

Bertha Sande Sylliaasen Oral History Interview, 1983

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Sylliaasen, Bertha Sande
Title	Bertha Sande Sylliaasen Oral History Interview
Dates	1983 (inclusive) 1983 1983
Quantity	3 file folders 3 photographs 1 sound cassette
Collection Number	t242
Summary	An oral history interview with Bertha Sande Sylliaasen, 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

Bertha Sylliaasen was born Bertha Sande in Balestrand, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway on May 2, 1888. Her parents were Johannes Sande and Kari Ruud. Johannes was a woodcarver, who designed and built houses in the summers and made furniture during the remainder of the year, and Kari passed away when Bertha was only sixteen months old. The Sandes were a prominent family in Balestrand, and Bertha had a relatively privileged education for a rural person. After grammar school, she attended two years of high school and then "middelskole" in Nordfjordeid, where she studied English among other things. While Bertha was attending "middelskole," her father requested that she come home because the family was going to immigrate to America. By this time, Johannes had remarried and had two more children. Bertha had no desire to immigrate, but her stepmother, Britta, had convinced her father to do it, and he insisted that Bertha come as well. The family immigrated to Bellingham, WA, where Britta's brothers lived, and Bertha initially hated it. Soon after their arrival, Bertha was told that she should go out and earn a living of her own, which troubled her at first since her family had always had a maid and she had no domestic experience. Fortunately, she found a job as a domestic helper

for the family of a very nice local dentist. She worked there for two-three years until she saw an ad for a second maid in Seattle, which offered a better salary. Bertha was hired for the job, which entailed helping the first maid and no cooking, which, still lacking any cooking skills, Bertha was happy about. Her next job was as a housekeeper-companion for a German woman. In Seattle, Bertha also began attending church, and met her husband who was part of the church choir. He was studying to become a civil engineer at the University of Washington and came from a very prominent family in Seattle. The Sylliaasens had one child, Jane, and continued to live in the Seattle area. Bertha's husband sang for the Seattle Normanna Chorus, and Bertha joined the women's group who supported them. However, Bertha never took part in any Scandinavian organizations despite the fact that she was asked to organize a Daughters of Norway lodge in both Bellingham and Seattle.

Lineage

Full Name: Bertha Sylliaasen. Maiden Name: Bertha Sande. Father: Johannes Sande. Mother: Kari Ruud. Paternal Grandfather: Bjørn Sande. Paternal Grandmother: Tolvarg Sande. Maternal Grandfather: Knut Ruud. Maternal Grandmother: Helga Ruud. Brothers and Sisters: One half-sister and one half-brother Spouse: (?) Sylliaasen. Children: Jane Sylliaasen.

Content Description

This interview was conducted with Bertha Sylliaasen on April 4, 1983 in Seattle, Washington. It contains information on family background, school, emigration, work, marriage, and community activities. Also available are two photographs of Bertha 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	
242, side 1	006: FAMILY BACKGROUND Born Bertha Sande in Balestrand, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway on May 2, 1888. The central Sognefjord is a big tourist area in Norway and had one of the largest hotels, Kviknes Hotel.
242, side 1	044: PARENTS Her father was Johannes Sande from Balestrand. Her mother was Kari Ruud (?) who was born across the fjord on a farm "way up in the sky" - said to be a bishop's gaard. The view from this farm is magnificent; can see seven churches. Even though located on the face of a small mountain, the farm supported large families: nine children in her mother's family and nine in the next generation.
242, side 1	090: GRANDPARENTS Maternal grandparents were Knut and Helga Ruud; paternal were Bjoern and Tolvarg (?) Sande. Bjørn owned a freighter that went from Bergen into Sognefjorden. Later he sold that and bought the place in Balestrand which her father - the eldest son- inherited. Her grandmother Sande was very critical, but grandfather had a big sense of humor and was delightful.

