

# Phiea Petersen Stahl Johnson Oral History Interview, 1983

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Creator</b>	Johnson, Phiea Petersen Stahl
<b>Title</b>	Phiea Petersen Stahl Johnson Oral History Interview
<b>Dates</b>	1983 (inclusive) 1983 1983
<b>Quantity</b>	3 file folders 3 photographs 1 sound cassette
<b>Collection Number</b>	t238
<b>Summary</b>	An oral history interview with Phiea Petersen Stahl Johnson, a Danish 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

Phiea Johnson was born Sophiea Petersen on August 6, 1901 in Tinning, Denmark to Kristian and Petrea Petersen. Phiea's father owned a dairy farm and raised horses, and Phiea was the eldest of about seven children. It was custom for the eldest daughter to live with her grandmother, and Phiea lived with her maternal grandmother, Maren Marie Petersen, until she was seven years old. She then lived with her mother for three years and immigrated to America at age ten in accordance with another custom. According to family custom, if the eldest son in the family did not have children, he adopted the eldest child of his youngest sister to carry on the family name. This being Phiea, she moved to Tacoma, Washington to live with her mother's brother, Anton Stahl. Anton was a contractor, and they had a nice home in the middle of Tacoma. Phiea attended school through the eighth grade, and after her adopted father died of a heart attack in 1917, her adopted mother did not feel Phiea need to continue on to high school. Instead, Phiea had to tend to the property Anton had left when he died. Phiea and her mother rented out rooms, and Phiea's husband was one of their borders for seven years. He was from Sweden, and they moved into Phiea's mother's house after they got married. Phiea had two

children, Anton and Gretchen, both of whom graduated from Pacific Lutheran University. Phiea never got involved with any Scandinavian organizations but has been an active member of Luther Memorial Church. She has only returned in Denmark once, in 1946. Phiea felt like a stranger and had to learn the language all over again. She can still speak it some, but when her sister writes to her in Danish, Phiea always has to have an up-to-date Danish dictionary handy. Since she left when she was only ten, Phiea does not remember a lot of her country's traditions, but she is very proud of her heritage.

### Lineage

Full Name: Phiea Petersen Johnson. Name after adoption: Phiea Stahl. Original Name: Sophiea Petersen. Father: Kristian Petersen. Mother: Petrea Petersen. Adopted Father: Anton Stahl Maternal. Grandmother: Maren Marie Petersen. Brothers and Sisters: Nils Petersen, Jens Petersen, Marie Petersen, Sina Petersen, Sern (?) Petersen. Spouse: (?) Johnson. Children: Anton Johnson, Gretchen Johnson.

## Content Description

Phiea Johnson was interviewed on March 15, 1983 in Tacoma, Washington. Her interview provides information about family background, emigration, her adoption, education, marriage and family, church involvement, and Danish heritage. Also available are a photograph of Phiea and her husband and two photographs of Phiea 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

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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	
238, side 1	018: PHIEA PETERSEN Born in Tinning, Denmark. Tinning is on Jylland (Jutland). Jylland is the peninsula, which connects Denmark with Germany. The nearest large city is Aarhus. Born on August 6, 1901.
238, side 1	050: PARENTS Petrea and Kristian Petersen. Mother was born in Tinning. Father was born in nearby Haurum. He was a farmer, known as "Gaardmand Kristian." Had a dairy farm and raised horses. The royalty's forest was connected to Phiea's parent's property.
238, side 1	115: BROTHERS AND SISTERS Phiea is the eldest. Left Denmark when 10. Doesn't know too much about her family. About seven children, Nils, Jens, Marie, Sina, and Sern. One child who Phiea didn't know died. Phiea is the only one who came to America.
238, side 1	145: GRANDPARENTS Maternal - Maren Marie Petersen. Phiea remembers her because she stayed with her for some time. It was a custom for the eldest daughter to stay with her grandmother. She stayed with her grandmother until she was 7. Stayed with her mother for three years and then came to America. Maternal grandfather passed away before Phiea was born. Never knew her paternal grandparents.

