

Peter (Per) Geirhart Danielsen Oral History Interview, 1982

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Danielsen, Peter (Per) Geirhart
Title	Peter (Per) Geirhart Danielsen Oral History Interview
Dates	1982 (inclusive) 1982 1982
Quantity	2 file folders 1 sound cassette
Collection Number	t185
Summary	An oral history interview with Peter (Per) Geirhart Danielsen, 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

Peter Danielsen was born on March 31, 1915 in Rjukan, Norway to Daniel B. Danielsen, an inspector for a hydroelectric plant, and Julie P. Hansen Espevik, a homemaker. Peter had two older siblings, Gunnar (George) and Solveig, and one younger, Finn. In 1921, Peter's father immigrated to Brooklyn, NY, where he lived with an aunt and worked as an interior decorator for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Due to immigration limitations at the time, the rest of the family could not join him until 1925. The family settled in the Bay Ridge area, which was a Scandinavian community, and rather than attending regular school, the children went to classes simply to learn the English language.

After one year, Peter felt comfortable speaking English and enrolled in regular school. He also began working as soon as he could. He did deliveries and worked in a soda shop. In America, the family continued to keep Norwegian traditions and began attending Bethany Lutheran Church in Brooklyn. To Peter, the Church felt like a second home, serving as a source of encouragement as well as a place for social activity. When he got older, Peter worked on Wall Street in an accounting department and as

a runner and was also a clerk at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards. In 1942, he enlisted in the Army and served for three years, following, which he attended and graduated from Long Island University.

In 1948, Peter decided to move to Alaska, where he stayed for one year and worked for Birch Johnson Telecorporation, after which he took a job with the military government in the South Pacific for two years. On his way to Alaska, Peter had stopped in Seattle, WA, and that was where he first met Helen Field. Helen and Peter were later married in Moorehead, MN, where Helen was from. Helen was half Norwegian and half Danish. In 1952, Peter and Helen moved to the west coast, where Peter worked for the Food King chain and then for the post exchange system out of Fort Lewis, WA and Portland, OR. In 1969, they moved to Alaska and taught school for eight years. Peter taught the fourth grade, some business classes, accounting, and on-the-job training programs, while Helen taught elementary school and home economics.

Peter and Helen have returned to Norway once and continue to cook traditional Scandinavian foods as well as using the Norwegian language. They also attend Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Tacoma, and Peter is a member of the Sons of Norway.

Lineage

Full Name: Peter (Per) Geirhart Danielsen. Father: Daniel B. Danielsen. Mother: Julie P. Hansen Espevik. Maternal Grandfather: Martin Hansen Espevik. Brothers and Sisters: George (Gunnar) Danielsen, Solveig Danielsen, Finn Danielsen. Spouse: Helen E. Field

Content Description

This interview was conducted with Peter Danielsen on September 15, 1982 in Tacoma, Washington. It contains information about family background, emigration, occupations, marriage, church and community activities, 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 Morrene Nesvig 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	
185, side 1	020: PERSONAL BACKGROUND Name is Peter Geirhart Danielsen. Born in Rjukan, Norway on March 31, 1915. Rjukan is located in the center part of Southern Norway near Porsgrunn. This is where the Germans made heavy water during WWII. There was a hydroelectric plant.
185, side 1	066 : PARENTS Father was Daniel Bernard Danielsen and his mother was Julie Hansen Espevik. His father was an inspector for the hydroelectric plant in Norway and in the U.S. he was the interior decorator for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. His mother was a housewife.
185, side 1	098: GRANDPARENTS Maternal grandfather owned a large farm in Porsgrunn, Norway that the Germans cleared all the buildings off of and made into an airstrip. He had a motorboat that he would take Peter out in.

Container(s)	Description
185, side 1	<p>140: DANIELSEN NAME</p> <p>At one time he heard that their family's name was Holm. When Peter came to the U.S. his name was Per but the teacher in Brooklyn changed it to Peter.</p>
185, side 1	<p>185: GROWING UP IN NORWAY</p> <p>Remembers playing, swimming, skiing, and berry picking. They lived in Kragerø on an island called Tatøy. They were always down at the water or in the winter times they would be on their snow sleds. Sometimes they had to pay the bigger boys to play in certain areas. They would play ball.</p>
185, side 1	<p>265: SCHOOL</p> <p>Started at age seven and went for three years. They went at least ten months.</p>
185, side 1	<p>285: REASONS FOR COMING TO AMERICA</p> <p>His father came in 1921, four years before the rest of the family. There wasn't too much America talk in their home. His father would send money home. His father settled down with an aunt in Brooklyn, New York. They couldn't go with their father because of the limitation on immigration at that time. The rest of the family came in 1925.</p>
185, side 1	<p>358: BROTHERS AND SISTERS</p> <p>Gunnar, Solveig, and Finn.</p>
185, side 1	<p>365: FEELINGS LEAVING NORWAY</p> <p>They were renting their house. Peter cried because they couldn't take the cat. Peter was almost 10.</p>
185, side 1	<p>388: TRIP TO U.S.</p> <p>Went from Tatøy to Kragerø and took the boat to Oslo. They stayed in Oslo with an aunt one night and caught the Bergensfjord the next day.</p>
185, side 1	<p>400: LUGGAGE</p> <p>They took furniture, bedding, and almost everything they had. Packed in the old-house round-topped trunks.</p>
185, side 1	<p>418: BERGENSFJORD</p> <p>Old, safe, efficient ship. Very comfortable. All five of them were in one cabin.</p>
185, side 1	<p>450: SHIP TRAVEL</p> <p>Crossing the North Sea was rough. Left March 21 and got to the U.S. March 31. The Atlantic Ocean was calm the entire trip. He thinks they stopped in Bergen, Norway and picked up some Danish people. For the five of them the crossing cost about \$250. Made a stop in Halifax, Canada.</p>
185, side 1	<p>520: ELLIS ISLAND</p>

