

# Otto Hjalmer Halseth Oral History Interview, 1981

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Creator</b>	Halseth, Otto Hjalmer
<b>Title</b>	Otto Hjalmer Halseth Oral History Interview
<b>Dates</b>	1981 (inclusive) 1981 1981
<b>Quantity</b>	3 file folders 4 photographs 2 sound cassettes
<b>Collection Number</b>	t120-121
<b>Summary</b>	An oral history interview with Otto Hjalmer Halseth, a Norwegian 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

Otto Halseth was born on July 10, 1904 in Ørsta, Norway. He was one of ten siblings by Oline Åam and Ole J. Helseth, a furniture maker. He was confirmed at age 14 and a half, at which time he started working in an insurance company office. He left Norway on October 16, 1921 at the age of 17. His coming to America was an accident; he used a ticket that was supposed to be for his brother Knut, who was called in for military training before he could emigrate. Otto was met in Tacoma by his aunt and uncle, whom he lived with while attending night school to learn English and study for citizenship. He worked with his uncle in a Tacoma bakery during the first year, then as a car knocker for the railroad for some time.

He got a job in a cabinet shop, Tacoma Millwork Supply Company, from 1924 to 1930, at which time the plant was shut down due to the Depression. He then left Tacoma and lived with another aunt and uncle on their fruit farm in Looking Glass Valley, ten miles outside of Roseburg, OR. In 1939, the factory in Tacoma reopened and Otto was called back to his old job as a cabinetmaker. He worked

there one year until he was called into military duty on Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1941. He did his basic training in Fort Lewis, WA and additional training in Fresno, CA. He joined the Air Corp at Fort Lewis as a specialist in woodwork, working on gliders when they needed repairs. He was sent to Louisville, Kentucky and then to Lowrenberg Maxston Air Base in North Carolina. A law was passed in Washington D.C. that all past the age of 38 were needed more on the home front than on the war front; Otto's manager in Tacoma sent a note to Otto's commander saying that he was needed, and Otto went back to Tacoma where he worked on the construction of Fort Lewis. He went to Canada for three to four years (no date given) to do ministry work, mainly with Norwegians, speaking his mother tongue.

Otto went to Norway after WWII, where he lived with his parents and did interpretations for English ministers who often went to Norway. He was asked to be pastor at a church there but refused. He stayed in Norway for three years, marrying Esther Swanlund Halseth, a nurse in his church, the last year before returning to the U.S. They had two daughters; Ruth was born in 1952 and Mary Ann in 1954. Both were delivered in the same room in Tacoma General Hospital. Otto did cabinetwork in the same Tacoma plant after returning from Norway and retired when he was 68 and a half, after which he did work for his church. He was not involved with Scandinavian organizations. He took a trip back to Norway with his wife in 1973. Otto's name was originally Helseth, but a Tacoma teacher asked him to change it to Halseth, which he has been for 50 years at the time of the interview.

### Lineage

Full Name: Otto Hjalmer Halseth. Father: Ole J. Helseth. Mother: Oline Åam. Paternal Grandfather: J. Helseth. Paternal Grandmother: Ingeborg Helseth. Maternal Grandfather: Knut Åam. Maternal Grandmother: Ane Åam. Brothers and Sisters: Ingeborg Helseth,, Astrid Helseth, Knut Helseth, Arnold Helseth, Ananda Helseth, Ruth Helseth, Jens Helseth, Olav Helseth. Spouse: Esther Swanlund Halseth. Children: Ruth Halseth, Mary Ann Halseth.

## Content Description

INSERT SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

## Use of the Collection

### Restrictions on Use

There are no restrictions on use.

### Preferred Citation

[Collection Number, Collection Title] New Land New Lives Oral History Collection. Scandinavian Immigrant Experience Collection. Archives and Special Collections Department. Robert A.L. Mortvedt Library. Pacific Lutheran University. Tacoma, WA 98447

## 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

Otto Hjalmer Halseth Oral History Interview, 1981  
<http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv82767>

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 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	
120, side 1	005: Otto Hjalmer Halseth. Name was Helseth. A teacher in Tacoma asked him to change his name to Halseth. Has been Halseth for 50 years. He was born in Ørsta, Norway.
120, side 1	021: Born in Ørsta because Ålesund burned down in 1904. This is where his parents had lived. Whole town burned down. Believed to be arson. The population of Ålesund was 17,000.
120, side 1	033:

