

EI-111/THORBJORNSON

EI-111

ERIC THORBJORNSON

BIRTH DATE: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW DATE: 10/31/1991

RUNNING TIME: 22:24

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: TENANTS HARBOR, MAINE

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 12/1993

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 3/1994

SWEDEN, 1921

AGE 24

RESIDENCES: SWEDEN: YARBERG, PROVENCE HALLAND

US: VINALHAVEN; TENANTS HARBOR, ME

SHIP: THE STOCKHOLM

PORT: GOTEBORG

Oral Historian's Note: There is a constant mechanical noise throughout the recording of this interview, as well as voices in the background. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of the Oral History Project, 3/4/1994.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm here in Tenants Harbor, Maine, with Mr. Eric Thorbjornson who is, it is October 31, 1991. Mr. Johnson came from Sweden at the age of twenty-four in 1921. (break in tape) Perhaps we can start by your telling me what town you were born in.

THORBJORNSON: In Yarberg, Sweden.

LEVINE: And how do you spell that?

THORBJORNSON: Y-A-R-B-E-R-G.

LEVINE: And the province that that's in?

THORBJORNSON: Halland. H-A-L-L-A-N-D.

LEVINE: A-N-D?

THORBJORNSON: Halland, land.

LEVINE: Okay. (break in tape) Did you live in the same town all of your life before you came to the United States?

THORBJORNSON: Well, I used to sail a lot. I used to be a sailor.

LEVINE: Oh, you were a sailor in Sweden.

THORBJORNSON: Yeah. I just sailed in sailing ships, square riggers. I was in America once before that. In 1920 I was in America on a square rigger.

LEVINE: So what was your purpose in coming to America that time?

THORBJORNSON: Nothing, just (he laughs), just happened to go.

LEVINE: In other words, you were working aboard the ship and the ship stopped.

THORBJORNSON: No. After I got back home I left the ship, and then we happened to talk to a fellow on board to

America, and got kind of an interest in the fellow, and we decided to go with the fellow and look it over. (he laughs) Then I happened to stay here.

LEVINE: I see. Before you left Sweden, were you already moved away from your family or were you still living with your family?

THORBJORNSON: No, I lived with my family.

LEVINE: And what was your family like? How many people in your family?

THORBJORNSON: I had a brother and one sister.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's name and her maiden name.

THORBJORNSON: Analina.

LEVINE: Anna . . .

THORBJORNSON: Analina Nelson.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

THORBJORNSON: Edward (?).

LEVINE: And how about your brother's name?

THORBJORNSON: I beg your pardon?

LEVINE: Your brother's name? The name of your brother?

THORBJORNSON: Oh, my brother. His name was Gustav.

LEVINE: Gustav. And how about your sister?

THORBJORNSON: Ellen.

LEVINE: Ellen. And how did, and where did you fall in line? Were you the oldest or in the middle, or were you the youngest child?

THORBJORNSON: I was the middle one.

LEVINE: The middle one. I see. So, now, what did your father do?

THORBJORNSON: He was a paving cutter, cutting paving stone.

LEVINE: Oh. I see. And do you remember where you lived?

THORBJORNSON: Yes.

LEVINE: What was it like? Can you remember the house that you lived in in Sweden?

THORBJORNSON: We lived in an apartment, two rooms. Three rooms and a kitchen.

LEVINE: And did you go to school?

THORBJORNSON: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: How many years did you go?

THORBJORNSON: I was, we started, at that time it was different from now. We have, I started when I was seven years old and I was through school when I was thirteen. But I went to evening schools a lot to learn construction and things like that.

LEVINE: Oh, you studied construction after?

THORBJORNSON: Well, there was, see, I still have the plaque. My sister brought them. She visit us in 1967 and she brought all my drawings and writings from my school, so I still have them.

LEVINE: Really. Wow, I'd love to see them.

THORBJORNSON: I have them upstairs.

LEVINE: And did you ever study English before you came to the United States?

