**Interviewer:** This interview number 409 with Elna Larsen. It’s the 26th of May 1989 and Mrs. Larsen is from Denmark. Could you give me your date of birth and immigration?

**Elna:** I was born January 18th, 1908 and we came to the United States in 1912, the spring of 1912. It must have been the middle of May. We waited for my brother Carl to be born. He was six weeks old when we left Denmark.

**Interviewer:** What we have here are a lot of photographs of remnants if you like remnants ... artifacts from your life in Denmark. I think you were going to go through them and explain a little bit about them to us.

**Elna:** Yes, maybe the best thing is to start from the beginning. This is the house where my grandmother was born and its way out in the heather. There’s nothing there now. The house is gone too but I always visit the spot when I’m in Denmark. In those days, they had only one building and it would be the family in one area and a few animals in the other area.

**Interviewer:** Could you describe for us exactly what that house looks like?

**Elna:** Well, this is the front door. I haven’t been in this house because it was gone by the time I got there but it will be like all other houses of that type in Denmark. These small windows, the living room will be behind that and probably over in this area will be the kitchen. This door is the door into the barn where the animals are kept there in the back part of the house.

**Interviewer:** In the roof?

**Elna:** No, no.

**Interviewer:** No, but the roof is ... you described the roof for us.

**Elna:** Yeah, the roof is a thatched roof and you could see it’s in pretty bad repair there. They need to have something done or they would get wet in winter.

**Interviewer:** Now, your parents, did you say were actually born in that house or your mother was actually born?

**Elna:** My grandmother was born in that house and she’s been gone for many years. She died in 1936, so she’s been gone a long time. These are my other grandparents and this is the way they lived in those days. They probably lived with a son or a daughter and then they had one room, which was theirs. You see the bed there and all the pictures on the walls. I can see some of them that I recognize, some of my cousins.

**Interviewer:** Once again, could you describe that room for us?

**Elna:** It has a table in the middle so that the occupants can sit there. She’s sitting with her knitting, he has his long pipe that he’s smoking and he’s reading from a newspaper. He probably reads aloud to her every day.

They most likely eat their meals with the family they’re staying with. In this case, I think there was a daughter that they lived with. There is the bed in the corner.

**Interviewer:** I see the needlework is very fine on the tablecloth.

**Elna:** Yes, it looks like it’s a hand-woven tablecloth and the piece on the dress there that has some hand-work. I think it’s probably crocheted. They always had plants in their houses. I presume that’s because they had those long cold winters where they never saw anything green so they always had a plant that served for ... a rubber plant.

**Interviewer:** Can you remember as a little girl what those long cold winters were like?

**Elna:** No, I don’t remember them because I was only four years old. My first memory is the Christmas before I was four years old. We have a custom in Denmark, you always have a Christmas tree but no one sees it until Christmas Eve.

Then it’s brought out and it’s in the middle of the room, set in the middle of the room. Then everyone joins hands and they dance around the Christmas tree. We call it dancing. In a way, it isn’t, it’s more just walking around the tree and singing hymns or songs. You always wind up with a gay little song. Can’t you just sing a few bars of *Nu Er Det Jul Igen* Carl?

**Carl:** [singing 00:04:49]

**Elna:** Now that’s very exciting to children when that starts. You go through all the hymns, that’s [inaudible 00:05:05] but when you get to this *Now We Have Christmas Again*, the children love that. Then there’s dancing around the tree. You have hold of somebody’s hands. I remember a hand on each side of me and big people because I was way down here and they were way up there but that’s my first memory of Denmark and I have other vague memories, for example...

**Interviewer:** Perhaps just before you tell us those memories. Could you give me the translation of that song your brother just sang us?

**Elna:** “Now we have Christmas again. Now we have Christmas again.” What was it then? “And Christmas lasts until Easter. No, it isn’t true. No it isn’t true because in between comes Lent.” That’s the translation for that.

**Interviewer:** What other memories do you have as a little girl in Denmark?

**Elna:** Well, one thing I remember from when we moved up to the farm, and here is a picture of that. Do you want to just hand me that Carl? Here’s a picture of the house that was along the [inaudible 00:06:25] Fjord. The family lived here. That’s my mother, grandmother and grandfather. I’m the one in the middle and my two little sisters. There’s the big dog, I always took my nap in his paws. He was such a good dog. My father-

**Interviewer:** What was his name?

**Elna:** *Max*, M-A-X. I guess you’d say Max but we said *Max*. My father was proud of his horses because he wasn’t a farmer and this appealed to him being on the land and having his own horses. But this farm had the [inaudible 00:07:03] Fjord running by it and we children always ran down there and played. My mother never worried about us being in any danger because Max was always with us and he would have pulled us out if any of us had fallen in.

