

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

EI-691

GEORGE ANTON GUNDERSEN

BIRTH DATE: NOVEMBER 9, 1902

INTERVIEW DATE: OCTOBER 25, 1995

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 2/1999

NORWAY, 1921

AGE 17 (AS RECORDED IN THE INTERVIEW)

PASSAGE ON "THE STAVANGERFJORD"

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Kari Janusz, the social services person at the Norwegian Christian Home, was also present during the recording of this interview. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 2/3/1999.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, October 25th, 1995. I am at the Norwegian Christian Home and Health Care Facility with George Gundersen.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Mr. Gundersen came from Norway and he's going to tell us about his experiences. (Mr. Gundersen laughs)
Mr. Gundersen, what year did you come to America?

GUNDERSEN: 1921.

SIGRIST: And how old were you in 1921?

GUNDERSEN: I had my eighteenth birthday in this country.

SIGRIST: So, so you were seventeen on your way over to America.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. What is your birth date?

GUNDERSEN: The ninth day of November, 1902.

SIGRIST: And where in Norway were you born?

GUNDERSEN: I was born on an island where you called Flekkeroy
outside of Kristiansand in the southern part of
Norway.

SIGRIST: Can you spell the name of the island for me?

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

GUNDERSEN: Uh, Flekkeroy, they had a, I just got a paper from
the, F-L, uh, Flekkeroy...

SIGRIST: I, I should also say that Kari [Janusz], the social
services person here, is also with us and she has
spelled it for us. And it's F-L...

GUNDERSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...E-K-K-E-O, uh, R, E-R, then O with the line
through it...

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Y. Flekkeroy.

GUNDERSEN: Flekkeroy, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

GUNDERSEN: Flekkeroy.

KARI JANUSZ: Flekkeroy

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

SIGRIST: And it was an island, you said.

GUNDERSEN: It is.

SIGRIST: Yes, still is.

GUNDERSEN: It still is.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about growing up on that island.

GUNDERSEN: Well, I remember, I'll tell you something, I had two sisters and I was the oldest one. And we had three cows and we had thirty chickens and a pig, a couple of sheeps. And I had to work from morning to night, before I went to school. The milk went into the city and in the wintertime in the snow I had one, one pail in each hand and I go down to the, there was a little steamboat that was there at that time, bring the milk. And then, when I come back from school, I had to go and collect the empty can, you know.

SIGRIST: How do you milk a cow? Can you describe it for me?

GUNDERSEN: Of course. I milk a, I milk cows in this country.
You milk, yeah, and they left me with a, they left
me with a farm. I says, I says to the farmer, "You
never know me from Adam." "Never mind," he says,
I'll tell you that. So they left on a Friday and
come back on a Monday. I says, "Maybe you haven't
got no farm when you come back," I says. "Oh,
yes," he says, "I know you." "You do?" "I'll
tell you that when I come back." "Yeah?
Okay." How did, I, I was over in the field working
hoeing. And the dog, I said, "Now, you stay around
the house and watch the house." It was near the
highway there. So he did but one time he got
lonesome. Then he come home. "Did I tell you to go
back and stay there?" Yeah, so he did. Me and that
dog were like that. (he gestures) And when the farmer
come back, they were gone, "Now I'll tell you the
secret," he says, "why I hired you because I had a
lot of people working for me here. When that, when
that dog took a liking to you, " he, he says,
"then I know you are all right," see?

SIGRIST: And that all happened here in America?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, that happened in America, here, sure.

SIGRIST: Tell me, tell me more about growing up on the farm in
Norway. What, what were some of your other chores.
You mentioned the cows...

GUNDERSEN: Oh! Yeah, on the farm there, there was nothing,
nothing but fishermans on that island at that
time. And, and then I went down to the ice house
there when they, when they unload the mackeral and
we packed the mackeral in, put ice, put it on ice
and ship it. And, and then I worked down there. We
got thirteen cents, thirteen, uh, an hour. (he
laughs heartily)

SIGRIST: Those were different days then.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, oh, of course.

SIGRIST: Describe the house that you lived in on the farm in
Norway.

