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Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS

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PRESERVING A HERITAGE—A SCHOOL PROJECT

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June 1986

Preserving a Heritage—A School Project

The theme of this particular interview is The Great Depression. However, there are other themes which also would be of interest to a family or lodge. Interviews with the older members of a family might reflect the years when they grew up—their recollections of local, regional, or national events, people they have known, or tradition and lore.

Interviewing lodge members may help reconstruct the history of your lodge. Even if lodge historians have collected facts and data, the recollections, anecdotes, and stories that lodge members contribute will give meaning and perspective to the dry facts.

The following interview is an example of how it can be done.

The Great Depression

Part I: Background Information

Where were you born, what kind of house did you live in?

I was born in Christiania (Oslo), Norway. We moved from an apartment in Oslo, when I was three years old, to a house in Larvik. It was a two-story house on a corner lot. We lived on the second floor and rented out the first floor. The yard was closed in by a big wooden fence and had a laundry house on the back lot. It had two bedrooms, one I shared with my six-year-old brother, Gunnar. Our beds were opposite each other under the eaved roof. The room had a skylight and was very cozy. Our parent's bedroom was on the other side of the house, off the kitchen. We had a living room and dining room and a long porch that ran across the back of the house, off the dining room.

Where did you live in Superior, what kind of a house?

The first house we lived in was in South Superior. We shared it with my father's brother and his family. We had one bedroom for me, my brother, my mother, and dad. I thought it was a strange place because the woodshed and the toilet were attached to the house so you didn't have to go outside. There was a big yard, fenced in with wire. It had a rustic summer house of white birch in the back. The house was outside the city limits at 68th Street and Tower Avenue. We lived there for one year and then lived in a house at Tower Avenue and 64th Street. It had two bedrooms, a living and dining room, and a kitchen. It was one block from the town pump. My dad used to carry water every day from the pump.

What kind of transportation did you use?

There were streetcars running from 62nd Street on Tower Avenue to downtown, but most of the time we walked. All the children walked to school.

Where was your favorite place to play?

A lumber pile at 64th Street and Tower. We played hide-and-seek. I played a lot with "Baby Joe," a survivor of the Hinckley, Minnesota fire. He was an orphan; no one knew who he belonged to. He'd been adopted by the Baraboo family. Joe Baraboo owned a saloon.

What did you do on Sundays?

I went to Sunday School at Bethel Lutheran Church at 58th Street and John Avenue. In the afternoon, after dinner, I'd play at different friends' houses.

Did your parents help you with your schoolwork?

They couldn't, because they only spoke Norwegian. My first teacher, Miss Bertha McGill,

helped me learn English and helped me with my lessons. She gave me two big boxes of "Scrabble" and a storybook with big print. I had to sit all day and pick letters to match the words in the book. Miss McGill would come and check up on me off and on all day. Once some kid gave me an indelible pencil and I put it in my mouth and my tongue turned blue. Miss McGill was afraid to send me home so she washed my tongue with soap.

Did you get special encouragement, special recognition?

When the superintendent of schools would come to visit, he always cited my brother Gunnar and me as examples of how well foreign-born students could do. Once I had my picture taken outside in front of the school (Billings) in my national costume (bunad) from Norway. I stood on a wooden table surrounded by the rest of the class.

Part 2: The Depression

How old were you in 1929 when the Depression first started and what effect did it have on your life?

I was 33 years old in 1929. In the beginning we didn't notice any effect. My dad worked at the Webster Chair Factory, my mother worked in homes (day work) and I was bookkeeper at a shoe store. By 1930-31 no one in my family was working. We went for four days without anything but coffee because my dad wouldn't let me go to the relief office for help—he was too proud. The factory had gone bankrupt. No one knew for a while and still expected to be called back because the management had told them they would be called. In 1932 I married. My husband worked for the railroad. He got laid off shortly after we married. We had three children and my ma and dad living with us. My husband and my dad hunted and fished a lot, so we had enough to eat. My husband went on WPA when Roosevelt came in.

I remember one Christmas Eve. The WPA men didn't get paid until late. They'd had to storm the relief office and demand their checks so they could shop for Christmas. The only stores that were still open were drugstores. He and I split up so we could hurry from one to the other before they all closed.

Did its effects get worse?

Yes. My husband left and then my folks and I went on relief (1937). We never got off it until the Second World War.

How did it change your life?

I had been brought up in middle class standards. We left Norway with money as my mother had two inheritances. We'd always lived well, had good clothing, good jobs, etc. Then I was left with my parents and three children to take care of, always trying to make ends meet, put food on the table, try to buy coal and wood for the stoves. My father would have to go out in the woods to cut trees for fuel. Once he got permission from my husband's

family to chop some wood on land they owned out in the country. He chopped and stacked the wood all day until dark. When he went back the next morning with his sled to haul it, someone had stolen it.

How did you clothe your family?

We got a lot of second-hand clothes from friends. My mother remodeled them. We both made quilts and knitted. We were always making fancy work for the fair. We got cash prizes—about $100 each every year. We made braided rugs, quilts, etc., to use also. We never got any of that type of goods from the Relief.

Tell us about a Christmas you remember from the Depression.

I remember one year when ma and dad, the kids and I walked the railroad tracks from 55th and Cummings Avenue to John and 59th Street to spend Christmas Eve with my husband's sister, Ethel Oliphant-Wagner. No one had much. Pencils were given as gifts, wrapped in fancy paper—or crayons and coloring books for the kids. None of the grown-ups exchanged gifts. Ethel's boy Buddy was very disappointed with the pencils he got and threw them away. There was always a tree. Usually we had venison and pheasant (shot out of season often times) and potatoes.

My ma baked everything. Once, for Christmas, I went to Seldens at 57th and Tower during a blizzard with a $5 bill I'd saved; I bought ma a set of bowls she wanted for baking bread. They were glass and weighed a ton. I had to walk Stinson Avenue home; in some places the snow was to my chest. It seemed like I struggled for hours; finally I did make it, though. I felt half dead from the effort.

My brother Gunnar (who had left Superior before the Depression and had a good job out West) always sent beautiful gifts to make everyone's holidays joyful.

What did you learn from the experiences you had during the Depression?

I learned how greedy people could be. When the Relief Program first started, a lot of the railroad men would be laid off one day and were asking for Relief the next, when our family was too proud to ask. I found there were many kind people side-by-side with the greedy. The American Legion helped us (my brother had been a member). Dr. Kilo called the Relief Office as he'd noticed there were never any lights in our house after dark when he'd be making house calls in South Superior. We went to bed early to save on electric bills. We learned who our friends were and how to keep our family together.