

Aleph Thorwaldson Johannsson Oral History Interview, 1982

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Johannsson, Aleph Thorwaldson
Title	Aleph Thorwaldson Johannsson Oral History Interview
Dates	1982 (inclusive) 1982 1982
Quantity	3 file folders 6 photographs 1 sound cassette
Collection Number	t191
Summary	An oral history interview with Aleph Thorwaldson Johannsson, an Icelandic 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

Aleph Johannsson was born on November 9, 1882 in the Milton, North Dakota, near Pemplina. Her parents, Stigur Thorwaldson and Thorun Jornsdoottir, were from Gislatorðum, Iceland and Fljotsdalheraði, Iceland, respectively. They had met each other in Iceland and were married after they immigrated. Stigur and Thorun settled in the Tongue River Valley in North Dakota and had ten children, of which Aleph was the eldest. After Aleph finished grammar school and one term at Grenwold Academy, which was affiliated with the Lutheran Church, Aleph attended a dressmaking school. She worked as a seamstress out of her family home. Aleph's husband, Bjarni Johannsson, was from Framnesi, Iceland and had settled in the same area with his family. He attended the University of Washington in Seattle, WA to become a pharmacist and corresponded with Aleph while he was gone. Aleph wanted to go to nursing school and did not want a serious relationship, but after Bjarni graduated, he proposed to Aleph. Neither Bjarni nor Aleph's father wanted her to become a nurse, so Aleph married Bjarni in 1906. They moved back to Seattle and had five children: Sigrid, Thorun, Wilma, Alice, and Lincoln. In 1912, they built the house that Aleph still lived in at the time of this interview,

and Bjarni also owned Cascade Drug Company until 1946. Through the years, Aleph has been active in the Lutheran Church, has sung in the Icelandic choir, and helped organize the Anning Society, a charity society that helps those sick or in financial trouble. She has also met Vigdis Finnbogadottur, the President of Iceland. President Finnbogadottur told Aleph that she spoke Icelandic as if she had been born there and send her a telegram on her 100th birthday.

Lineage

Full Name: Aleph Johannsson. Maiden Name: Aleph Sigriour Thorwaldson. Father: Stigur Thorwaldson. Mother: Thorun Jornsdoottir. Paternal Grandfather: Thorvaldur Stigsson. Paternal Grandmother: Vilborg Jonsdoottir. Maternal Grandfather: Bjorn Peterson. Maternal Grandmother: Olafia Olafsdottir. Brothers and Sisters: Valdi (Thorwald), Bjorn, Olafia (Polly), Wilmar Peter, Gudny (Gwen) Hjalmarson, Wilmar Thorwaldson, Olafur Thorwaldson, Jennie Thorwaldson, Anna Thorwaldson. Spouse: Bjarni Johannsson. Children: Sigrid Hastings, Thorun Robel, Wilma Vadnais, Alice Johannsson, Lincoln Johannsson.

Content Description

This interview was conducted with Aleph Johannsson on October 12, 1982 in Seattle, Washington. It contains information on family background, growing up in North Dakota, marriage and family, settling in Seattle, community activities, and Icelandic heritage. The interview also includes a photograph of Aleph's brothers (taken in 1893), a photograph of Aleph on her wedding day, a photograph of Cascade Drug Store, an article, which includes a picture of Aleph meeting President Vigdis Finnbogadottur (September 1982), and two photographs of Aleph at the time of the interview.

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	
191, side 1	022: Aleph Sigriour Thorwaldson Johannsson Born on November 9, 1882 in the Dakota Territory. Born near Pembina, which was established as a military post during the Creole Rebellion.
191, side 1	115: PARENTS Thorun Jornsdoottir and Stigur Thorwaldson. Both born in Iceland. Stigur came to America with his mother, five brothers, and three sisters. His father died of stomach cancer after he went to Copenhagen, Denmark for treatment. They came to America after his death. Aleph's parents were well acquainted before they left Iceland. They had plans to get married after leaving Iceland. Her mother's family came with them as well.
191, side 1	175: Her mother's father, Bjorn Peterson wanted to leave Iceland and find something to do. There wasn't anything for them here.
191, side 1	193: GRANDPARENTS Paternal - Thorvaldur Stigsson and Vilborg Jonsdoottir. Thorvaldur was the oldest of six brothers. He had four older sisters. Vilborg lived in her parent's old