Container(s)	Description
	Led to the see the medics. Got coffee with sugar, which they never had before, and some sandwiches. They waited a few hours.
185, side 1	535: MEETING FATHER He was like a stranger to Peter. From customs they went to Bertha and Uncle Hans' place in Bay Ridge, New York. Father had a place.
185, side 1	557: FIRST IMPRESSIONS He remembers learning his first English from the kids asking "What's your name?" He was numb, had no impressions.
185, side 1	590: FATHER'S WORK He worked for the Metropolitan Museum of Art doing painting whenever new pieces were bought.
185, side 1	620: LANGUAGE They didn't go to school that year. They all went into classes just to learn.
185, side 1	640: COMMUNITY Bay Ridge, Brooklyn was a Scandinavian area, but they lived in an area called Little Italy with the Italians. The immigrant groups were very well defined. Strong national identities. There were a few fights that broke out. There was lots of support within the community. Some of the women worked in "sweat shops" sewing for \$1 a day in their homes.
185, side 1	710: HOME IN BROOKLYN, NEW YORK A very nice upstairs apartment with 6-7- rooms a with a big porch and backyard. They lived there from 1925-1927 and then they moved to their own home in Bay Ridge. They paid about \$12,500 for it.
185, side 1	750: CHILDHOOD IN U.S. They had a bicycle. He took a job as soon as he could. He delivered chickens, groceries, and meat, worked in a soda store, and sold soda from his wagon. He also sold newspapers. Soon he had three bicycles.
185, side 1	800: PREJUDICES They felt prejudice against them. They weren't invited to certain affairs and hearing people talk about them. Lots of jealousy. The Norwegian community took root in the Italian community.
185, side 1	845: SCHOOL IN NEW YORK They went to the regular classes. Everything was in English. He knew his math. The teachers were nice. After one year he felt comfortable with English. They were pretty quiet until then.
185, side 1	880: LANGUAGE USE

Container(s)	Description
	They spoke Norwegian in the home. He mother and his aunt went to immigrant English classes at Bay Ridge High School, but it didn't last for long. The kids spoke English between themselves or used whichever word seemed to fit best.
185, side 1	<p>910: CITIZENSHIP</p> <p>Father had to wait for five years to get his first papers. Father became a citizen in 1931 and all his children under the age of 15 became citizens under his papers. The two older children had to take out their own papers. Later Peter asked for his own papers. He had to take a loyalty test.</p>
185, side 1	<p>947: DEPRESSION</p> <p>The kids all worked hard and still they couldn't afford meat for 3-4 days. Only heard of one Danish man, Mr. Madsen (?) that returned because of the Depression. He had trouble getting out because there was no record of him coming in.</p>
185, side 1	<p>985: SCANDINAVIAN TRADITIONS</p> <p>Celebrated the same holidays. The churches in Brooklyn, New York kept up the traditions too.</p>
185, side 1	<p>993: CHURCH LIFE IN NEW YORK</p> <p>He practically lived in church. He was there Sunday morning for Sunday school, Sunday services, Sunday evening for services, Wednesday evening for services, and Friday night for Luther League. In Norway, they hadn't had a full-time minister, they had a bedehus where the minister only came once and a while. They went to Bethany Lutheran Church in Brooklyn. The church was a source of hope and encouragement for the immigrants. He liked to go. It was a social place too. They had a Norwegian service once a month.</p>
185, side 1	<p>1045: CHRISTMAS IN NEW YORK</p> <p>That was the big holiday. They would make up food baskets and go out and give it to the poor people. People donated their time to the church. The church was his second home. At home they had a big tree and walked around it singing songs on Christmas Eve. They had lutefisk and cooked rice with sugar and cinnamon for Christmas Eve. There was lefse and lots cookies. There were lit candles on the tree and they made paper decorations. They had presents under the tree.</p>
185, side 1	<p>1110: HOLIDAYS</p> <p>They would go on picnics to the nearby parks. There was Prospect Park, Sunset Park, and out to Coney Island.</p>
185, side 2	<p>004: BAY RIDGE</p> <p>He talks about the location of the various ethnic groups in New York. Bay Ridge is one of the last places remaining the same.</p>
185, side 2	<p>043: SCANDINAVIAN ORGANIZATIONS</p>