THORBJORNSON: I, on the First World War I send in England and France for a whole year, so I spent a lot of time in England. I picked up a little. Not very fancy, but . . .

LEVINE: I see. So let's see. Well, what was your town like? Could you describe it, the town? What was the town like?

THORBJORNSON: Now it's a summer resort mostly, in the summer. Well, at the time when I, there was only about seventy thousand people. Now there is, they incorporate about forty thousand.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. There were seven thousand?

THORBJORNSON: When I lived.

LEVINE: Wow.

THORBJORNSON: And they said now there's about nineteen, twenty thousand.

LEVINE: Well, what do you remember about your childhood? Can you remember any things that happened to you?

THORBJORNSON: Nothing special. (he laughs)

LEVINE: No? How did you decide to become a sailor?

THORBJORNSON: Well, I always liked the water. I loved the ship. There was a coastal town. I always went down to the harbor, and I have a friend that owns a ship too, and I went with him finally.

LEVINE: I see. So, and then, how long were you, were you in the army?

THORBJORNSON: No, I was in the Swedish Navy.

LEVINE: The Swedish Navy. I see. So how long were you in the navy?

THORBJORNSON: Twelve months. It was compulsory at the time. That was during the World War Two, One.

LEVINE: One, uh-huh. Now, when you think about Sweden and you think about you growing up there, what are the things that you think about? What are the things that you remember most about it?

THORBJORNSON: Well, my brother and sister. They died a couple of years ago. I used to live with him in Stockholm. My wife and I went to Sweden in 1969, and we visited my brother and my sister. She

lived in Varberg. He lived in Stockholm.

LEVINE: I see. Well, when you get together with your brother and sister, what things would you talk about that you remember?

THORBJORNSON: Oh, we probably talked about what happened years ago, but nothing special. I can't remember.

LEVINE: Can you remember when you came here what things were different than in Sweden, that struck you as being different in the United States than they were what you were used to?

THORBJORNSON: No, I don't think there's much difference. I went to Vinalhaven

LEVINE: Oh, you went to Vinalhaven when you came?

THORBJORNSON: We wrote to a fellow that I knew of to cut paving, in a way, but, and we got a job in Vinalhaven.

LEVINE: I see. Well, let's, let's go back. So in other words you were working on a ship and then you came to the United States.

THORBJORNSON: No, not through a ship. When I was in the United

States on a ship, we went back. But it was a Danish ship, and we went to Denmark and went home to Sweden. And we took, we come as immigrants, as passengers on the Stockholm liner.

LEVINE: Stockholm was the name of it?

THORBJORNSON: Stockholm, Swedish-American liner.

LEVINE: Do you remember what it was about the United States that made you want to come here?

THORBJORNSON: No, not especially. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Did you like it in Sweden?

THORBJORNSON: Huh? Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: You liked it there. So you weren't trying to get away from Sweden?

THORBJORNSON: I had nothing to get away from.

LEVINE: So you came here just because you thought you would like it better?

THORBJORNSON: No. I don't know. I just wanted to move. But I intended to come back home later, but, see, I happened to stay.

LEVINE: (she laughs) I see. So when you decided to come it was with a friend that you talked about it?

THORBJORNSON: Yeah. It was a friend. I used to show him around in Sweden. We come together.

LEVINE: And was the name of the ship the Stockholm?

THORBJORNSON: Yeah. It was the liner.

LEVINE: Oh, it was the Stockholm line.

THORBJORNSON: The Swedish-American line.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. And it left from Stockholm?

THORBJORNSON: No, it left from Goteberg.

LEVINE: Goteberg.

THORBJORNSON: On the west coast. Stockholm on the east coast.

LEVINE: I see. So how long did it take?

THORBJORNSON: On across? I think it was nine days. I'm not sure. But on the square rig it took us forty-five days.

LEVINE: And did, what happened, was it complicated to get your visa and to get ready to leave?

THORBJORNSON: No.

LEVINE: It didn't, how long did it take you to get everything in order once you decided you wanted to come?

THORBJORNSON: Oh, probably a month. We had to write for a passport and so on.