Container(s)	Description
	Biggest peacetime fire in Europe. German Kaiser sent two warships loaded with food and clothing. A statue now stands in Ålesund in his memory. Ålesund is the first big city north of Bergen.
120, side 1	041: People got out of the fire, left town quickly. Fire was January 23, 1904. Otto born July 10, 1904.
120, side 1	048: PARENTS Father was a møbelsnekker, furniture maker. He had a cabinet shop with many people working for him. He lost everything in the fire. Ålesund has been rebuilt. Father started from scratch. Father raised ten children, five girls and five boys. His name was Ole J. Helseth.
120, side 1	060: MOTHER Oline Åam. She came from Ørsta. Her parents were Knut and Ane Åam. They were farmers on a small scale.
120, side 1	080: FATHER'S PARENTS Helseth, lived in Romsdal, Norway. He died at age 47. Mother born in Malmesdal, Romsdal. Her name was Ingeborg. They had six children, two girls, and four boys. Ingeborg brought up the children. They learned to care for themselves at an early age.
120, side 1	108: BROTHERS AND SISTERS Anders became an inspector of schools in Ålesund. Jens, blacksmith in Kristiansund, Norway. Lars, tinsmith in Minneapolis for a time then moved to the West Coast.
120, side 1	119: Ole, Otto's father went to school in Kristiansund to learn the furniture trade. Started factory making his own furniture.
120, side 1	132: Father rebuilt the factory after the fire. Imported finished furniture from Sweden. Had a sale. Father taught all his sons to make furniture.
120, side 1	142: SISTERS Ingeborg was a cashier at a big department store. She married Egil Eide, son of the noted Eide, who went up and down the coast selling Landgaars Tobakk. They settled in Oslo where Egil became a teacher at the University of Oslo. Ingeborg died in 1934.
120, side 1	158: Astrid became a telegraph operator. Died when she was 65. Ananda became the wife of a Lutheran minister. Died at age 65.

Container(s)	Description
120, side 1	166: Knut lived to be 65. He was a cabinetmaker. Worked on Oslofjord, a Norwegian flagship. He was with them until the ship sank in WWII.
120, side 1	181: Otto came to Tacoma. Knut received a ticket from his uncle on the West Coast in the U.S. He was planning to emigrate but was called for military training. Otto came on Knut's ticket in 1921. He has been here 60 years minus three years in Canada and three years in Norway.
120, side 1	200: Arnold became a craftsman in Ålesund, had his own furniture business. Jens, a businessman in Ålesund, had a large clothing store. He died at the age of 60. His son runs the business now. Olaf took business training, hired by Norse Brensel Oil Company, British Petroleum Company. Retired now in Trondheim.
120, side 1	222: Ruth became a nurse, retired and lives in Ålesund. Ananda was a sister that Otto never saw. She drowned at age two and a half. She fell into a swollen river behind their house.
120, side 1	243: CHILDHOOD HOME Close to the biggest hospital in Ålesund. Meadows to run around in. Moved into town, a six-story building. They lived on the fourth story, ran up and down the stairs. Were close to the school. Played in the schoolyard. There was a soccer field. Good for sports.
120, side 1	284: Otto was baptized in the Ørsta church.
120, side 1	289: SCHOOL Went to grade school in the old country. Confirmed at the age of fourteen and a half. Seven grades in grade school. Latin school was the next step. Otto did not do this.
120, side 1	298: Otto started work in an office of an insurance company. Describes his duties. He was fourteen and a half years old. Delivered papers when he was younger. Made lots of money selling the paper with the story of the sinking of the Titanic. People wanted to see the pictures.
120, side 1	323: CHRISTMAS A big deal because of the big family. Lots of presents given to each other. Decoration made for the tree. Lots of baking.
120, side 1	349: CHRISTMAS EVE