Container(s)	Description
238, side 1	<p>224: SCHOOL</p> <p>One room school. The teacher was a sweet and kind lady. The minister came in the mornings for worship. He taught them the catechism and prayers for confirmation. One day, Phiea didn't memorize what she was supposed to. The minister rapped over her fingers with a stick. She started studying for confirmation when she was 7 and had moved to her mother's home. She had to learn the whole Bible by heart</p>
238, side 1	<p>272: CHILDHOOD HOME</p> <p>Large home. Front parlour, everyday parlour, and three bedrooms. One-story house.</p>
238, side 1	<p>299: CHRISTMAS</p> <p>Went to church at midnight. Before the service everyone met in the church's reception hall. Marched around Christmas tree. Received a small bag of candy and an orange. Didn't have a tree at home.</p>
238, side 1	<p>357: CHRISTMAS</p> <p>Had a community dinner on Christmas Eve. Everyone brought something. Christmas day had a roast goose. Each child in the family would make a gift for grandparents or aunts that were alone. They visited on Christmas Day. Had Christmas cookies, kringle, and a special kind of coffee bread with prunes, raisins, and nuts. Had fattigmand. Christmas dinner started with the adults having drinks and the children having juice. Had some fruit and then goose. Had potatoes and cabbage. Always had rice. Put a thimble and a penny in it. Whoever got the thimble would become an old maid. Whoever got the penny would get married. Cooked the rice in milk. Ate it with sugar and cinnamon.</p>
238, side 1	<p>462: LEAVING DENMARK</p> <p>Left on August 6, 1911. Was 10 years old. Phiea's mother's oldest brother lived in the US. His name was Anton P. Stahl (?). Anton and his wife came to Denmark to visit in 1910. Phiea was to go back to the US but her foster mother got sick. She left Denmark at 4:00am on her birthday in 1911. Phiea was at her grandmother's. Her mother came and brought her to a small town where a boat would take her across the North Sea. Phiea remembers getting seasick on the boat. Was traveling with a lady who laughed at her for getting sick. This lady got sick when they got to Liverpool, England. They had to stay there for three days. Phiea left the room where they were staying in. Met the caretaker's daughter who was the same age. Phiea bought some food. The girl asked where she got the money and then took it. Uncle had sent plenty of money for Phiea's 1st class ticket and new clothes. All Phiea got was a new dress from her mother. She was traveling with a friend of the family. The woman pocketed the money, bought a 3rd class ticket and bought her niece new clothes in New York.</p>
238, side 1	<p>616: REASONS FOR ADOPTION</p>

Container(s)	Description
	<p>Custom in family was that if the oldest son in family has no children, he will adopt the oldest child of his youngest sister to carry on the family name. Phiea's son has the name Anton P. Stahl (?) Johnson. Phiea's great-grandmother was in the same situation.</p>
238, side 1	<p>653: TRIP ACROSS THE ATLANTIC  Traveled on the Lusitania. Storm on the first night out. Everybody got seasick except for Phiea. The woman she was traveling with never got out of bed. A stewardess would come for Phiea when it was time to eat. Trip was stormy. Took nine days to cross the Atlantic. Normally took seven days.</p>
238, side 1	<p>680: ELLIS ISLAND  Had to go through Ellis Island like all other immigrants because she traveled third class. Wouldn't have had to do this if she'd traveled first class. The woman brought Phiea into the US under her name. Told Phiea in Danish to call her mother. She had to do this or she would run into difficulties. She had 1st class papers for Phiea in the name of Phiea's uncle. Phiea didn't realize what had happened until she had taken out her citizen papers. She had changed her name from Sophiea Petersen to her adopted name Phiea Stahl (?) Johnson. Her adopted mother, Elizabeth, didn't like the name Sophiea.</p>
238, side 1	<p>727: TRAIN TRIP  Met aunt and uncle (adopted parents) and another uncle in Tacoma, Washington on August 18. Passed through on the 16th but the woman she was with took her to Everett, Washington and called the uncle from there. Phiea was glad to see them.</p>
238, side 1	<p>762: TACOMA, WASH.  Uncle was a contractor. Quite well liked. Built quite a few of the highways in the area. Excavated for St. Leo's Church, Holy Rosary Church, and the Lincoln Bowl. His partner was Jones. They built the highway from Longmire up to Nerrada Falls. They had to bring their own tools and work horses. They built their own cookhouse at Longmire. Phiea's aunt had her own horse and buggy. She'd drive back and forth between Tacoma and Longmire. This was the year before Phiea came. They had a nice house in the middle of Tacoma near J Street.</p>
238, side 1	<p>831: SCHOOL  English was difficult. First principal and teacher was an Englishwoman. Gave Phiea a hard time. Put her in the 1st grade. Teacher in that class was sweet. Said Phiea didn't belong there. 2nd grade teacher had the same argument. She started school after Christmas. Had learned some English by then. Teachers with an English background were not helpful or patient. There was another Danish girl who had the same difficulties. One teacher with a German background was very kind. Went to Lincoln School (not related to Lincoln H.S.) an old wooden school that had been there for years. The only man working at the school was the janitor. Phiea finished the 8th grade.</p>