Container(s)	Description
242, side 1	<p>145:</p> <p>The Sande property was a relatively large and important parcel of land. Three Sande houses were clustered on the property: Bertha's family, her paternal grandparents, and an uncle (dad's younger brother). The Sande land included waterfront on both sides of the hotel and land extending back into the steep hills.</p>
242, side 1	<p>165: THE BALESTRAND COMMUNITY</p> <p>Kviknes Hotel was on the point at Balestrand and there was a small skerry (Balholm) connected to it by a bridge. On Balholm was a bathing beach and a "lysthus", a little, open chalet used for afternoon coffees. Many English and German tourists came for a month with the entire family. Some eventually bought land along the beach and built houses, including some German landscape painters.</p>
242, side 1	<p>195:</p> <p>Father designed and built houses in the summer besides being a wood carver and making furniture. Although he owned the Sande property, he didn't run the farm at all or even have a garden.</p>
242, side 1	<p>232:</p> <p>The Sande house was unique for that time and place; it was very big with a basement that had a concrete floor and cold running water. Outside was a well and a creek for farm use. Father had studied woodcarving and his trade in Germany and had the basement intentionally built as a workshop. Bertha has three pieces of furniture designed and built by her dad in Norway; in America, he did not continue with his trade.</p>
242, side 1	<p>269: BROTHERS AND SISTERS</p> <p>Her mother died when Bertha was 16 months old. She was brought up by Grandmother Sande until father remarried. Then she had a half sister and a half brother. Both died young from TB over in America, although her sister had been married for a short time.</p>
242, side 1	<p>284: SCHOOL IN NORWAY</p> <p>Bertha's schooling was relatively privileged and extensive for a rural person. She spent her first year at a "private school" by invitation of her godmother, Mrs. Sverdrup. This lady was the wife of the minister and mother of the famous Sverdrup family, and was living with her daughter (Tyggesen) outside of Balestrand. The Tyggesens had a large family for which they hired a private house-teacher. After the first year Bertha attended six years at the regular grammar school in Balestrand.</p>
242, side 1	<p>335:</p> <p>Here, too, she was favored by the teacher and other parents because they felt sorry for her having a stepmother. Although she was shy, she was also a</p>

Container(s)	Description
	"mischief maker". But because her best friend was the teacher's daughter and people felt sorry for her, she was excused and forgiven.
242, side 1	<p>376:</p> <p>After grammar school, she attended a year of high school at Balestrand and a second year at Leikanger (easterly on the Sognefjord), returning to Balestrand once a month to take an exam. The following year she attended "middelskole" in Nordfjordeid, having two quarters of English plus other studies; She was here when the family notified her about emigrating. She loved school and knew nothing else, so she didn't want to emigrate. She had no knowledge of housework - they always had a maid - and was totally unprepared to do anything in America where she was told that she "was 16 and had to go out and earn her own living". She felt handicapped - "the most stupid thing that ever lived."</p>
242, side 1	<p>410: CONFIRMATION</p> <p>She was confirmed with Sverdrup (Tjugum parish?). She feels that church is not important to families in Norway like it is in America, because the state controlled the church, minister, etc.</p>
242, side 1	<p>444: BACKGROUND TO EMIGRATION</p> <p>Her father really didn't initiate the emigration or even want it; it was due to her stepmother. She had three brothers homesteading by Bellingham, Washington. Each would return to Norway and say how wonderful America was. Her stepmother was never happy on the homeplace because Grandmother Sande was critical of her and Balestrand's most important and prosperous people were the Sandes and the Ruuds. So, she wanted to come to America.</p>
242, side 1	<p>482: CHRISTMAS IN NORWAY</p> <p>In our home, Christmas began on Christmas Eve when we were allowed into the parlor - the big living room. The tree was trimmed and lighted, and the tables were all set for food. She thinks they had rommegrøt, small, crisp spareribs, lefse, and flatbread for the Christmas Eve meal. The Balestrand lefse was a regular sort, spread with butter and brown sugar. But her stepmother made Hardanger lefse with a special iron; the lefse was fluffy with a pebbly surface. Bertha has seen lefse like this at bazaars.</p>
242, side 1	<p>556: EMIGRATION</p> <p>Bertha was 18, almost 19, when her father requested she come home at once from school so they could immigrate to America. It was hard on her emotionally; she "went through agony". "Uncle Ole" was home visiting from Lawrence (near Bellingham), Washington - a completely Scandinavian area. And they were supposed to go back with him. Bertha "made a fuss. I wasn't going to go". Her father was very upset because Bertha and her stepmother, Britta, had never gotten on. Bertha had been raised and basically spoiled by Grandmother Sande from 16 months to seven years. During this time she and her father lived with the grandparents, sharing a room. Her father and she had been very close. He taught her many Bible stories, even though she doesn't</p>

