Julius Sjønning Tollefson Oral History Interview, 1981

Overview of the Collection

Creator  Tollefson, Julius Sjønning
Title  Julius Sjønning Tollefson Oral History Interview
Dates  1981 (inclusive)
       1981 1981
Quantity  3 file folders
       2 sound cassette
       2 compact discs
Collection Number  t049-050
Summary  An oral history interview with Julius Sjønning Tollefson, 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

Julius Tollefson was born on January 26, 1890 in Rognan, Norway to Tollef Johansen and Anette Abelsen. Tollef was a boat builder and carpenter, and Anette was a housewife. In addition to Julius, they had seven other children: Haakon, Magnus, Emma, Johan, Agnes, Fridjof, and Adolf. Julius immigrated to America on February 16, 1907. At that time, he was an apprentice for a blacksmith, who invited Julius to go to America with him. Language differences posed a problem for Julius when he first arrived, and he worked various jobs on the East Coast until coming to Tacoma, WA in May 1907. Julius's brother had been living in Tacoma for two years, and Julius soon found work there at a sawmill and later worked in lumber camps. In Tacoma, Julius also became involved with several Norwegian organizations, including the Norwegian Good Templars (Temperance), the Sons of Norway, Nordlandslaget, and the Ancient Order of Vikings. Julius held offices in Nordlandslaget and served as a trustee in the other groups. In the 1920s, Julius also helped with the building of Normanna Hall, where various Scandinavian clubs meet in Tacoma. At the time of this interview, Julius was working on his seventy-seventh year in the Sons of Norway, making him the longest continuous member in the United
States. Julius considers his heritage very special. In addition to Norwegian organizations, Julius has also been active in church life and was a charter member of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Tacoma. Julius has five children: Irene, Mildred, Emma, Telma, and John. His first wife, Inga, passed away, and he later remarried to Judith Mikkelsen.

Lineage


Content Description

This interview was conducted with Julius Tollefson on May 7, 1981 in his Tacoma home. It contains information on family background, emigration, Scandinavian organizations, employment, family, and Norwegian heritage. The interview also contains two articles about Julius and his life experiences from the Tacoma News Tribune (December 2, 1979 and January 1, 1984). Also see Judith Tollefson. 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

Processing Note

The interview was conducted 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


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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container(s)</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cassette</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 49, side 1   | 004/06: BACKGROUND
Name is Julius Sjønning Tollefson. Born in Saltdal, Norway near the village of Rognan, which is north of the Arctic Circle in the town of Saksenvik in 1890. |
| 49, side 1   | 010: FAMILY HOME
Rognan, Norway. Baptized, confirmed and married by the same minister even though he had been in the U.S. twice. |
| 49, side 1   | 023: PARENTS
Tollef Johansen was a boat builder and a carpenter. Mother was Anette Abelsen who was a housewife. |
| 49, side 1   | 042: EIGHT BROTHERS AND SISTERS
Haakon, Julius, Magnus, Emma, Johan, Agnes, Fridjof, and Adolf. |
| 49, side 1   | 051: MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS
Well-off financially. Lived in a cabin with a stone floor. Had two hired men and two maids. They cut wood and fished. |
| 49, side 1   | 063: MATERNAL GRANDFATHER’S OCCUPATION
Fishing off the Lofoten Coast. Talks about how boats were named according to how many people could occupy them. Sails and oars powered boats. Julius fished too. |
| 49, side 1   | 088/07:
Left Norway on February 16, 1907. Took up the blacksmith trade. The blacksmith he was working under wanted to go to America and take Julius
The blacksmith was told he could get rich quick with his skills in the U.S. Julius' parents didn't like the idea since the blacksmith was often drunk and disregarded his family. The blacksmith paid Julius' way from Bodø to Trondheim. Julius was paid $50 a year as an apprentice.