Container(s)	Description
	Ate rice pudding, swine ribs for dinner. Opening up of presents.
120, side 1	363: CHRISTMAS DAY Julenatta, up at 4am went to church. Visited people. Ate prepared goodies. This went on for two weeks.
120, side 1	375: As a paperboy, Otto remembers getting apples, American apples as presents.
120, side 1	386: CHURCH Both parents were Christian. Children were made to go to church. Had Bedehus, operated by the inner mission branch of the church. They heard the plain gospel without all the rituals and liturgy. Parents liked the Bedehus.
120, side 1	403: Otto knew what it was like to live in a Christian home. Four hours of religion in grade schools. Bible history, prayers, personal experience with the Lord was expressed. Thankful to have been brought up in a Christian setting, "it marked all of us."
120, side 1	423: Did not believe in folk beliefs and customs. They were strong Christians.
120, side 1	445: Did religious training before they were confirmed, read to the Pastor. Father had them read a chapter together from the Bible on Sunday before they could go out and play.
120, side 1	464: REASONS FOR COMING TO AMERICA Came by accident. "In every youth to see the world." Had relatives in the U.S. He was 17 years old.
120, side 1	474: Father said "the family is growing, yet diminishing." The nest was being emptied. Otto took the Stavangerfjord.
120, side 1	495: After three years in the U.S. he started asking himself questions 'What am I doing? Where have I come from? Where am I going?' He found the answer in the gospel in 1924.
120, side 1	515: BOAT TRIP Left Norway from Bergen October 16, 1921. Took fourteen days to get to America. Terrible weather on the Atlantic. Sick the whole time.
120, side 1	543: ELLIS ISLAND

Container(s)	Description
	Checked for lice. He was all by himself. Did not know any English, only Norwegian.
120, side 1	553: TRAIN TRIP All tagged up. Tags on baggage and clothing. Wandered around Chicago. Lived on bananas from Chicago to the West Coast. Could buy 3 for 10 cents. Could buy sandwiches on the train.
120, side 1	596: Met in Tacoma by his aunt and uncle. Also had an aunt and uncle in Oregon and eastern Washington. All Otto's father's sisters had settled on the West Coast in the U.S. with their husbands.
120, side 1	614: Went to stay with his aunt and uncle. Began night school to learn the language and study for his citizenship. Took out the first paper in Washington, took out the second paper in Oregon. Needed to be here for five years for citizenship. Describes this process.
120, side 1	654: WORK First year worked with his uncle in a bakery in Tacoma, this was down on Market Street. Worked for the railroad for some time outside as a car knocker. Then the strike came.
120, side 2	010: Car knocker was the one who made the railway cars. Stripped old cars and remade them.
120, side 2	017: Got a cabinet shop in Tacoma. Tacoma Millwork Supply Company. 3000 Center Street. They did fine work. Stayed here from 1924-1930. They shut down in 1930 because of the Depression.
120, side 2	027: Left Tacoma and spent nine years with an aunt and uncle who had a fruit farm in Looking Glass Valley, 10 miles out of Roseburg, Oregon.
120, side 2	032: Learned to prune trees, milk cows, run the tractor, and raise turkeys.
120, side 2	036: In 1939, the factory in Tacoma began to work again. Otto was called back to his old job as a cabinetmaker. He was there for one and called into military duty on Pearl Harbor Day December 7, 1941. Basic training at Fort Lewis, sent to Fresno, California for more training.

Container(s)	Description
120, side 2	055: Joined the Air Corps at Fort Lewis as a specialist in woodwork. To repair gliders when they needed repair.
120, side 2	062: Sent to Louisville, Kentucky then to Lowrenberg Maxston Air base in North Carolina. Waited to be shipped to Casablanca. First convoy shot by the Germans.
120, side 2	074: Law passed in Washington D.C. that all key men past 38, were needed more on the home front than on the war front. Otto's manager from Tacoma sent a note to Otto's commander saying he was needed. Otto went back to Washington via Florida. Bought a ticket back for one cent a mile.
120, side 2	096: Went back to Tacoma. Building the 'Magic City', Fort Lewis. 40,000 window frames, 40,000 doors, etc. Fort Lewis popped up over night.
120, side 2	106: Went to Canada for 3-4 years to do Gospel work
120, side 2	113: Talks about going to church for answers to his questions. Lutheran Church Olav Hollen, later changed to Pentecost. Describes his conversion. Has always been involved with church related work.
120, side 2	132: Did Gospel work in Canada. Otto was baptized in the Baptist Church. Has seen many miracles. Talks about his church experience some, mentions speaking in tongues. Many young people went to the Pentecostal Church. He has been a member for over 50 years.
120, side 2	186: Friend from Canada came down to encourage Otto to go to Canada with him. Stayed for three years. Spoke mostly in his mother tongue. Mostly Norwegians that he ministered to.
120, side 2	205: After WWII he went to Norway. Felt he was equipped. Gave his testimony to a hometown assembly. Asked to be the pastor at this church but he refused. Stayed with his parents in Ålesund. Did interpretations for English ministers who often came to Norway.
120, side 2	241: "BILLY GRAHAM TRIO"



