

**DP-35 LARSEN**

**ELEANOR LARSON**

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**INTERVIEWER: ANDREW PHILLIPS**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY:**

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**TRANSCSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:**

**PHILLIPS:** This is interview number 409 with Eleanor Larsen. It's the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 1989. Mrs. Larsen is from Denmark, and could you give me your date of birth and immigration?

**MS. LARSEN:** I was born January 18, 1908 and we cam 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.

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

**MR. LARSEN:** Yes. Maybe the best thing is to start from the beginning. This is my, 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 there would be the family in one area and a few animals in the other area.

**PHILLIPS:** Could you describe for us exactly what the house looks like?

**MS. LARSEN:** Um, well, this is the front door. And 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 the kitchen. And this door is the door into the barn where the animals are kept. They're in the back part of the house.

**PHILLIPS:** In the roof?

**MS. LARSEN:** No.

**PHILLIPS:** Now the roof is, you describe the roof for us.

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

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

**MR. LARSEN:** My grandmother was born in that house, and she's been gone for many years. She died in, uh, 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. They, I can see some of them that I recognize, some of my cousins.

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

**MS. LARSEN:** Um, 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 the, from the newspaper. He probably reads aloud to her every day. Uh, they most likely eat their meals with the family they're staying with. In this case I think it was a daughter that they lived with. There's the bed in the corner.

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

**MS. LARSEN:** Yes. It looks like it's a hand-woven tablecloth. And the piece on the dresser there, that has some handwork. I think it's probably crocheted. And they always had plants in their houses, and I presume that's because they have these long, cold winters where they never saw anything green. So they always had a plant, sort of a rubber plant.

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

**MS. LARSEN:** Uh, 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. And, uh, we have a custom in Denmark. You always have a Christmas tree, but no one sees it until Christmas Eve. And then it's brought out, and it's in the middle of the room, set in the middle of the room, and 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. And you always wind up with a gay little song. Can't you just sing a few bars of Nu Yuk Carl?

**BROTHER:** (Sings "Nu Har Vi Jul Igan" in Danish.)

**MS. LARSEN:** Now, that's very exciting to children when that starts. You go through all the hymns, that's very sedate. But when you get to this, um, "Now we have Christmas again." The children love that. And then there's dancing around the tree. You have hold of somebody's hands. And I remember a hand on each side of me, 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, uh...

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

**MS. LARSEN:** Uh, "Now we have Christmas again. Now we have Christmas again." How is it, then. "And Christmas lasts until Easter. No, it isn't true, no it isn't true, because in between comes Lent." So that's the translation for that.

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

**MS. LARSEN:** Well, one thing I remember from when we moved up to the farm. And here's a picture of that. Do you want to just hand me that, Carl? Here's a picture of the house. That was along the Limfjord. The family lived here. That's my mother, grandmother and grandfather. I'm the one in the middle, and my two little sisters. And there's the big dog. I always took my nap in his paws. He was such a good dog. And my father ...

**PHILLIPS:** What was his name?

**MS. LARSEN:** Uh, Mox. M-A-X. I guess you'd say Max, but we said "Mox." 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 Limfjord running by in. But, uh, this is the living quarters, these four windows here. And then here where there are no windows, that's where the horses lived and presumably they had, 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.

**PHILLIPS:** Did you tell us already what your father, in fact, did before he got this far?

**MS. LARSEN:** Yes. He was a furniture maker. He had been apprenticed to a furniture maker and after he married, he bought this house. And here's where he had his showroom. There are some of the chairs and furniture standing outside. But this is where he had his showroom, 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. And this is the entrance to the family living quarters. They were upstairs, and there was 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. And this is an uncle who rented this area. Wasn't he a tinsmith, Carl? Uncle Søren?

**BROTHER:** Yes, that's right.

**MS. LARSEN:** Yeah, he was a tinsmith. He made all, a lot of those æble skive pans they make æble skive in. This building is still standing. I visit it whenever I'm in Denmark.

**PHILLIPS:** This is a building, it's a two-story building with one, two, three, four, five windows. It's quite a wide building. 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?

**MS. LARSEN:** It's a big house.

**PHILLIPS:** Big brick house.

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

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

**MS. LARSEN:** 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, and they walked the length and breadth of Norway, it you can believe it. And 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's probably shortly before they were married.