They took a steamer from Rognan to Bodø and another from Bodø to Trondheim. Then they got on the Wilson Line, which was an English line and went to Hull, England with stops at Bergen and Stavanger. Then they took the train to Liverpool where they were delayed a week before boarding, "The Baltic," which was the largest ship to cross the Atlantic at that time. This was before the Lusitania and the Mauritania. They came to New York in seven days. It should have taken five days but there was a terrible storm, the worst the captain had ever seen. Only seven of the sailors weren't seasick. Julius was asked to help out because he wasn't sick. There were 2700 passengers onboard.

Worries about coming to America at 17 with a drunkard.

Little money, borrowed enough to get through immigration. Stayed at a boardinghouse in Brooklyn, New York. Looked for work.

Hard to come by because of language problems. Couldn't follow the instructions.

Worked at various jobs on the east coast on ships and in the first tunnel under the Hudson River. Brother in Tacoma sent him the money for the train ticket. Brother had been here for two years.

Thought Tacoma was a wilderness upon arrival.

His brother worked there. His brother was at the camp, which was about three miles outside of Orting, Washington, so it was a while before they actually met. Old Town (Tacoma). Worked in the old Tacoma sawmill (10hrs. a day @ 17 cents an hour).

Worked in the lumber mills. Talks some about Old Town where he found people to talk to.
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<th>Container(s)</th>
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</table>
| 49, side 1  | **302: OUR SAVIORS EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH**  
Built in 1903, torn down ca. 1960. All Norwegian speaking services. Now united with Gloria Dei. |
| 49, side 1  | **336: BACK TO NORWAY (1910)**  
| 49, side 1  | **346/10: ATTACHED TO TACOMA**  
Scandinavian Festivals, Norwegian paper, the Tacoma Tidende (Tacoma Times) |
| 49, side 1  | **360: ANCIENT ORDER OF VIKINGS**  
Historical background it was started by a man named Tollefson who was a Norwegian Missionary from Minneapolis. He started a Ladies Aid Society, a Singing society in 1889 and an athletic club, which was the first Norwegian social group in Tacoma that Julius knows of. In 1893 during the Cleveland Depression the Athletic Club changed its name to the Norwegian Commercial Club to gain the favor of the city government and retain jobs. In 1888 the group changed its name again to the Ancient Order of Vikings. |
| 49, side 1  | **431: SONS OF NORWAY**  
Organized in 1904. (See Tape 49 counter I-467, II-154, II-658, and Tape 50 counter I-116) |
| 49, side 1  | **445: NORWEGIAN GOOD TEMPLAR (TEMPERANCE)**  
Organized in 1906. They were a group against liquor. He joined in 1908. Tacoma at that time was an open town with liquor and a red light district. (See Tape 49 counters I-636 and II-154) |
| 49, side 1  | **467: SONS OF NORWAY**  
| 49, side 1  | **479/11: NORDLANDSLAGET**  
Founded on March 12, 1912. One of the 12 founders. (See counter Tape 49 II-639 and II-658) |
| 49, side 1  | **499:**  
North Norway had been neglected. Backwards during his grandmother’s day. |
| 49, side 1  | **530: NORDLANDSLAGET**  
Mr. Norstrof (one of the 12 founders) researched and traced Norwegian sagas (see Tape counter 49 II-639 and II-658). The priests had the community records and took them with them when they left. |

