

Interview with Donna Larson

At the Northern Forrest Heritage Park, Berlin, New Hampshire

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Interviewer: Scott Strainge

Crew: Josh Silveira, Steve Rugoletti, Jim Forest, Den Zanello, Dave Morse

Q: Thank you for taking time to speak with us today. The first thing we ask all of our interviewees is to state your name for us and tell us where you are from.

6:09 – DL: well, my name is Donna Larsen and I am from here in Berlin, New Hampshire in the Norwegian Village.

Q: One of the things we have been talking about with all of the folks we have been interviewing is about the culture of this place. Could you tell us a little bit about the Norwegian culture and its history here in Berlin?

6:25 – DL: Actually where we are cited right now is the beginning of the Norwegian Village. There was a pretty large group of Norwegians about three thousand families in all that came to Berlin and settled in this area because of the logging industry. W.W. Brown who bought the Winslow Saw Company which is also on this site was from Portland, Maine and he came into an acquaintance with a gentleman by the name of Jan Oswald. Unlike a lot of other ethnic groups the Norwegians didn't all come through Ellis Island. Very few came through Ellis Island. They would get on a ship in Norway, a feeder ship, and they would go to England and then from England they would come to a port here on the East coast and it could be Montreal, it could have been Quebec, it could have been Portland, it could have been Boston. So, Jan Oswald came from Tuten, Norway, which is one of my ancestral homes up near Lillehammer and he fell in with W. W. Brown and they became very fast friends. Because Jan Oswald knew about lumbering and timbering W.W. Brown invited Jan Oswald to come to Berlin (NH) and Jan Oswald was a recruiter. He would write back to Tuten and say there are plenty of jobs over here. There is plenty of work and the scenery is very much like the section of Norway that he came from. So, between 1860 and 1926 about 3000 Norwegian families came to Berlin (NH). This section of the Norwegian Village originally consisted of streets called Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland Streets and those streets are still here today. Two of the numbered streets, 5th Street and 6th Street, got changed recently to Iceland Street and Viking Street, so when they moved mo office back into the Norwegian Village I am on the corner of Main and Viking Street which I think is very appropriate for someone like me who is very proud of their Norwegian heritage. When I was a little kid growing up in the Norwegian Village Norwegian was spoken in every household. The rule was you speak Norwegian in the house but if you go out with

English speaking people you speak English, It was very common to hear elderly or older Norwegian men and women with very heavy Norwegian accents trying to speak English which was quite funny. My grandfather Tormud Larsen came from Oslo and he came over when he was sixteen years old to meet up with his step-sister who was already living here in Berlin (NH) on Sweden Street and he never went back to Norway. He stayed here as a young man and had a business and got into the restaurant business. Anyway, to make a long story short my "bestafar", my grandfather Tormud had been here in the states so long and away from Norwegian speaking people because he moved downstate, he became a flatlander, that he never really learned to speak English proficiently and he lost his Norwegian, so it was a lot of fun trying to communicate with someone who was speaking with such a strong accent that it was very very difficult to understand him (said in English with a mock Norwegian accent). You almost needed sub-titles. My grandmother was born in this country although her parents were born in Tuten. She used to get very angry at my bestafar, my grandfather. My bestamore is grandmother and bestafar is grandfather. She couldn't call him a gosh darn Norwegian because she was full blooded so she used to call him a gosh darn immigrant, only she used stronger language. It was really a wonderful experience growing up in the Norwegian Village. It was a very close knit community. Everybody knew everyone else. Everyone's grandparents probably knew each other from Norway and folks were just do inter-related that it was very difficult to say anything harsh about anyone else because it could be your cousin or an aunt or an uncle because of the inter-connectedness of folks in the Norwegian Village. Another really I think a fascinating section of Norwegian history is In Berlin New Hampshire is the oldest ski club in North America. It is the Nanssen Ski Club. Originally it was called the Skii Cluben Nort Americansk and it was for Norwegian speaking people only and the reason they did it was to keep the Swedes out. If you were Swedish and spoke Norwegian that was ok, but the club was conducted and all of the meetings were conducted in Norwegian so that was the rule. When Fritzhoff Nanssen the famous Arctic explorer came to Berlin the club members in honor of Dr. Fritzhoff Nanssen to change the name to Nanssesn Ski Club. I recall pictures of Dr, Nanssesn coming to Berlin and going to the Brown Company House. Back in those days it would be like Neil Armstrong coming to town. I mean this man crossed Greenland on skis solo and he went to the Arctic on the From with some help but he made it to the North Pole, so he was a very famous person in his own right. Everyone still, my grandfather's generation and my dad's generation, always talk about the day that Fritzhoff Nanssen came to Berlin. It was just a huge honor to have him here. I still have a picture of Fritzhoff with my grandmother's uncle who was one of the City Councilors at the time, taken in front of the Main Street City Hall, so that was quite an honor. The ski club itself was founded in 1872 and it is still going. Up the river you probably have seen the big ski jump. There used to be a little jump up on the corner of 12th Street where the bridge is now. That was the original Nanssen Ski Club skiing area, the cross country skiing and the jumping area. In 1938 Alf Halversen who