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

**MS. LARSEN:** Uh, can you remember any stories they've told us, Carl? We should have been thinking about this, but I hadn't any idea what you were going to want to know.

**PHILLIPS:** It's no real problem. Just if anything comes to mind.

**MS. LARSEN:** One thing I can remember, my father's home was, bordered by a big swamp and the peat moss, or peat bog, and he loved to explore down 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. Uh, and didn't he have the measles, Carl, and, uh, he was supposed to stay home in bed? And his big sister was to take care of him and see that he stayed in bed, and he had measles. I remember once he was telling about he had gotten a pair of red boots for Christmas and he was so pleased with those boots he wouldn't take them off. So he, uh, they couldn't find him when it was bedtime and he was, then they finally discovered him. He had crept into a corner behind the door, and there he was sitting hugging himself in his red boots.

**PHILLIPS:** Tell me about, again, getting back to that American fever. What was that about, a lot of, were there a lot people in Denmark who felt that they wanted to leave the country and travel to America?

**MS. LARSEN:** Yes. Times were really tough in Denmark, that time. And it was very hard for, uh ...

**PHILLIPS:** Can you start by telling us what date this was?

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

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**MS. LARSEN:** ...my father, that was his first pair of American overalls, so that's 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.

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

**MS. LARSEN:** Uh, yes. He always loved to be 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.

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

**MS. LARSEN:** Uh, here in America it was because the Danes liked 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 they say in Danish, but it's been Americanized, and we call it Viborg. Uh, but many Danes would come to a community like that. There are others. There are communities in Minnesota. I think there are a couple on the east coast somewhere. There's one down in Mississippi. And, uh, the...

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**MS. LARSEN:** ...bottom. I was friends with everybody. (She laughs.) Let's see, what can I think of. (Other voice.) Oh, yes. (She laughs.) I found a package of cigarillos, little small cigars. And that was my first experience at salesmanship. I later, here in Solvang, started a women's and children's wear 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. And when, 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. (She laughs.)

**PHILLIPS:** 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?

**MS. LARSEN:** Yes. Well, first we moved into an apartment in Alborg, and lived there, and we made on change. We moved from one apartment to the other, so we must have been there for quite a while. Then I don't know here 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 and they were looking at something, and 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, and I climbed up on the rail and then I started down the other side because I thought, well I got to get down so I can see what they're looking at. And just then a sailor came by and he said, "Hello Eleanor." They all knew me by name, you know. And he plucked me off. Otherwise I guess I would have landed in the Atlantic Ocean. And I remember there was a cook's helper or something, I guess. Anyway, he had to go down in the hold to get something, some supplies or something for the kitchen. And, uh, 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. And I remember one of them dropped through the floor. I couldn't hold them all. And I was down on the floor trying to pick that up. But the floor was made of this duckboard, you know. You know how that is. So I couldn't get it up. It went into one of those cracks. So he said, "Oh, don't get that. I'll give you some others." So 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.

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

**MS. LARSEN:** No. Just little things like that, you know. Is there anything else, Carl, that I've ever told you that you can think of?

**PHILLIPS:** Then you arrived in the United States at Ellis Island.

**MS. LARSEN:** Yes. Uh-huh. 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, uh, one thing or another, and so many people. And they all had to have some kind of examination. Most of what we could see was they looked into people's eyes and in 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, you know. So I went around looking between everybody's fingers and looking in their eyes and passing them just like the doctors did. (She laughs.) Then we got on this train. And we didn't have any choice there. This kind of irritated my father, especially after he discovered that they sent us all the way up through Canada instead of straight across, so it took much longer, and it must have been really hard to travel with three little girls and then a little baby boy. And, uh, 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 coach. But I remember, you know how those coaches, the seats would come from one side to the other. And when two seats were put together there'd be kind of a little tent under there, so that's where I slept, with one of my sisters. And some real heavy person sat down on the seat above us. (She laughs.) 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 close place because I'm afraid I'll get smothered. At one point along the way, the trains often stopped and there was a time when my father couldn't 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. But there was one place here 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 four or five of them. And by the time he got back to us, they were melting and running down his hands. (She laughs.) That was our first ice cream cone. Then we got to South Dakota where my uncle lived with him 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 and there was no, there was no place for his skills in that line. But he had also learned all about making blueprints and so one, you know. So he was a general contractor for many years in South Dakota where we lived. They countryside there is dotted with his barns and houses. My brother helped him when he grew up and was big enough to, so Carl got to be a carpenter, too.

