mathematician - sent her to "handelsskole" (business school) in Orset (Oerset ?) for a six month course. Then she worked for her sister who had a big restaurant in Aalesund. "That's just slavery!" She didn't like that, and found employment as a bookkeeper for</p>

Container(s)	Description
	a big bakery ran by a Jewish baker. She stayed there eight years. She had a room with the family and ate with them; they were good to her.
219, side 1	<p>672: EMIGRATION</p> <p>"I couldn't save any money and I had to help my mother. I didn't want her going slaving around the farm or country." Olivia's uncle would solicit "pengeseddel" (paper money) - \$5 or more - from Olivia to give to Marie, her mother. "He wore it out before he let it go." After Olivia got to America, she could help her mother more. Her sister with the restaurant was so busy, and Olivia felt she was stingy also - took advantage of her mother.</p>
219, side 1	<p>705:</p> <p>Olivia knew about America from reading and tourists. She read the magazines in the Jewish home, and - after the books were balanced - served fancy cakes, pastries, coffee, and chocolate in the bakery to tourists, German, American, and English. Had a little acquaintance with hearing these languages.</p>
219, side 1	<p>736: LEAVING NORWAY</p> <p>She went home in September 1912 to say good bye. Everyone helped pack; the trunks were secured with hemp line. Her mother "was without speech. She cried. She cried so much I could hardly see her." Olivia felt terrible about leaving. "I didn't know that it was going to be so hard as that. But something was just like driving me." She left from Ålesund to catch a ship at Oslo; she was by herself, although she was engaged to be married.</p>
219, side 2	<p>020:</p> <p>She and Lars (Louis) Petersen had met in Ålesund and exchanged rings on May 4, 1912. They couldn't come together; had to be married to do that. When she came he wanted to stay and continue fishing with his uncle, Jon Diske (?). Louis' father had died and there were seven kids in the family. This uncle helped the family by hiring Lars on, and eventually got him to buy his own boat to be more independent and make more money.</p>
219, side 2	<p>088: THE TRIP OVER</p> <p>In the Oslo hotel Olivia "got bit by bedbugs for the first time. I never knew what bedbugs were. Oh God. Got big blotches all around my neck. Uff." She boarded the "United States", the smallest of the three boats owned by this company. "It was just like a tug." She was used to being on a boat and wasn't too seasick. The trip "took forever" - 11-12 days.</p>
219, side 2	<p>126:</p> <p>They came to Ellis Island in New York where there was "all kinds of riff-raff - all kinds of nationalities". The doctors were lined up on both sides of stalls, giving shots, 4-5 a person. She had met a girl on the boat who helped her with the language. The agent took her group to a restaurant to eat; ordered steak</p>

Container(s)	Description
	which had so much fat it ran all over the platter. Olivia ate bread and some meat because she was hungry.
219, side 2	204: THE TRAIN WEST Big packages of food, mainly fruit like oranges, apples, and bananas, were thrown at them. Olivia thought it was for free until the next stop, when they came on board to collect. She was mad, but another girl who knew English paid \$5 for the both of them.
219, side 2	242: Olivia came to Spokane to her married sister, Kari Anderson, who was eight years her senior. The brother-in-law came to meet Olivia; she didn't know him but the agent at Spokane helped.
219, side 2	269: SETTLING IN Spokane. Olivia lived with the Andersons for two years and helped her sister run the rooming house. One time she was sent to the store to buy loaf sugar. "I said loaf sugar all the time on the road; was a couple of blocks away from the house. By the time I come up on the steps, I forgot what it was!"She didn't go to school to learn the language; she didn't have the time as she had to earn a living.
219, side 2	295: WORK Her first job was for an 80-year-old lady, a Christian Scientist and reader in her church. Olivia read the religious literature but remained a Lutheran; the other had too much superstition and supernatural. She stayed there two years earning \$25 a month plus room and board. The lady was very good to her, showed her how to cook American foods, and gave her vacations. To serve the food, Olivia always cleaned up and wore a white cap and apron.
219, side 2	346: Olivia learned more English at her second job where there were four school age girls 18,16,14, and 6. The youngest was so cute. Then another baby came. They were middle class people and had a German governess for the children. She was so smart and taught German at the YMCA. There were so many men who came to interview her (at home); this was when the war had broken out. Olivia knew something was wrong. It turned out they were spies, wrote codes on the coinage.When a set of twins were born into the family, the governess became neglectful. A container of cotton caught fire and one baby was burned badly. The parents began an investigation, and that's when she, a high German, was discovered to be a spy. She served 20 years in San Quentin. Olivia cried the day she left because she was pretty good to her - helped with her English.
219, side 2	418: TO PORTLAND She had a cousin who moved to Portland and could get Olivia a good job. So, Olivia went and worked for a fancy family down there.