Container(s)	Description
	home in Keldaskoar. (This is the name of the farm in Iceland.) Maternal - Bjorn Peterson (see I-175).
191, side 1	<p>276: PARENTS' TRIP FROM ICELAND TO AMERICA</p> <p>1876-9 Petersons on boat. Aleph's mother ended up coming before her father. Thorun was ready for marriage when Stigur came in 1881. She had worked and learned the language by then. Stigur's mother wanted to stay in Iceland and take care of the farm. Stigur had a man who could help her on the farm, but after he was ready to go, she backed out and wouldn't let. She decided that if he was going, they were all going. They had to get rid of the farm and animals before they left and that took time.</p>
191, side 1	<p>332: SETTLING IN AMERICA</p> <p>When they came to America, Aleph's mother had staked a claim on a homestead on the Red River, Dakota Territory. Not satisfied with the farm. It flooded every year. She found a young fellow who wanted a good fishing place. Fishing was marvelous on the Red River. They exchanged farm lots. Aleph's parents got married and settled in the Pembina Mountains, North Dakota. Her father wanted a wheat farm. An Irishman had jumped their claim and didn't want to give it up. He'd built a house there. He paid them. They settled in the Tongue River Valley and had a nice home and farm there in North Dakota.</p>
191, side 1	<p>414: BROTHERS AND SISTERS</p> <p>10 children in the family. Oldest brother, Thorwald stayed on the farm. Bjorn had an automobile agency in Cavalier, North Dakota. Pauline became Mrs. Shaeld (sp?). Wilmar died as a small boy. The next sister was Gwen Hjalmarson born in 1890. Ole was the youngest brother. There was another brother named Wilmar. He was a policeman and died in California. Her youngest sister was Jennie Elizabeth.</p>
191, side 1	<p>493: SCHOOL</p> <p>She attended school and then Grenwold Academy, which was affiliated with the Lutheran Church. Aleph and one brother attended this academy for one season. It was a good addition to their general education. They had some business courses. Aleph attended a dressmaking school in Pembina County, North Dakota.</p>
191, side 1	<p>510: WORK</p> <p>She was a seamstress. Always worked at home because her mother was not healthy. Her mother had just lost her youngest child.</p>
191, side 1	<p>532: MEETING SPOUSE</p> <p>Her husband came from Iceland in 1886. His father settled a claim in the area. Her husband, Bjarni Johannsson, had two brothers who also came. Bjarni became a schoolteacher and taught at Aleph's school. They usually had school in the winter. He didn't get paid well as a teacher so he decided to attend the University of Washington. He became a pharmacist. Aleph met him while he</p>

Container(s)	Description
	was teaching. He was writing to her after he went to Seattle. Aleph didn't really want to correspond with him - she wasn't interested in a serious relationship.
191, side 1	<p>587:</p> <p>She wanted to become a nurse. Bjarni talked her out of going to school to become a nurse. He didn't want to wait for 4 years. After he graduated, he visited her in North Dakota. He proposed so she had to decide between getting married and becoming a nurse. Her father didn't want her to become a nurse. Bjarni waited for a year and then they got married.</p>
191, side 1	<p>640: THEIR WEDDING</p> <p>Very nice. It was in the summer when Bjarni had his vacation. He had only one week off. Two of Aleph's friends came. They made the wedding dress and the other dresses. One was a good cook and made the dinner for the wedding.</p>
191, side 1	<p>698: THE TRIP TO SEATTLE</p> <p>They took the train. Automobiles weren't in use yet. When they got to Seattle; Bjarni wanted to let his boss, Mr. Preston,</p>
191, side 1	<p>710:</p> <p>know he was back. They met 3 men at Mr. Preston's door. Bjarni was acquainted with them and greeted them. The boss was mad that Bjarni had talked with his customers on such familiar terms and Bjarni lost his job. Bjarni hadn't even had a chance to introduce his wife. Bjarni got a job at another drug store in Ballard. This store was owned by a Norwegian man, H. Hourn. He wanted someone who could run the store because he wanted to start a chicken farm in Sumner. The name of the store was Cascade Drug Company. Eventually, Bjarni bought the store. He owned it until 1946. The other store was Preston's Pharmacy. Preston sold out to a larger company because he was losing his trade.</p>
191, side 1	<p>820: HOUSING</p> <p>Mr. Preston allowed them to live on the 2nd floor of his drug store until they could find new lodgings. Then they rented a house on 62nd Street and lived there quite a while. In 1912, they bought the house that Aleph now lives in.</p>
191, side 1	<p>864: CHILDREN</p> <p>Lincoln worked for Washington State Employment Service. Sigrid got married to Don Hastings. He was a teamster. They have two boys, Phillip and Neil. Phillip is a manager for Shasta. Neil works for Texaco. Thorun married Eugene Robel. He is an electrician. Wilma married Cleo Vadnaia (sp?). He worked for Pioneer Sand and Gravel. They have a boy, James, and a girl, Janis. James is a treefarm manager in Pysht, Washington. Janis is married to Gordon Prutt (sp?) and lives in Port Angeles, Washington. He drives a log truck. Alice, the youngest daughter, became ill while in school. Heart trouble. They didn't know she had diabetes. She died in a coma in 1937.</p>