But this is the living quarters, these four windows here and then here where there are no windows. That’s where the horses lived. Presumably … yes, I know they had cows because my mother had to milk them. My father could not learn to milk cows, so my mother had to do the milking.

**Interviewer:** Did you tell us already what your father in fact did before he got this farm?

**Elna:** Yes, he was a furniture maker. He had been apprenticed to a furniture maker. After he married, he bought this house and here is where he had his show room. There are some of the chairs and furniture standing outside. But this is where he had his show room so he could show people what there was and they could either buy what he had or he would make it to order for them.

This is the entrance to the family living quarters. They were upstairs and there were a couple of rooms down here. There are a couple of maids sticking their heads out. They wanted to be in the picture too.

That’s my grandmother and mother and father and my sister and me. This is an uncle who rented this area. Wasn’t he a Tinsmith Carl?

**Carl:** Yes, that’s right.

**Elna:** He was a tin smith. He made a lot of those [inaudible 00:08:46] pans that they made, the [inaudible 00:08:47] in. This building is still standing there. I visit it whenever I’m in Denmark.

**Interviewer:** This building, it’s a two story building with one, two, three, four, five windows. That’s quite a wide building. It’s … it has to be how wide, at least 30 … about 20 yards I guess long I suppose? The frontage of it is quite long, it looks like the equivalent of about three tenement houses in terms of its width, doesn’t it?

**Elna:** It’s a big house.

**Interviewer:** Big brick house.

**Elna:** Then it was my father wanted to be a farmer and then we moved into this house and then the America fever hit him and then of course we came to America.

**Interviewer:** Tell me about America fever. When did you first realize that he wanted to come to America?

**Elna:** Well, I don’t know. I think my father probably had had some dreams of it when he had finished his apprenticeship. Then it was the custom that a young man should go to a foreign country and rely on his trade to live there so he and a companion went to Norway.

They walked the length and breadth of Norway if you can believe it. When they ran out of money they would stop and work. They would find someone who was in their line of work. They would work for him until they had money again and then they would walk further and I think maybe that was when he began to dream of going other places.

This is my father and mother when they were young. It was probably shortly before they were married.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me a little bit about perhaps any stories your father might have told you about his life in Denmark or your mother or your grandparents? A sense of what it was like on those days before the turn of the century?

**Elna:** Can you remember any stories they’ve told us Carl? We should have been thinking about this but I hadn’t any idea of what you were going to want to know.

**Interviewer:** It’s no real problem, just if anything comes to mind.

**Elna:** One thing I can remember, my father’s home bordered a big swamp and a peat moss … or a peat bog. He loved to explore it on there but it was rather dangerous because there were soft spots and he wasn’t allowed to go down there but of course, he always went anyway.

Didn’t he have the measles Carl and he was supposed to stay home in bed? His big sister was to take care of him and see that he stayed in bed but and he of course sneaked out and got down there and played even if he had measles.

I remember once he was telling about he had gotten a pair of red boots for Christmas. He was so pleased with those boots he wouldn’t take them off so he … they couldn’t find him when it was bedtime. Then they finally discovered him. He had crept into a corner behind the door. There, he was sitting hugging himself and his red boots.

**Interviewer:** Tell me about … again, getting back to that American fever, what was that about? Were there a lot people in Denmark who felt that they wanted to leave the country and travel to America?

**Elna:** Yes, times were really tough in Denmark that time. It was very hard for-

**Interviewer:** Could you start by telling us what date this was?

**Elna:** This must have been- I imagine he started thinking about it 1910 or something like that and economics of the times were just really tough. Nobody had anything and it was hard to get ahead. Of course, they heard all these glowing stories of streets in America paved with gold.

I don’t think my father really believed that but he thought that opportunities for him would be much better in this country and for his family too. I think maybe he was right on that score, so they wanted to come to America.

My father had a brother who ventured out before he did and he left them with two little girls and settled in South Dakota. When the time came, my father decided that that was where they would go also because it was nice to have a brother to go to.