was the youngest president of the Nanssen Ski Club he was quite an entrepreneur and middle man kind of person he raised the funds to build the big jump up on the boarder of Berlin and Milan. That jump has been used and was used for years and years and years for Olympic tryouts and World Cup skiing and it was quite the site when, I recall my Bestamore my grandmother telling me that back in the heyday of the ski jumping the city of Berlin had 20,000 inhabitants and 40,000 people would go to the ski jumping competition. SO, the city really exploded. I don't know whether you have been able to see a copy of any of the ski club programs, the Nanssesn Ski Jumping Competition Program, but they are quite amusing in that there was something like two hundred bars and beer parlors in Berlin and they all advertised in the Nanssen Ski Club Bulletin. We have the best beer! Come here after the jump! (laughs)

Q: Why do you feel it is important in the 21st century to continue to embrace your culture from your parents and your grandparents past?

14:56 – DL: Well, as you can see it says on my apron “It’s hard to be humble if you are Norwegian” so you know I was raised by my grandmother, my Bestamore and I just lived in the Norwegian Village growing up. I left to go to school elsewhere and I was fortunate enough to be able to come back ten years after I left high school. There is just something so magical about this area and something that really needs to be preserved. A lot of people don’t know there are Norwegians here but we are here and we continue to be here and it is our heritage. What we did to make Berlin what it is...we brought skiing to the United States. We brought jumping and Nordic combined which is cross country and jumping. Irrespective of what the Austrians say Alpine skiing is really a variation of Telemark skiing which came from Telemark, Norway. So, the tradition here is just so very rich and the scenery...I have been back to Norway several times back to the Tuffen area and the scenery is just so much like Norway that it is really hard not to be proud of your heritage and keep that culture alive. I think it is important for me as a person and for my community not to forget all of the people that came here at great hardship like my grandfather who came over at sixteen on a ship by himself to meet a step-sister who he had never met before and never went back to Norway. He did correspond with his family in Norway. Actually my grandmother corresponded on his behalf in Norwegian, but I can’t imagine with those separations, and that it was very hard for those people to do, I can’t imagine our generation doing that. I think that is one of the reasons why I keep my culture alive, and I also like Norwegian food. I can cook Norwegian really well.

Q: I have two requests. Could you speak a few sentences in the Norwegian language so we can hear its cadence and beauty, and could you sing the Norwegian National Anthem for us?

17:22 – DL: (laughs) Well I don’t know about singing the National Anthem, but I will speak a little Norwegian, some words that my grandmother taught me when she was

teaching me to speak Norwegian. The first one that Norwegians learn is (*phonetic spelling*) *Vorden stor detill*, which means how the heck are you doing? If you are doing well you go *Sedara*, things go good or if things aren't going well you go *Sut eekibrah*, *eeki* is not. We have a little saying in our family *eeki eeki eeki no nigh no eeki* which means no no no nonigh eeki. Another little phrase that she taught me when I was first learning Norwegian is, and I still remember it and when I was in Oslo I repeated it...the gentleman that I was talking to wanted to know how I learned Norwegian and I said I learned it from my grandmother and he said well could you say something that your grandmother taught you so I went "*bestafar sitter ee in linner stolden. Handroker in pe pah'* and the gentleman said you are from Tutten aren't you?(laughs) They speak...Tutten is like a cute way of speaking Norwegian. Someone equated it to the same as a Southern drawl because it is very singy-songy up and downy and that is the way they speak in Tutten. The words to the Norwegian national Anthem are some of the most beautiful words of any national anthem not just because it is Norwegian but because it talks about the homeland. *Ja vi elsker dette landet, som det stiger frem*. Yes I love this land my country, land of home and kin, and then it goes on and on talking about *hjem pa mor og far* the home of my mother and father and *hjem de la beck e hoele* the home of the mountains and the hills. It is very unlike the American National Anthem. It talks about the beauty of Norway. It talks about the fells and the fjords, the mountains and Mom and Dad.

Q: If you can't sing it, can you just talk us through it and just give us that language and those words?

19:50 – DL: I will try. It is better sung because you remember songs better, but it goes something like

*Ja, vi elsker dette landet
som det stiger frem,
furet, værbitt, over vannet,
med du tusen hjem.
Ja, vi elsker Ja, vi elsker
Ja, vi elsker dette
Ja, vi elsker dette landet
som det stiger frem*

and *Ja Vi Elsker*, if you ever had a Norwegian girlfriend you would know *ja vi elsker* is "I love you". That is one of the first things that couples would say to each other *ja elsker dette*.

Q (Steve): That phrase that you said your grandmother taught you could you tell and give us a translation of that?

20:29 – DL: Sure. *Bestafar siten e en leta stool. Hans roker and pe ba.* Grandfather sits in an armchair and he smokes a pipe. (laughs) So those are just very typical things that you would teach a little kid when you are learning the language.

Q (Scott): Thank you for your time today I know you are incredibly busy.

20:53 – DL: Yes, I am going to make Fried Dough! Thank you!