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Julius Sjønning Tollefson Oral History Interview, 1981  
http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv77294
<table>
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</table>
| 49, side 1  | 566: ERIK THE RED’S SAGA  
Julius tells us the interesting saga as it was told to him by Nordlandslaget member Norstrof. |
| 49, side 1  | 636: Dropped the Good Templars (Temperance). They carried on until the late 1920s (see Tape 49 counter II-154). Things got better downtown. |
| 49, side 1  | 648: SONS OF NORWAY  
He is the longest continuous member in the U.S. He is working on his 77th year now. |
| 49, side 2  | 034/12: NORWEGIAN CLUBS:  
Met in various halls, Fraternity Hall, Swiss Hall, and the Danish Hall. In 1912 began discussing building a hall for themselves. |
| 49, side 2  | 049: NORMANNA HALL  
In 1914 they began their plans. They incorporated and sold stock plus had bazaars and other fundraisers to finance it. In 1922 they had enough money to start but ran out of money before completion and had to borrow to finish it. In 1927 they were in financial trouble and had to sell bonds. |
| 49, side 2  | 154/13: NORMANNA HALL  
Scandinavian clubs met there, Ancient Order of the Vikings, Sons of Norway, Daughters of Norway, two Good Templar Lodges, and… |
| 49, side 2  | /01:  
other ethnic groups too. |
| 49, side 2  | 187: 17TH OF MAY  
How it was celebrated. (See counter Tape 50 I-005) |
| 49, side 2  | 200:  
Norwegian spoken at clubs. After WWI there was a more patriotic atmosphere and English was spoken. |
| 49, side 2  | 238: PACIFIC LUTHERAN COLLEGE  
85 students in the early days 1907. Drew them into activities. Fishermen would come in the winter. |
| 49, side 2  | 256/02: ALASKA-PACIFIC EXHIBITION (in Seattle  
Forestry and lumber were represented. Each nationality had their own day. |
<p>| 49, side 2  | 282: TACOMA LUMBER CAPITAL OF THE WORLD |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A lot of lumber was exported from here. In 1903 there was a timber claim homestead act to get rid of some of the timber.</td>
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<tr>
<td>312:</td>
<td>The timber was thought to be a hindrance by Senators Jones and Dexter (ca. 1904). Teddy Roosevelt commissioned later investigations, Vice President proved that timber was the greatest asset to the area and forest reserves were set up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>335/03: LUMBER CAMPS</td>
<td>In the olden days, the conditions were terrible. No regulations. The bunkhouses were in poor condition and bug ridden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>360: TWO BILLS PASSED</td>
<td>Sanitary conditions for lumber camps and elimination of the 10 hours work day. The latter the Wobblies were involved in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>405: SIMPSON LOGGING CO.</td>
<td>Talks about the old days and the unwritten history, which was circulated in the camp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>424/04: JOHN TURNOW STORY</td>
<td>The story of an infamous woodsman who shot six men before they got him. This is a very interesting detailed history as experienced by Julius.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>567/05: SETTLING IN UNIVERSITY PLACE AND THEIR CABIN</td>
<td>Second trip back to Norway in 1915. Sold the home in Norway and brought his older and younger brother back to the U.S. with him.</td>
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<td>590:</td>
<td>Street care service from University Place to Tacoma.</td>
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<tr>
<td>601:</td>
<td>Getting electricity on December 24, 1915 at his University Place home. Had 300 acres of virgin timber area then. Talks about changes now with so many people in the area.</td>
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<td>618:</td>
<td>Daughter attended PLU. Didn't lock their doors in earlier years.</td>
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<td>627: CHANGES OF SCANDINAVIAN COMMUNITY</td>
<td>Normanna Hall (see counter Tape 49 II-049 and Tape 50 I-110, I-202 and I-270) Sons and Daughters of Norway and the Northlight Clubs are still active.</td>
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<td>639/06: NORDLANDSLAGET CONVENTIONS 1980</td>
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<td>(See counter Tape 49 I-479, I-530, and II-658) Groups from Victoria, Vancouver, Seattle, and Tacoma came. The group is only active in the northwest now. They have problems attracting new young members to the group prompting a concern for their future.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 49, side 2 | 658: ORGANIZATIONS  
The function of Nordlandslaget, Sons of Norway, Leif Erickson Committee is to present scholarships and preserve their culture. (See counter Tape 49 I-431, I-467, I-479, I-530, I-648, II-154, II-639, and Tape 60 I-116) |
| 49, side 2 | 674:  
Seven trips to Norway. Traveled in 1915 during WWI. Reflections on emigration. |
| 49, side 2 | 688: NORWEGIAN RELATIVES  
They keep in touch. Relatives have come here to visit him. |
| 50, side 1 | 005/07: 17TH OF MAY, 1914  
Centennial of the Norwegian Constitution. They gathered at the Tacoma Hotel. They claimed there were 10,000 Norwegians in Tacoma at that time. They had a big parade. They gathered at Wright’s Park and Mayor Fawcett spoke. |
| 50, side 1 | 046: JUDGE ARNTSON  
He was an active figure in Tacoma. He was the key to the development of many organizations. He was the Police Judge in 1909. He is a member of the Sons and the Northlight club. |
| 50, side 1 | 070: F.J. LEE, B.L. Kirkebo  
Photographed Scandinavian doings and prominent Tacoma citizens. Was a building superintendent for many buildings. These were some of the active Norwegians at this time. |
| 50, side 1 | 092: PACIFIC LUTHERAN UNIVERSITY  
Fortunate to have in the area. |
| 50, side 1 | 110: NORMANNA HALL AND SONS OF NORWAY TODAY  
Doesn’t like all the liquor at the meetings. (See counters Tape 49 I-049, I-627, II-110, and II-207) |
| 50, side 1 | 127: ANCIENT ORDER OF THE VIKINGS  
Ended in 1955 (see counters Tape 49 I-360 and II-154) Liquor was part of their downfall. Julius took care of their assets after they ended. Talks about Normanna Hall’s corporate charter life. Julius has held offices in Nordlandslaget and served as a trustee in other groups. |
<p>| 50, side 1 | 170/08: CHURCH |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charter member at St. Mark's Lutheran Church. In 1918 there were many Lutheran synods this was often discussed in the Skandinavisk Papir and the Decorah Posten.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 50, side 1 | 202: NORMANNA HALL  
Their social center. (See counters Tape 49 I-049, I-627, II-110, and II-207) |
| 50, side 1 | 223:  
Speaks the older Norwegian whenever possible. |
| 50, side 1 | 250/09: CHILDREN  
Irene received a Rotary Club award for civic activities and work in the Children's Orthopedic Hospital. |
| 50, side 1 | 250: CHILDREN  
Mildred is a teacher and PLU graduate. Emma worked for Gunderson's Jewelry. John is in the building business. He was in the Navy. He attended Stadium High School, the University of Washington, and Columbia University in New York. |
| 50, side 1 | 270: SCANDINAVIAN TRADITIONS  
Christmas doings at Normanna Hall. |
| 50, side 1 | 290: IMPORTANCE OF NORWEGIAN HERITAGE  
Happy to be Norwegian, but wants to be a good American. He describes the first generation as being dumb, illiterate immigrants and the second generation didn't want to be associated with this so they neglected their heritage. The third generation realizes that they are a part of a special heritage and want to keep up its traditions. This is a special heritage because the Norwegian immigrants were courageous, adventurous, and because of their achievements. |