**Interviewer:** We’ve been standing around the table looking at your photographs. Would you like to sit down and continue or have you got something else to show us here?

**Elna:** Well, this is Carl, my brother who was born right before we left Denmark. This is the old Budolfi Church in Aalborg where he was christened. It’s a beautiful old church. Unfortunately, it doesn’t quite look like that anymore because they built right up to it, so you have all these modern buildings taking the view. This is the interior of the church. It’s one of the most beautiful churches in Denmark.

When we came to America, we came to my uncle. That’s my uncle and his two daughters. My father didn’t want to dress up like my uncle did. See, my uncle has his bowler hat and everything but my father, that was his first pair of American overalls, so that was what he wanted to wear and this is Carl in his carriage and my mother. I’m tired, I was always tired, I sat down.

**Interviewer:** Your father sounds like he had a real love affair with the rustic life.

**Elna:** Yes, he always loved the outdoors puttering around with things. This is from my parents’ golden wedding day in 1955. By that time, the family has grown quite a bit. Those are all relatives. My parents are gone now and this is what they left, seven children.

**Interviewer:** Was it customary … let me ask you, was it customary for Danish people to marry into Danish families? Has that been …?

**Elna:** Here in America, it was because the Danes like to settle in an area where they could be together and keep their Danish customs. We for example went to a small city in South Dakota called Viborg. It was named for a city in Denmark, which is *Viborg* they say in Danish but it’s been Americanized and we call it Viborg.

But many Danes would come to a community like that. There are others. There are communities in Minnesota, I think there a couple on the east coast somewhere. There’s one down in Mississippi.

The Danes had a tendency where there were other Danes and they could keep up their customs that they had from the old country.

Solvang is a Danish colony from the start and that was the idea here to, to create a place where we could continue to have our customs even though we all became American citizens or most of us.

**Interviewer:** Let’s go back. Before in fact you settled in Solvang and again, perhaps sit down, other parts of the country. Could you perhaps tell me a little bit about … well, as much as you can about your leaving Denmark and perhaps just lead into that. Tell us about the atmosphere, the environment. This was just before the First World War, was it not?

**Elna:** Yes. Let’s see, the First World War started in Europe in 1914. I don’t know if you notice the picture, my uncle and my father were both in the home guard. I remember going to the post office. The clerk gave me a card and she said, “Well, now your father has to go to war.”

I was so excited about that I ran all the way home. I was breathless when I got home. I told my mother, “Now dad has to go to war,” but of course, he didn’t. With all those children, he couldn’t go to war.

I remember quite a bit from our trip to the United States. I don’t know if that’s interesting. Do you think so? I must have been a very forward child because I knew absolutely everybody on that ship from top to bottom. I was friends with everybody.

Let’s see, what can I think of?

**Carl:** You sold cigarettes.

**Elna:** Oh, yes. I found a package of cigarillos, little small cigars. That was my first experience at salesmanship. I later here in Solvang started a women’s and children’s ware shop but that was my first experience in salesmanship. I found these cigarillos and I ended up sitting on a big round table in the dining room and I was auctioning these cigarillos.

My father was sent out to look for me then and when he found me, I was just auctioning off the last cigarillo. I had one laid aside, that was for him, I wasn’t going to auction that one off but people were standing around this table. Everybody wanted to buy a cigarillo from me.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell us a little bit about actually leaving Denmark, how you actually left to travel to the United States? You were up north on your farm, weren’t you?

**Elna:** Yes. Well, first we moved into an apartment in Aalborg and lived there. We made one change, we moved from one apartment to the other so we must have been there for quite a while. Then I don’t know where we lived when we went to Copenhagen but that could only have been a matter of a couple of days because by then, we were ready to leave.

It was very interesting on that ship. There was so much to see. I wondered about … there were always people standing … leaning on that rail and they were looking at something. I couldn’t see over the rail, so one day I decided, “Well, I’m going to find out what those people are looking at.” I climbed up on the rail and then I started down the other side because I thought, “Well, I’ve got to get down so I can see what they are looking at.”

Just then, a sailor came by and he said, “Hello Elna.” They all knew me by name you know, and he plucked me off otherwise, I guess I would have landed in the Atlantic Ocean.

I remember there was a cook’s help or something I guess. Anyway, he had to go down in the hold to get something for … some supplies or something for the kitchen. I went with him down there and he had a big sack of walnuts in the shell down there so he put some in my hand.