Container(s)	Description
	believe him to be so Christian, just "a good man." Grandmother taught her hymns and Bertha sung a lot as a child.
242, side 1	613: PREPARATION FOR EMIGRATION Although Father really didn't want to come either, he insisted that Bertha come; the grandparents were too old to care for her. But he put money in the bank so she had the means to return to Norway anytime - if she wanted.
242, side 1	631: Since Ole was leaving very soon, the family virtually walked away from Balestrand leaving everything behind. Ole assured them they could buy everything in America. So, "we came without anything - anything". But of course, Father could not replace his tools in America; there was no place for him to work and no call for his hand carved furniture. He never was happy.
242, side 1	642: THE TRIP OVER They left from Bergen going to Boston via England. The whole family emigrated and had one big room. Ole had his own quarters. Bertha remembers little else about the boat trip except that she wasn't seasick and that two men next door drove them crazy playing bagpipes. She was so unhappy, she paid no attention to the length of the trip, name of the ship, or what was happening.
242, side 1	679: TRAIN ACROSS AMERICA She hated the train and she picked up measles. They arrived in Lawrence in spring time, and Bertha felt miserable. The youngest Hoheim uncle had a big party for them - invited all the Scandinavian families. Bertha broke out with measles the next day, after infecting the whole neighborhood. "So you know how popular I was!" Bertha was very sick with the measles; stayed in bed in a darkened room. She "was just hoping I'd die every minute. I didn't care to live. And it was ugly around there."Ole had told them how beautiful it was. But having come from the most beautiful place in Norway she didn't "think it was much beauty to look out and see nothing but half sawn trees and then burned - so the trees were black". Now Bertha thinks the Bellingham area is beautiful with its great big cleared meadows so the mountains can be seen. "It's amazing how the country has changed."
242, side 1	720: SETTLING IN In the fall the family moved into Bellingham - in a house that her father built. In town she helped her stepmother with shopping, finding and dealing with Norwegian-American stores. Bertha took the two younger children to school. Her brother was just beginning school and wouldn't stay unless Bertha did. Bertha accompanied him to school for the next two-three months while she too attended. His teacher and the principal determined she could read English at the fifth grade level and arranged for her to be in that class. Bertha didn't feel out of place because she was small (100 pounds) and undeveloped for her age. Her father was working in a sawmill out in the woods during the fall. Uncle

Container(s)	Description
	Ole came to their house and told Bertha that her father wasn't earning enough money to keep the whole family, and she should go out and earn her own way.
242, side 2	<p>025: WORK</p> <p>Being independent and feeling guilty that the two small children were being deprived, she couldn't bear to remain at home. Uncle Ole was a "very good arranger for other people" and had already arranged a job interview for Bertha with a dentist, under the pretense of a dental exam. Bertha took the job and worked for this family for two-three years as a domestic helper. The wife was rather frail but did do her own cooking. Bertha thinks she was "probably the worst helper - had to be shown everything", but she was happy. She was treated like a member of the family and got along beautifully with their adopted daughter (a niece). She was slightly older than Bertha, grown up, and a deputy clerk at the county courthouse. Bertha thought she was extremely smart.</p>
242, side 2	<p>141:</p> <p>While still working for the dentist's family, they took the Alaska-Pacific-Yukon ferry into Seattle to attend the fair, staying at a hotel. The family returned but Bertha had money left and remained in Seattle at the YWCA. Besides going to the fair daily, she discovered the Seattle Public Library and a cache of Norwegian books.</p>
242, side 2	<p>174:</p> <p>She returned to the dentist's home, where she continued to work and better her English; the dentist was very good about teaching her and having her practice new words. She visited Seattle two-three more times, attending the fair and loaning works of Ibsen, Bjoernson, etc., from the library.</p>
242, side 2	<p>225: WORK IN SEATTLE</p> <p>Finally Bertha read a newspaper ad for a "second maid at a good salary". Not knowing what a second maid did, she interviewed for the job and took it "because no cooking was involved". This huge house and its family were cared for by a gardener, cook, chauffeur, first maid, and now Bertha whose responsibilities were to care for the upstairs, set the table, place flowers about, and help the regular maid.</p>
242, side 2	<p>250:</p> <p>The help ate in the kitchen. Bertha always found something to do during this mealtime so that she wouldn't have to join them - which created a little problem. The chauffeur was different, too. He was the son of a Seattle doctor, but he was so crazy about automobiles that he hired out as chauffeur. One time he invited her out on a motorcycle ride all about Lake Washington. It was the only time she's gotten motion sick - "that was the most exciting ride I ever had in my life. I was scared to death on it" - although, she really believed he was a good, dependable driver. One day she had to fill in for the cook; it was tough, but by then she could at least read the cookbook.</p>