Container(s)	Description
	Every country had their organizations. His parents didn't belong to this but his mother was involved in hospital groups - Martha Maria Foreningen. He would go some Saturday nights for their programs at the Sons of Norway. His mother's group would help in the hospital.
185, side 2	115: WWII He enlisted in the Army. After getting to see some places outside of Brooklyn he realized Brooklyn wasn't for him. He had thought that the Dodgers and baseball were everything. He enlisted in 1942 right after Pearl Harbor when he was 26.
185, side 2	175: WORK IN NEW YORK He had worked on Wall Street in an accounting department and as a runner. He was a clerk at Bethlehem Steel Shipyards. They were very busy during the war. He didn't have time to spend the money he was making.
185, side 2	230: In 1945 he got out of the Army and went to Long Island University and finished
185, side 2	235: WEST COAST Came in 1948 to visit his aunt in Los Angeles, California. This aunt was a housekeeper for the wealthy. She was working for Mrs. Slavik (?). What he really wanted to do was go to Alaska. On his way to Alaska he stopped in Seattle and met his future wife.
185, side 2	288: ALASKA Stayed there for one year and worked for Birch Johnson Telecorporation (?).
185, side 2	297: SOUTH PACIFIC Took a job with the military government there for almost two years.
185, side 2	300: Now he felt that he had seen the world. Brooklyn still doesn't appeal to him.
185, side 2	310: MARRIAGE Married in Moorehead, Minnesota where Helen was from. Helen is half Norwegian and half Danish. She grew up in North Dakota and Minnesota. Her mother came from Denmark and her father from Norway. They didn't have any children.
185, side 2	335: MOVING AROUND Taught school in Alaska in 196(?). In 1952, they were out west. He was working for the Food King chain and then for the post exchange system out of Fort Lewis and Portland, Oregon. They moved out here because of the nice climate. There is no better place. In 1969, they went up to Alaska to teach school where they stayed for eight years. He taught the fourth grade, some

Container(s)	Description
	business class, and then to the University of Alaska Accounting Department. He also taught on-the-job training programs. Helen had elementary and home economics.
185, side 2	405: VISITS TO NORWAY It took 53 years to return. Very little had changed. They left on a Sons of Norway trip from Vancouver, B.C. to Gardermoen in Oslo. It was fun and they want to return. He got along fine with the language. There were a few problems understanding the younger children.
185, side 2	480: NORWEGIAN LANGUAGE USE He would speak Norwegian to his mother. He and his wife would also speak Norwegian sometimes. His mother would write letters to him in Norwegian. Also he would speak it with some of his neighbors.
185, side 2	500: SONS OF NORWAY They became active in Tacoma.
185, side 2	510: CHURCH IN TACOMA They go to Bethlehem Lutheran. They have been on the board and Helen belongs to the Circle.
185, side 2	515: OTHER ORGANIZATIONS He belongs to the Elks and the Masons. They retired five years ago.
185, side 2	533: CONTACT WITH NORWAY They have distant relatives that they write to. They are invited back.
185, side 2	545: IMPRESSIONS OF SCANDINAVIA They are very friendly and very clean.
185, side 2	563: He has cousins in Brooklyn still. He is the last one in his family. He has some nieces and nephews.
185, side 2	570: SCANDINAVIAN TRADITIONS They keep up the traditions food wise.
185, side 2	590: SPOKEN NORWEGIAN He says that they have it good here in America in Norwegian. He recites I Jesu Navn.
185, side 2	620: IMPORTANCE OF NORWEGIAN HERITAGE

Container(s)	Description
	It is very important. At one time he wanted to be buried where his parents were. Has never had a bad moment in Norway, but has had some because of the U.S. His loyalty is to America.

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Christmas
 Education--United States
 Emigration and immigration
 Family--Norway
 Freemasonry--Tacoma (Wash.)
 Marriage service
 Norway--Social conditions--1945-
 Norwegian-Americans--Ethnic identity
 Norwegian-Americans--Northwest, Pacific--Interviews
 Norwegian-Americans--Social life and customs
 World War, 1939-1945

Personal Names :

Field, Helen E.
 Hansen Espevik, Martin
 Danielsen, Daniel
 Danielsen, Peter--Interviews
 (creator)
 Espevik, Julie P.

Corporate Names :

Bergensfjord (Steamship)
 Bethany Lutheran Church (Brooklyn, N.Y.)
 Bethlehem Lutheran Church (Tacoma, Wash.)
 Bethlehem Steel Corporation
 Elks (Fraternal Order). Tacoma Lodge No. 174
 Sons of Norway (U.S.) Norden Lodge No. 2 (Tacoma, Wash.)

Family Names :

Danielsen family
 Espevik family
 Field family

Geographical Names :

Alaska
 Bay Ridge (Brooklyn, N.Y.)
 Brooklyn (N.Y.)
 Moorehead (Minn.)
 Rjukan (Norway)
 Tacoma (Wash.)

Form or Genre Terms :

Oral histories

Occupations :

Interior Decorators

Soldiers
Teachers

Finding aid prepared by Kerstin Ringdahl and Amity Smetzler
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