I remember one of them dropped to the floor. I couldn’t hold them all. I was down on the floor trying to pick that up but the floor was made of this duct board, you know how that is, so I couldn’t get it up. It went into one of those cracks. He said, “Oh, don’t get that, I’ll give you some others.” He said, “Hold up your skirt,” and he filled my skirt with these wonderful walnuts. I’d never eaten a walnut, so I thought that was really something.

**Interviewer:** You travelled across the Atlantic. Do you remember anything else of that journey?

**Elna:** No, just little things like that. Is there anything else Carl that I’ve ever told you that you can think of?

**Carl:** No.

**Elna:** Then you arrived in the United States at Ellis Island?

**Interviewer:** Yes, and that was with great anticipation. I remember vaguely the skyline as we came in and of course, it was a very slow process to get through there. There was so much one thing and another and so many people and they all had to have some kind of an examination.

Most of what we could see was they looked into people’s eyes and between their fingers and I don’t know what they were looking for but I volunteered to help the doctors because I was getting tired of sitting there. I went around looking between everybody’s fingers and looking in their eyes and passing them just like the doctors did.

Then we got on this train and we didn’t have any choice there. This irritated my father especially after he discovered that they sent us all the way up through Canada instead of straight across. It took much longer and it must have been really hard to travel with three little girls and then a little baby boy.

I don’t know if there were sleeping cars in those days. There might have been but if there were, we couldn’t afford it. We weren’t on one. We were just in a coach. But I remember how those coaches- the seats would come from one side to the other. When two seats were put together, there’d be a little tent under there. That’s where I slept with one of my sisters.

Some real heavy person sat down on the seat above us. It sent so much dust down where we were that I thought I was being asphyxiated. I’ve never since been able to be in a closed placed because I’m afraid I’ll get smothered.

At one point along the way, the trains often stopped and there was time when my father could get out. I don’t think the rest of us got out because he couldn’t keep track of three children and I suppose my mother was afraid we’d get lost.

There was one place they were selling ice cream cones and we’d never seen anything like that but he thought, “Oh, everybody should have an ice-cream cone,” so he bought five of them. By the time he got back to us, they were melting and running down his hands. That was our first ice cream cone.

Then we got to South Dakota where my uncle lived and we lived with them for a couple of weeks or so until we could find a house to move into, until my father could get a house built for us and that’s what he did when he came to America, was to build houses.

In America, people didn’t have their furniture made. There was no place for his skill in that line but he had also learnt all about making blueprints and so on. He was a general contractor for many years in South Dakota where we lived.

The countryside there is dotted with his barns and houses. My brother helped him when he grew up and was big enough to so Carl had to be a carpenter too.

**Interviewer:** Maybe you could tell us a little bit about that experience Carl, about building barns in South Dakota? Yes?

**Carl:** No.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Can you perhaps tell us a little bit about what your life was like when you arrived in the United States? Were you surprised by it? What kind of things do you remember?

**Elna:** Well, I remember I wanted to go back to Denmark. I talked one of my sisters into wanting to go too so we set out one day. I guess we got a couple of miles out of town. We were on our way to Denmark and some old farmer in a lumber wagon stopped and asked where we were going. He was Danish too so we could communicate with him.

I said we were going back to Denmark. We liked it better I guess in Denmark or else we were lonesome. He said, “Well,” we could get in and have a ride in his lumber wagon and then we could go with him back to Viborg. We thought, “Well, that was pretty nice to get a ride in a lumber wagon,” so that ended our trip back to Denmark.

When I started school in Viborg, there wasn’t any kindergarten. You start right into first grade. I couldn’t speak a word of English when I started school because all the people we got together with were Danish and they spoke Danish. It was a little hard the first couple of months but by the time I had been in school for six months, I not only could understand to speak English but I could also read.

So I’m not in sympathy with all this, people have to be taught in their own language when they come to America because if I could learn it in six months, so can other kids.

**Interviewer:** I’m just going to wait for that airplane to get by. The community, did they speak in Danish?

**Elna:** There was a Danish church and of course, that was all Danish. The sermons were Danish, the songs were Danish, everything was Danish. Even when I was confirmed- that happens when a young person is 14 years old. That also was in Danish, although by that time, we of course all spoke English.

But my parents, well, they didn’t tell us we had to speak Danish at home, it just came naturally, we did and we’re glad now. So many people wanted to learn English as soon as they got to America and they wanted to forget their homeland language but it’s such an advantage to know both languages that when you go to Denmark, you are just as at home as you are in the United States.