Container(s)	Description
191, side 1	<p>982: CHURCH</p> <p>Helped prepare dinners. Was in the choir. Also sang in the Ballard High Choir. They had concerts at high school and got instruction from the teacher, Harriet Charlton. All of Aleph's children were confirmed in the Lutheran Church.</p>
191, side 1	<p>1024: ICELANDIC CLUBS</p> <p>These organizations were mostly for men. She did sing in the Icelandic choir.</p>
191, side 1	<p>1035: COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES</p> <p>Helped organize the Anning Society. This is a charity society originally for the women in the church. Since not all women belonged to the church, they decided not to bind it to the church. They helped sick people and people with financial troubles. She tells about an old couple who had moved to the west part of Ballard from Alberta. They had nothing to live on. They lived in a tent. They helped these people. The Anning Society is still active.</p>
191, side 1	<p>1089: TRIPS BACK TO NORTH DAKOTA</p> <p>She and her husband went back while her sister was still there. Her parents moved to California because of her mother's rheumatism. Her father had a brother, Horris, in Fresno, California. In 1919, Aleph, Bjarni, and the five kids all went back to North Dakota. Aleph's parents and brothers and sisters were still there. They stayed there for a month. Traveled by train. She tells about the trip back. They could only get seats in the tourist section of the train.</p>
191, side 2	<p>009:</p> <p>He went to Canada to see his brother and then went back to Seattle. His brother was a storekeeper in Saskatchewan at that time. His youngest brother had died of tuberculosis. Their mother had died in Iceland.</p>
191, side 2	<p>054: GOLDEN WEDDING ANNIVERSARY</p> <p>1956 - They had a big party at the Calvary Lutheran Church. It was an open-house. Some of her brothers and sisters came. Ole and Dilla came and Gwen and Jessie came. Her husband died in 1970. He was born in Framnese, Iceland.</p>
191, side 2	<p>173: MEETING THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND</p> <p>Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. They had a nice visit. Aleph spoke Icelandic to her. Vigdís said she spoke Icelandic as if she were born in Iceland. Aleph received a telegram from the president wishing her well for her 100th birthday.</p>
191, side 2	<p>285: ICELANDIC FOOD</p> <p>Aleph sometimes fixed sausages made of liver. She also liked blood sausage. She also made a type of Icelandic doughnut called kojna (kleinur?). She made wienerkeppa (vieterta?), a cake with many layers. She also makes rullpoelser, a kind of sausage. She speaks a little Icelandic.</p>

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Emigration and immigration
Family -- Iceland
Homestead law
Icelandic-Americans--Northwest, Pacific--Interviews
Icelandic-Americans--Social life and customs

Personal Names :

Thorwaldson, Stigur
Johannsson, Aleph Thorwaldson--Interviews
(creator)
Johannsson, Alice
Johannsson, Bjarni
Johannsson, Lincoln
Jornsdottir, Thorun
Robel, Thorun Johannsson
Vadnais, Wilma Johannsson
Hastings, Sigrid Johannsson

Corporate Names :

Anning Society (Charitable organization)
Calvary Lutheran Church (Seattle, Wash.)
Cascade Drug Company (Seattle, Wash.)
Icelandic Club of Greater Seattle.

Family Names :

Hastings family
Hjalmarsson family
Johannsson family
Peterson family
Robel family
Stigsson family
Thorwaldson family
Vadnais family

Geographical Names :

Fljotsdalheradi (Iceland)
Framnesi (Iceland)
Gislatorðum (Iceland)
Milton (N.D.)
Seattle (Wash.)

Form or Genre Terms :

Oral histories

Occupations :

Pharmacists

Finding aid prepared by Kerstin Ringdahl and Amity Smetzler
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