**Names and Subjects**

**Subject Terms:**
Emigration and immigration  
Family--Norway  
Norway--Social conditions--1945-  
Norwegian-Americans--Ethnic identity  
Norwegian-Americans--Northwest, Pacific--Interviews  
Norwegian-Americans--Social life and customs

**Personal Names:**
Abelsen, Anette  
Tollefson, Inga  
Tollefson, Irene  
Tollefson, John
Corporate Names:
- Ancient Order of Vikings (Tacoma, Wash.)
- Baltic (Steamship)
- Commercial Club (Tacoma, Wash.)
- Gloria Dei Lutheran Church (Tacoma, Wash.)
- Nordlandslaget Nordlyset (Tacoma, Wash.)
- Normanna Hall (Tacoma, Wash.)
- Our Saviors Evangelical Lutheran Church (Tacoma, Wash.)
- Pacific Lutheran College
- Simpson Logging Company
- Sons of Norway (U.S.) Norden Lodge No. 2 (Tacoma, Wash.)
- St. Mark's Lutheran Church (Tacoma, Wash.)
- St. Paul-Tacoma Lumber Co. (Tacoma, Wash.)

Family Names:
- Abelsen family
- Mikkelsen family
- Os family
- Tollefson family

Geographical Names:
- Rognan (Norway)
- Tacoma (Wash.)

Form or Genre Terms:
- Oral histories

Occupations:
- Carpenters
- Sawmill workers

Finding aid prepared by Kerstin Ringdahl and Amity Smetzler
2004