And then all the songs and the literature- Danish literature is very rich and it’s wonderful to be able to read it in the language it was written. A translation, no matter how good it is, nearly always loses something.

The only translations I’ve ever read that I thought were absolutely accurate are the ones my brother Carl here has done of my dad’s diaries and other documents. They are exactly as they would have been written if my father had written them in English. They’re him only it’s in English.

**Interviewer:** These diaries … This is side two of cassette 409, Elna Larsen. As well as the diary that your father wrote travelling from Denmark to the United States, he also wrote a diary travelling across Norway, so there are other diaries?

**Elna:** Yes, the length and breadth of Norway.

**Interviewer:** Just in case someone who listens to this tape is interested, they now know there is additional … he has additional diaries?

**Elna:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Could you perhaps tell us a little bit about your life subsequently in The United States after you arrived, grew up, went to school? Give us a sense of that.

**Elna:** Okay. Well, South Dakota really was a wonderful place to grow up in. We had creeks where we went fishing, there were flowers early in the springtime, the mayflower is the state flower and that was the first thing that came in the springtime when the snow began to thaw. It was really a wonderful place.

We got to take our lunches to school if the weather was below zero, then it was too cold to come for lunch then, so there were a lot of good things about growing up in South Dakota.

But it also is a place that we liked to get away from. It was very cold in the wintertime, very hot in the summertime, thunderstorms, which actually we loved. My mother always taught us to see how beautiful it was instead of worrying about that it might strike us.

My older sister and I came to California when we were quite young. I was 17 and she was 18. We came out mainly because of [inaudible 00:33:02] College, which isn’t here anymore but a very close friend of ours was president of the college and he thought we should come out and spend a winter out here, which we did. Then of course, we stayed here and we did all sorts of things.

My first job here was working in a store in Downtown Solvang. We also worked some up at the college, spent some winters there and were mother’s helpers and so on and so forth and eventually, I opened my shop in Solvang.

That was in 1942 and I had that for 31 years. Then I retired and now I’ve been enjoying taking care of my garden and going fishing and things like that.

That reminds me, here’s one more person I can show my big fish to. I ran out of people to show it too. I asked one of my relatives in Denmark if I’d shown him my big fish and he said, “I can see it with my eyes shut,” so he had seen enough of it. Here’s my big salmon.

**Interviewer:** That’s a big salmon. How many pounds?

**Elna:** It weighed 30½ pounds. I almost got the prize. I was fishing in a derby up in Washington but someone brought one in that weighed a ¼ pound more but I had the fun of catching it.

**Interviewer:** It’s an enormous salmon. You’re a keen fisherman? Fisherperson, fisherwoman.

**Elna:** Yeah, I like to fish. I used to go out quite a lot but it’s tapered off a little bit.

**Interviewer:** Is that something that you brought with you from the homeland?

**Elna:** Well, I didn’t fish in Denmark but of course, I was too little to fish. But in South Dakota, we had a little stream that ran there, maybe a mile or two from home. We hiked out there many, many times. We’d ask mom, “How many fish do you want mom?” and then we would go out and hopefully, we’d catch as many as she wanted.

**Interviewer:** Was it customary for women to fish in Denmark?

**Elna:** No, I don’t think so. No, that was left to the men. We have a cousin who was a fisherman that was his living. He had a fishing boat and its fun to visit them. They always have so much wonderful fish even now because he still goes out just to catch what they want.

**Interviewer:** How many in your family now live in The United States from Denmark, how many immigrants?

**Elna:** Let me see. I suppose Uncle Walters and then Uncle Jens up in Washington. Yeah, they are the only ones. My Uncle Walters has two daughters left and they are living in Santa Barbara. My Uncle Jens and his wife was … his wife was my father’s sister. She lived to be 102 years old. Even though I’m 81, I’ve got a lot of time left because I’m going to beat her.

But they had I think about 10 children so they are a big family up there. Some of them have passed away but I think they are about seven left of them but that’s all that came of our close relatives.

**Interviewer:** Thank you. Is there anything else that you think we should record? Otherwise, we’ll call it quits.

**Elna:** Well, I can’t really think of anything else. Maybe when you are gone I’ll think of a lot of things.

**Interviewer:** Okay, this brings to a close interview number 409.

**[Silence 00:37:11]**