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242, side 2	<p>308: THIRD JOB</p> <p>Her next job was as a companion-housekeeper for a German lady who owned a restaurant that served breakfast and lunches. This woman had a big, three-bedroom apartment on First Hill, and brought food home from the restaurant. Once again, Bertha didn't need to cook. She helped with the house and with the German lady's English.</p>
242, side 2	<p>344:</p> <p>On one of her free days, Bertha was riding the bus to the fair. Behind her sat the two girls from next door, one Swedish, and one Norwegian, talking in their native tongues. It made Bertha so homesick that "I could have died, but do you suppose I turned around and told them I was Norwegian? No. Not I." She changed her day off because she couldn't bear to hear them.</p>
242, side 2	<p>370: CHURCH</p> <p>Bertha was recommended to attend Rev. Stowe's (?) church, which she did once, but didn't like it much. When her half sister was grown and came to live in Seattle, Bertha asked her to church and in the process discovered there was a very active Norwegian young people's group - and, the church also had a bookcase full of Norwegian books. Her half sister was seven years younger than Bertha, very beautiful, and liked to have a good time. Both girls became members in this church group; the half sister for social reasons, and Bertha for book reasons.</p>
242, side 2	<p>420: MEETING HER SPOUSE</p> <p>A Norwegian neighbor girl introduced Bertha to the church choir. Her husband who was attending the University of Washington as a civil engineer student was also in the choir. He was skinny, tall, and lanky. He offered her a chair to sit down in a very crowded choir room. They were married several years later, as she simply was not interested in marriage; she had too much to learn (was attending night school), and she also had an inferiority complex.</p>
242, side 2	<p>455: WEDDING</p> <p>The Sylliaasen's were prominent Seattle people; he was a well-known successful contractor. They had actually arranged another match for their son but he insisted on marrying Bertha. They did not accept her very well because of her unknown family background. They had a small, beautiful church wedding; she wore a long white dress. Afterwards there was a catered reception at the boarding house where she stayed on Capitol Hill. No invitations were sent out by his family but it was all very nice anyway.</p>
242, side 2	<p>518: FATHER SYLLIAASEN</p> <p>"He kind of stuck by me all his life." In later years when sick, Father Sylliaasen became Bertha's confidant, asking her opinion on medical matters, etc. He was a bosom friend of Mr. Pantages, built his home near St. Mark's Cathedral and other buildings. Mr. Pantages desired Sylliaasen to build another one of his theaters in Memphis, Tennessee but Sylliaasen refused to travel that</p>

Container(s)	Description
	far. Finally Mr. Pantages offered to send and pay his best people- carpenter, bricklayer, painter - with Sylliaasen if he'd only accept the job. Sylliaasen agreed in the end.
242, side 2	570: Bertha's husband was working as an engineer for Seattle at this time, but spent time in Tennessee on the Pantages project. Bertha and daughter Jane joined him in Memphis and remained there for a while as there were many building opportunities in Memphis. It was an old-fashioned, wealthy town on the Mississippi River. Bertha liked this area and the Southern people very much.
242, side 2	590: CHILDREN Jane is the only child. She is now widowed and a musician in Rochester, New York. She met her husband back East while doing her graduate work in musicology at Eastman.
242, side 2	599: SCANDINAVIAN GROUPS Her husband sang with the Seattle Normanna Chorus. He had a magnificent voice and was offered free lessons by several church choir directors. But he would have had to return the favor by singing in their church choirs. Later he took a few private lessons; loved to sing.
242, side 2	624: After Jane was born, she gave up the choir but joined and became active in Ladies Aid at church. Bertha was asked to organize a Daughters of Norway lodge in the Bellingham area, but she didn't want to for lack of organizational skills. She was asked some years later by the same fellow to organize the Seattle lodge, but this too she refused. "It was a mistake because they've been honored and are still being honored". The lady who was the organizer "is a very prominent Norwegian woman but she was very bossy". Bertha never joined the group because the membership was quite elderly. She did join the women's group that supports the Normanna Chorus because of her husband's involvement.
242, side 2	659: RETURN TRIPS TO NORWAY The entire family returned in 1926 with the Normanna Chorus. The family stayed on and traveled through Europe after visiting and meeting the Sylliaasen family in Norway. Her husband was born in South Dakota.
242, side 2	670: CHANGES IN NORWAY She was back in 1981-2, with her 11 year old granddaughter. They visited the Sylliaasen family and Bertha's home place. Everything is just like in America.
242, side 2	716: SPEAKING NORWEGIAN Her dialect is a very mixed up one; everyone says she does not talk like a "Sogning". She can write the dialect but not talk it without some practice.

Container(s)	Description
242, side 2	735: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE NORWEGIAN Even though her memories of childhood are not particularly pleasant, it has enriched her life greatly. She thinks that Norwegians - including her - are proud, stubborn, honest, and hard-working. She was offered a loan by Professor Ordal to attend PLU but she refused to borrow money.

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

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

Personal Names :

Ruud, Kari
Sande Johannes
Sylliaasen, Bertha--Interviews
(creator)

Corporate Names :

Normanna Male Chorus (Seattle, Wash.)

Family Names :

Ruud family
Sande family
Sverdrup family
Sylliaasen family

Geographical Names :

Balestrand(Norway)
Bellingham (Wash.)
Nordfjordeid (Norway)
Seattle (Wash.)

Form or Genre Terms :

Oral histories

Occupations :

Domestics
Engineers
Wood-carvers

Finding aid prepared by Kerstin Ringdahl and Amity Smetzler
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