Container(s)	Description
	Three boys who came to Norway. Otto did the interpreting for them. They were educated at Wheaton College in Illinois.
120, side 2	301: Did interpreting for a pastor in Seattle. Describes his travels with him.
120, side 2	328: Stayed in Ålesund for three years before going to America. Married the last year before he left Norway.
120, side 2	331: Married a nurse from church. She was from Notodden, in southern Norway, not far from Oslo. She had been in Ålesund for five years. Esther Swanlund Halseth.
120, side 2	349: After she had been in the U.S for twelve years, Esther returned to her profession. Ruth Halseth was born at Tacoma General Hospital in 1952. Mary Ann born in the same room, same hospital in 1954. In 1962, Esther looked for work.
120, side 2	360: CHILDREN Mary Ann is a switchboard operator, part-time receptionist at Tacoma General Hospital. Ruth is Mrs. Steven Jensen now. She went to Seattle Pacific to study nursing. Worked at Tacoma General Hospital, quit when she was married.
120, side 2	401: GRANDCHILD Ruth's child. Ruth is now going back to school to pick up her nursing.
120, side 2	418: Otto did cabinetwork when he returned from Norway. Involved with the church.
120, side 2	473: Not involved in organizations. Have attended sessions at Gloria Dei with Norwegians.
120, side 2	484: TRIPS BACK TO NORWAY 1973 went with his wife. Had received two round trip tickets from the company he retired from. Spent five weeks in Norway. Visited family, many already passed away. Spent a week in Trondheim with his brother. Went to Ålesund.
120, side 2	595: Things more modern. He noticed changes in 1947 when he lived with his parents.
120, side 2	606: FEELINGS ABOUT BEING NORWEGIAN

Container(s)	Description
	Would prefer to go back to Norway to spend his last years. Has fear that Russia will take over the Scandinavian area. Many friends still in Norway, relatives are buried there. Senior citizens are well off in Norway.
120, side 2	643: HERITAGE Loves America too. Norway was small-scale family oriented. Norway wants to keep its culture. Oil companies have changed things in Norway. The country is losing the culture.
120, side 2	680: Still cook Norwegian food at home. Children do not know the Norwegian language.
121, side 1	003: Church has been very important.
121, side 1	006: Otto had joined singing society when he first arrived here in Tacoma. He became involved with the church so he dropped out of this.
121, side 1	013: Was with the society when they laid the cornerstone for Normanna Hall.
121, side 1	021: CHURCH IN NORWAY Losing their hold on the people. Lacking spiritual life of the hungry. Dissenters, anybody outside church, are growing as the state church diminishes. Some claim that there may soon be no state church in Norway.
121, side 1	034: SPEAKING NORWEGIAN Good clear example of the language.

## Names and Subjects

### Subject Terms :

Baptists  
 Christmas  
 Confirmation  
 Emigration and immigration  
 Family--Norway  
 Naturalization  
 Norway--Social conditions--1945-  
 Norwegian-Americans--Ethnic identity  
 Norwegian-Americans--Northwest, Pacific--Interviews  
 Norwegian-Americans--Social life and customs  
 Ocean travel

Railroad travel

**Personal Names :**

Åam, Knut

Åam, Oline

Halseth, Mary Ann

Halseth, Otto Hjalmer--Interviews

(creator)

Åam, Ane

Halseth, Esther

Halseth, Ruth

Helseth, Ingeborg

Helseth, Ole J.

Helseth, Otto Hjalmer

**Corporate Names :**

Normanna Hall -- (Tacoma, Wash.)

Stavangerfjord (Steamship)

Tacoma Millwork Supply Co.(Tacoma, Wash.)

**Family Names :**

Åam family

Halseth family

Helseth family

Swanlund family

**Geographical Names :**

Ålesund (Norway)

Looking Glass Valley (Or.)

Ørsta (Norway)

Romsdal (Norway)

Tacoma (Wash.)

**Form or Genre Terms :**

Oral histories

**Occupations :**

Bakers and bakeries

Farmers

Railroads – Employees

Finding aid prepared by Kerstin Ringdahl and Amity Smetzler  
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