**PHILLIPS:** Maybe you could tell us a little bit about your experience, Carl, that building barns in South Dakota. Yes? No, okay. What, can you perhaps tell us a little about what your life was like when you arrived in the United States? Were you surprised by it? What kinds of things do you remember?

**MS. LARSEN:** Well, I remember I wanted to go back to Denmark and I talked one of my sisters into wanting to go too. So we set out one day and 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. And he was Danish too, so we could communicate with him. So I said we were going back to Denmark, we liked it better, I guess, in Denmark, or else we were lonesome. And 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. So we though, 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 started right into first grade. And 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. So 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 and speak English, but I could also read. So I'm not much 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 month, so can other kids.

**PHILLIPS:** I'm just going to wait for that airplane to go by. Um, the community, did they speak in Danish?

**MS. LARSEN:** Um, 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, uh, 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. Then when you go to Denmark you're just as at home as you are in the United States. And then all the, uh, 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 in. A translation, no matter how good, 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're exactly as they would have been written if my father had written them in English. They're him, only it's in English.

**PHILLIPS:** And these diaries have been donated to the Ellis Island museum? (Tape ends.)

END OF SIDE ONE  
BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

**PHILLIPS:** This is side two of cassette 409 with Eleanor 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.

**MS. LARSEN:** Uh-huh. The length and breadth of Norway.

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

**MS. LARSEN:** Yeah.

**PHILLIPS:** Okay. Could you perhaps tell us a little about your life subsequently in the United States after you arrived, grew up, and went to school. Give us a sense of that.

**MS. LARSEN:** Okay. Well, South Dakota really was a wonderful place to grow up in. We had creeks where we went fishing and 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, and it was really a wonderful place. And we got to take our lunches to school if the weather was below zero, then it was too cold to come home for lunch then. So there were a lot of good things about growing up in South Dakota. But it also, uh, is a place that we like 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 Atterdag College, which isn't there anymore, but a very close friend of ours was president of the college, and he thought we should come out and spend the winter out here, which we did. And then, of course, we stayed here. And, well, we did all sorts of things. We, uh, my first job here was working in a store in downtown Solvang and 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. And 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 run out of people to show it to. 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.

**PHILLIPS:** That's a big salmon. How many pounds?

**MS. LARSEN:** It weighted 30-1/2 pounds, and I almost go the prize. I was fishing in a derby up in Washington, but someone brought one in that weighed a quarter pound more. But I had the fun of catching it.

**PHILLIPS:** It's an enormous salmon. So you're a keen fisherman.

**MS. LARSEN:** Uh-huh.

**PHILLIPS:** Fisherperson, fisherwoman.

**MS. LARSEN:** Yeah. I like to fish. (She laughs.) And I used to go out quite a lot, but it's kind of tapered off a little bit.

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

**MS. LARSEN:** 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, oh, maybe a mile or two from home, and we hiked out there many, many times. We'd ask Mom, "How many fish do you want, Mom?" And then we'd go out and hope we would catch as many as she wanted.

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

**MS. LARSEN:** No, I don't think so. No. That was left to the men. We have a cousin who's a fisherman. That was his living. He had a fishing boat. And it's fun to visit them. They always have so much wonderful fish, even now, because he still goes out just to catch what they want.

**PHILLIPS:** So how many of your family now live in the United States? From Denmark, how many immigrants?

**MS. LARSEN:** Let me see. I suppose Uncle Walters, and then Uncle Jens up in Washington. Yeah, they're the only ones. My Uncle Walters has two daughters left, and they're living in Santa Barbara. My Uncle Jens in, uh, and his wife, his wife was my father's sister. She lived to be 102 years old. So 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 ten children, so they're a big family up there. Some of them have passed away, but I think there are about seven left of them. But that's all that came of our close relatives.

**PHILLIPS:** Okay. Is there anything else that you think we should record; otherwise we'll call it quits.

**MS. LARSEN:** Well, uh, I can't really think of anything else. Maybe when you've gone I'll think of a lot of things.

**PHILLIPS:** Okay. That's, this brings to a close interview number 409.