Container(s)	Description
238, side 1	<p>924: GROWING UP IN AMERICA</p> <p>Her father passed away in 1917, the year the flu was so bad. He had a heart condition. Died of a heart attack one month after he got over the flu. Her mother was a jealous person. Made it difficult for Phiea to make friends. Still she was good to Phiea. Tell about her mother's background. Phiea had to help with the dinner, learn to knit and sew. Longed for Denmark sometimes. Cried when she was alone many times. Missed her sisters and brothers. She never said anything about it. Phiea's mother didn't know she cried. A friend who was staying with the family heard Phiea crying at night. Told her father. Her father made up for it. Played with her in the snow. He loved children. The children in the neighborhood were his friends. They lived in a Catholic neighborhood. When he died, they paid for his mass.</p>
238, side 1	<p>1044: CITIZENSHIP</p> <p>Took out her papers when 18 years old. Their lawyer who was a friend said he would go with her. They could find no records. The examiner advised them to get her baptismal records from Denmark. Phiea could have got her papers then but she would have deprived the woman who falsely brought her into the US of her citizenship. Her lawyer said she could apply again and move to Canada for four years. She finally got her citizen papers after she got married.</p>
238, side 1	<p>1089: WORK</p> <p>Phiea's father left quite a lot of property when he died. Her mother didn't want to tend to it so she had to take care of it. Had to take care of the banking, the rent, and cleaning. Phiea worked in a telephone office for one year. Her mother was angry about that so she quit.</p>
238, side 1	<p>1117: MEETING SPOUSE</p> <p>They rented out rooms and he rented a room for about seven years. He went home to Sweden for two years. They got married when he came back.</p>
238, side 1	SIDE II:
238, side 1	<p>030: MARRIAGE</p> <p>Husband painted for Richfield Oil Co. Quit doing that and got work doing contracting. They went to Seattle to get married. She wore a nice new street dress. Her mother came and her mother's friend, "Mother Curley." Phiea and her husband moved into her mother's house. She took care of her mother until she died at age 96. An uncle who was a bachelor lived there too.</p>
238, side 1	<p>173: CHILDREN</p> <p>Phiea's first son, Anton was his grandmother's sunshine. (See also I-616) He never needed correcting. Kind and thoughtful. Five years later, Phiea's daughter Gretchen was born. Phiea's mother loved Gretchen, but not like she loved Anton. Tells about the one time Anton got a spanking. He was 6 and was playing with a friend. They heard some swearing at a rented house in the area. Anton came home and said one of the new words he'd learned to his</p>

Container(s)	Description
	<p>grandmother. She got quite upset and his father had to spank him. Both Anton and Greta started taking violin lessons when 5 years old. Anton learned to play the clarinet and Greta the piano. Both graduated from Pacific Lutheran University. Anton is a minister in Sweet Home, Oregon. He has four children, John, Margaret, Martin, and Suzanne. Suzanne goes to PLU. Martin graduated from PLU. Is in Germany now on a scholarship. Daughter, Greta works for Northwest Airlines at Sea-Tac. Has worked there for 20 years. Graduated as a teacher. Got a job in Texas but didn't want to go. Got a job at Northwest instead. Had to go to school in St. Paul, Minnesota for three months. She is married but separated. Has three children.</p>
238, side 1	<p>446: CHURCH</p> <p>Was confirmed at St. John's Lutheran Church was in now Luther Memorial. She's been a member there since 1911. Was confirmed by Rev. Stover who helped build the church. Didn't go to church all of the time during the summer because her father was working out of town often and he'd take the family with him. Pastor Loma told Phiea and another girl in the same situation that they were sinners. Phiea quit going to church there until a new pastor came. The other girl ended up dying in an asylum. Phiea continued going to Luther Memorial every Sunday as long as she could drive. Her husband went to Augustana First Church. He did take communion when Anton got married. He went into the church but was never active like at Augustana. He would go to Luther Memorial's 4:00 Easter service and midnight Christmas Eve service. He took the kids to Sunday school but later only went when he wanted to</p>
238, side 1	<p>546: SCANDINAVIAN ORGANIZATIONS</p> <p>Never belonged to any.</p>
238, side 1	<p>549: TRIPS BACK TO DENMARK</p> <p>Took Anton and Greta to Denmark in 1946. Phiea had received notice at Christmas that her father was dying of cancer. She wrote, saying that she'd come in the spring. They were a month later getting back to the US because the boat they were supposed to take from Liverpool, England was set on fire. They stayed in Denmark for three months. Phiea felt like a stranger. Had to learn the language over again. Denmark didn't have the dialects like it did when she was young. Spent a week in Copenhagen with a cousin before going to Jylland (Jutland). Phiea picked up Danish fast. Anton and Greta learned some. Kind of a strain being with her parents in Denmark at first. Felt like she'd had never been away from her brothers and sisters, although two of them had been born after she left. Phiea went to Denmark right after WWII. Saw a lot of destruction that had occurred during the German occupation. People suffered during the war. People felt very bitter towards the Germans. American paratroopers would land in her parent's field. Hid in the barn. Phiea's brother and sister would take them to the forest at night. Then they'd be taken to Sweden. One cousin was caught doing this. Spent the last month of the war in a German prison camp. The Germans would enter homes and take what</p>