LEVINE: And when you left did people, how did you feel about leaving?

THORBJORNSON: I was used to leaving on a ship. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Oh, you left often. And also you expected to come back.

THORBJORNSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: So let's see. Were you a religious family when you were growing up?

THORBJORNSON: Well, my mother was religious, Lutheran.

LEVINE: Lutheran. And did you go to church and everything?

THORBJORNSON: Well, I did. When I was a kid we had to.

LEVINE: Oh. (she laughs) And then, but, like, did you celebrate religious holidays and things like that?

THORBJORNSON: Oh, yeah. Just like here, Christmas and Easter.

LEVINE: And, let's see. So when you came to this country do you remember at all what you expected?

THORBJORNSON: No. I'd been here before. I knew what to expect.

LEVINE: But when you were here before were you in New York?

THORBJORNSON: No. Norfolk, Virginia. We stayed there for probably a month, and then we had coal from there to Denmark.

LEVINE: Well, when you first saw the New York Harbor do you remember that on the ship? Did it mean anything in particular, or?

THORBJORNSON: I saw the Statue of Liberty and I . . .

LEVINE: Were the people all getting on deck when you came

into the Harbor to see the Statue and . . .

THORBJORNSON: What do you mean? If we, what do you mean? If we went up?

LEVINE: Up on deck to see the Statue?

THORBJORNSON: Oh, yeah. When we come into harbor most of them were up on deck.

LEVINE: Yeah. And what were people doing? Do you remember how people reacted?

THORBJORNSON: Doing?

LEVINE: Yeah. How, when they saw the Statue, were they . . .

THORBJORNSON: Oh, I don't know. (scratching noise is heard)
They just . . .

LEVINE: I'm sorry, I didn't . . .

THORBJORNSON: They just looked. I didn't hear any comments.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. And then how about Ellis Island?
Do you remember that place?

THORBJORNSON: Yeah, in a way. I remember we come in with the

Stockholm to dock in New York, and we have to have a small boat to go to the island.

LEVINE: Right. And then what, do you remember anything about that, about Ellis Island, about being there?

THORBJORNSON: No. We didn't stay there very long.
(scratching noise is heard)

LEVINE: How long?

THORBJORNSON: I don't know.

LEVINE: A few hours or something, do you think?

THORBJORNSON: Probably an hour or two.

LEVINE: And do you remember what, do you remember your impression what, when you saw that big hall at Ellis Island? Do you . . .

THORBJORNSON: I don't remember much of Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Do you remember being examined?

THORBJORNSON: Well, no. They didn't, I don't think they did.

LEVINE: Oh. And were you fed there? Did you have a

meal?

THORBJORNSON: No. Nothing.

LEVINE: And then where did you go from there?

THORBJORNSON: I headed for a Boston, I had an address to people in Boston, and we took there, the Fall River boat from New York to Rhode Island. Where was it? To Fall River. Then we rode up to I think it was South Station in Boston, and there was people there that took care of. My friend and I, we were going to leave, but (?). (scratching noise is heard) They hired a man, a buggy, you know, a horse.

LEVINE: A horse and buggy?

THORBJORNSON: Yeah, a horse and buggy. We were sitting on that. And we asked him to take us to Dorchester, and he wouldn't leave before he saw us, meet our friends. And, you know, I laugh when I think of it. People used to, we went to East Boston. A lot of people in the windows, waving. And we had derby hats, I remember. (he laughs)

LEVINE: You were tipping your hats? And who was the man

you, whose address did you have?

THORBJORNSON: Who?

LEVINE: Whose address?

THORBJORNSON: Oh, I forget now. He was a friend. We met him in Sweden. It was just him, and it was his relations we went to. His sister was married. I forgot his name now. We stayed there for a couple of days. Then we went to Vinalhaven.

LEVINE: I see. And they were just people that you would be able to stay with when we first got here?

THORBJORNSON: No. We stayed a few days.

LEVINE: And then did you know in advance that you were going to work at Vinalhaven?