Container(s)	Description
219, side 2	<p>424: MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN</p> <p>Louis had emigrated two years after Olivia. "The skunk . . . he was a bad drinker. That was one thing my people never touched" as they were church people. "That drinking - I could never forgive him because that's a ruination on any home."He didn't drink for the first few years of the marriage - no money for that. They were married in Spokane (before she went to Portland). Her friends helped put the wedding together, and she had a lovely, long wedding dress. "I had everything fixed up to a T."</p>
219, side 2	<p>464:</p> <p>Louis had come to Seattle to join some Norwegian friends and to be a fisherman. Times were poor. Some older friends advised her to buy a rooming house, which she did. But this house on 8th Ave. attracted riff-raff who stole bedding, etc. Besides, she was pregnant and due that fall, and her husband was gone fishing. She sold the boarding house and stayed with the couple until she purchased another house a few months later.</p>
219, side 2	<p>488: CHILDREN</p> <p>They have three children Myrtle, Lawrence, and Paul. Paul drives a milk truck for Carnation. Lawrence was a salesman but had a stroke. Myrtle was a pianist - "was music in her". Olivia took her everywhere to concerts and lessons. She sacrificed, like clothes for herself, to give her music lessons. Myrtle never had children. She had a stroke and Olivia took care of her; that was hard on Olivia.</p>
219, side 2	<p>513:</p> <p>Olivia worked after marriage during hard times. Her husband made a living at fishing after the fish prices rose following the Depression. While he was fishing in Petersburg, Alaska, she was alone with the children. But it wasn't hard because she and a friend rented a duplex and helped one another.</p>
219, side 2	<p>560: CHURCH AND SCANDINAVIAN GROUPS</p> <p>She was active in the young people's society when her children were small. She's never been active in the Scandinavian groups because of her religion; she doesn't believe "in too much of the dancing and hopping around". Talks about her Christian faith.</p>
219, side 2	<p>590: NORWEGIAN HERITAGE</p> <p>Olivia never returned to Norway. Her mother died in 1926, and there was no one to go back to. Her brothers emigrated before 1900. The oldest one came in 1892; was mining for gold in Nome, AK. She didn't get involved with foods too much. She was trained early on as a bookkeeper, and never felt she could bake as well as her mother. Because the parents spoke Norwegian to them, her children could talk Norwegian, but didn't want to.</p>
219, side 2	<p>609: HEALTH AND ECONOMICS</p> <p>(Olivia tells about her general economic life. Money has always been tight, but she's managed due to her business training, sense, and Scandinavian grit.)She</p>

Container(s)	Description
	needs cataract surgery for her eyes, but can't afford it. The children don't have the money either. Lawrence had a stroke, but is married to a wonderful woman. They have four or five grown, good-looking girls.
219, side 2	657: She came to Foss Home in 1971 after three - four years of bad health and a broken hip. She couldn't care for herself or her home - a dollhouse - on 24th Ave.
219, side 2	669: Her husband just died recently, she and her husband were separated because of a woman and also over a disagreement on a business dealing. They owned shares in a fishing boat, which Louis skippered - he was a very good navigator. When the boat was sold, his brother asked for \$1000 in cash, which Louis gave him. Olivia was angry because she'd been working for small wages at Fort Lawton (?) besides caring for the house and children while her husband was in Alaska. She went to the bank and demanded to see their account, which was smaller than she expected. The banker said it was too bad but "women folks didn't have any right to property", to which Olivia retorted, "Since when?" She had scratched long enough to get money and felt entitled to the little that was left.
219, side 2	720: Through the years she dabbled in real estate and made good on it. She watched if houses were well built and in good locations, and then bought a few. She only got stuck once with a house she still owns on 24th Ave. across from her home. She has put money into it new railing, rockery, paint, etc. But she doesn't have the health to handle a sale now; and her children don't have her business sense.
219, side 2	759: Olivia, very tiredly, says a table prayer in Norwegian "I Jesu navn gaar vi til bords..."

## Names and Subjects

### Subject Terms :

Christmas  
 Education-- Norway  
 Emigration and immigration  
 Family--Norway  
 Norwegian-Americans--Northwest, Pacific--Interviews  
 Norwegian-Americans--Social life and customs  
 Ocean travel  
 Railroad travel

### Personal Names :

Anderson, Kari  
Petersen, Olivia--Interviews  
(creator)  
Floathe, Ole Knutson  
Midtlid, Marie Johanna  
Petersen, Lars (Louis)  
Petersen, Lawrence  
Petersen, Myrtle  
Petersen, Paul

**Corporate Names :**

United States (Steamship)

**Family Names :**

Floathe family  
Glomset family  
Midtlid family  
Petersen family

**Geographical Names :**

Møre og Romsdal fylke (Norway)  
Portland (Or.)  
Seattle (Wash.)  
Spokane (Wash.)

**Form or Genre Terms :**

Oral histories

**Occupations :**

Bookkeepers  
Domestics

Finding aid prepared by Kerstin Ringdahl and Amity Smetzler  
Å 2004