Container(s)	Description
	they wanted. Phiea has only made this trip once. Her daughter has been back three times.
238, side 1	760: DANISH HERITAGE Proud. Doesn't remember many customs. Was only 1 when she left.
238, side 1	778: DANISH LANGUAGE Can still speak some. Has a sister who can speak English but writes to Phiea in Danish. Phiea had to have an up-to-date Danish dictionary because many words have changed.
238, side 1	795: DANISH FOOD Have fattedigmand and rice pudding at Christmas.
238, side 1	803: ADOPTED MOTHER Never spoke Danish to Phiea. Phiea's father would explain things to her in Danish in the basement. Mother wanted Phiea to learn English. Was only three years old when she came to the US. Was adopted by a Mormon family when 5 years old. Was raised in a German settlement. Learned high Dutch in school. Kept the Danish because the people she lived with were Danish. Was raised as a Mormon but baptized as a Lutheran. Joined the Lutheran Church after Anton had gone through seminary. Pastor E. Arthur Larson, pastor at Augustana Church gave her instruction and she joined his church. She met Pastor Larson while with a friend who went to his church. Pastor Larson knew her grandson Anton from PLU. Phiea's mother had been married once before she married Phiea's uncle (adopted father). Was married in the Mormon Church when 14. She had promised Phiea's mother in Denmark that Phiea would be raised a Lutheran.
238, side 1	887: ADOPTED FATHER Was a contractor. Danes wanted him to hire only Danish immigrants. Felt he couldn't do this. Went to St. John's Church. Had an Italian crew, a Russian crew, an America crew, and a couple of Danes. He didn't want a Danish crew that couldn't speak English. Didn't want to hire Danes for labor work. He had his crews doing sewers and planking jobs. Had street and road jobs. Built roads at Fircrest and parts of Tacoma. Father felt the Danes had enough education to find better jobs than labor jobs.
238, side 1	956: ORGANIZATIONS Active in Luther Memorial Church. Member of the Rebekahs. Joined the North American Dinner Association after she got married. This is an insurance organization. Is still active in it. They take care of the sick. Phiea is the paternal supervisor. Calls on the sick. Brings things to them. They give financial assistance when needed.



# Names and Subjects

## **Subject Terms :**

Christmas  
Danish-Americans--Interviews  
Danish-Americans--Northwest,Pacific--Social life and customs  
Denmark -- History -- German occupation -- 1940-1945  
Denmark -- Social conditions -- 1945-  
Education -- Denmark  
Education -- U.S.  
Emigration and immigration  
Naturalization  
Ocean travel

## **Personal Names :**

Johnson, Phiea Petersen Stahl--Interviews  
(creator)  
Johnson, Anton  
Johnson, Greta  
Petersen, Maren Marie  
Petersen, Petrea  
Stahl, Anton  
Petersen, Kristian

## **Corporate Names :**

Lincoln High School (Tacoma, Wash.)  
Lusitania (Steamship)  
Luther Memorial Church (Tacoma, Wash.)  
St. Johns Lutheran Church (Tacoma, Wash.)

## **Family Names :**

Johnson family  
Petersen family  
Stahl family

## **Geographical Names :**

Tacoma (Wash.)  
Tinning (Denmark)

## **Form or Genre Terms :**

Oral histories

## **Occupations :**

Contractors  
Farmers

Finding aid prepared by Kerstin Ringdahl and Amity Smetzler  
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