THORBJORNSON: No. We, I think he was working, this man we met in Sweden. He was working in Vinalhaven and he got us a job.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So you knew when you came here that you would have a job once you got here.

THORBJORNSON: Not exactly. I wasn't looking for it. I was

looking for a yard job. But if I had stayed another week I would have had one. I wouldn't be cutting pavement. But that yard burned that summer.

LEVINE: Oh. Huh. Well, tell me, in other words, you were going to come here and try and find a job, but you didn't have a job already in mind.

THORBJORNSON: No.

LEVINE: I see. So the person you went to see in Dorchester told you about Vinalhaven.

THORBJORNSON: We know . . .

LEVINE: From Sweden.

THORBJORNSON: From Sweden.

LEVINE: I see. So how did you get to Vinalhaven, then?

THORBJORNSON: We had a Boston boat. We caught the boat from Boston to Rockland and we stayed. And then we had a boat from Rockland to Vinyl Haven. And I remember we went up on the street in Rockland and there was a little cafe and we had coffee and doughnut, two doughnuts for fifteen cents. You

can't get that now.

LEVINE: No. So did you then live on Vinalhaven and work there?

THORBJORNSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: For how long?

THORBJORNSON: 1924 I left there. But we used to leave, we used to leave, I used to go down to Boston and get the ship south to ride the fruit liners and go to Central America and Cuba and those places.

LEVINE: Oh. So you would work at the stone quarry on Vinalhaven.

THORBJORNSON: Not in the quarry. Cutting stone.

LEVINE: Cutting stone. And then you would sometimes go to Boston and get on a ship.

THORBJORNSON: In the winter.

LEVINE: Oh, in the winter. I see. I see. So then what happened after you did that until 1924?

THORBJORNSON: Well, I went, I got (?). We went, I went, I was on a ship for the winter, and then I come back to

Boston and I took a train up here to Rockland. I went to Black Island and got in over there.

LEVINE: Cutting?

THORBJORNSON: Paving, yeah.

LEVINE: I see. So can you think of anything that you could say about growing up in Sweden and then coming here and settling here?

THORBJORNSON: What do you mean?

LEVINE: I mean do you, why didn't you go back, for one thing?

THORBJORNSON: I don't know. I just happened to stay. And I met Edna.

LEVINE: I see. And then so you got married here and you just . . .

THORBJORNSON: And then I had to stay.

LEVINE: And do you have children?

THORBJORNSON: We have a boy.

LEVINE: And what's his name?

THORBJORNSON: Edward.

LEVINE: Edward. Well, is there anything else that you can think of about Sweden that you had mentioned, or about your mother or father? Were there any things that they taught you that you still, that you still live by? Any ideas that they instilled in you?

THORBJORNSON: Well, they always taught me to be honest, and I tried to be that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Are you the only person from your family that came here?

THORBJORNSON: That's right. I have some relations out West. I had an uncle, but that was before I was born I think he went to America. He left (?) in a covered wagon, but we never heard from him after that. And I have another uncle, my mother's brother. He was a farmer. He helped build the railroads out west.

LEVINE: But you never saw these relatives when you were here?

THORBJORNSON: I saw the one in Iowa. He would come and visit

us when I was fifteen years old.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you know, did he tell you stories about America?

THORBJORNSON: Not too much. He, what I remember, "If you please." (he laughs)

LEVINE: He said, "If you please."?

THORBJORNSON: Yeah. I caught on to that. And, well, he had (?). I don't know what happened. He died during the Spanish flu, and so did his children. But they had one, the boy was married. He was married. We used to get letters from her. Her name was Maude and she was a teacher of things, a schoolteacher.

LEVINE: Well, is there anything else that you would want to mention before we end?

THORBJORNSON: No, I don't think so. I think you have enough.

LEVINE: Well, thank you very much. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. (a scratching sound is heard)

THORBJORNSON: What are you going to do with this now?

LEVINE: Speaking with Mr. Eric Thorbjornson in Tenants Harbor, Maine on October 31, 1991.