GUNDERSEN: Oh, that house, that was, the old house, it was an

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

old house that was, it was about three hundred years old. But my father tore it down and built a new one.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what year that was that he built the new house?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, let's see now, it was in 19--, 1913 I think, I think so.

SIGRIST: 1913.

GUNDERSEN: Then, then he, then after that he, he left for, for this country, went out on the west coast. He was a lumberjack out in the state of Washington.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about the first house that you lived in, the old house. What did it look like?

GUNDERSEN: It was an old, there was a big, there was a big parlor. And there was a, bedroom was upstairs. And all the heating was, you had, you had a, big pipe went from the stove up through the (?), there through, got to heat up the loft up there, see?

Yeah.

SIGRIST: And who slept upstairs?

GUNDERSEN: My father and mother, see? And we slept up there,
too. We had bunks there, you know, beds there,
see? And then my grandmother slept downstairs.

SIGRIST: Your grandmother lived with you?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Is that your father's mother?

GUNDERSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes. What do you remember about your grandmother?
What sticks out in your mind about your
grandmother?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, she was very nice, my grandmother. When I
start to go to school, I used to go in and ask her a
few things about when you start to write, you
know, and everything. And she helped me out,

too.

SIGRIST: What was your house made out of? What ddi they
make...

GUNDERSEN: Well, made, they were made out of logs, regular logs.

SIGRIST: Were they painted?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, they were. They all, most all them houses were
made out of logs, big log cabin. And they,
sometime they put panels on the, on the logs, you
know, and make it warmer that way, (you?) and
then they painted it and everything.

SIGRIST: What color was your house?

GUNDERSEN: Red. It was a, the new one, that was painted white
and we had a big basement there and a bake oven
and we were, Mom baked bread twice a month.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking in the family?

GUNDERSEN: My mother.

SIGRIST: And tell me some of the foods that you ate when you were a boy in Norway.

GUNDERSEN: I eat, well, we had, uh, salt meat. My father butchered a, the sheeps. He was a good butcher. And we salted that down and we salted down fish, mackeral and herring and stuff like that. And then we had potatoes. And then we had, we baked some kind of, I don't know what you call it here, it was just like a, big leaves. They call it flabola [ph]. There was, tastes like, they had a big stack of it, you know, they had a big, uh, I don't know how you call it, what do you? My grandmother on my mother's side, she was great for, for baking, for making flat bread and, and lepshah [ph]. You bake that. She could bake. They had a big, uh, what do you call it, you put it on a, on a tray down in the basement. Well, uh, I don't know, I don't know what do you call them.

SIGRIST: It was a kind of bread that she was making?

GUNDERSEN: She was making, she was making that. We used it for

the winter, you know. And we used to crush it up
and have it in milk and stuff like that. And then
she made lephshah [ph] and, yeah, but that house,
the old house, there was a big, when he, when my
father tore it down, it was a big puddle of water
all over there. They were built right on a, on a
rock. They didn't care how they build a house at
that time. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did the house have a name?

GUNDERSEN: No. They were, there was only, there was only the
name on the, on the village, what you call the
village, K-A (?).

SIGRIST: You mentioned earlier that your father slaughtered
the sheep.

GUNDERSEN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: How did your father slaughter a sheep? Can you
describe how he did it?

GUNDERSEN: Sure. That was easy. I, I sit on the stone, on a

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

bench holding the legs and he hit him in the head,
stuck him, got the blood out. Then we, then we
took the skin off, everything and took the guts
out, hanged him up, sure. And after that he, he cut
him up, we salted it. But sometimes we had two
sheeps. And he gave a lot of it away to the poor
people, people that didn't have much. He was, I, I
had to go around in different in different places
with, with meat, with meat I would go, nice steak
or whatever they wanted, yeah.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

GUNDERSEN: His name was Lars.

SIGRIST: Lars. And had he always been a farmer?

GUNDERSEN: No, he was a seaman. He went to sea. He went to sea
when, I don't know, ten years old he went to sea on
a sailing ship.

SIGRIST: Doing what? What was his work on the sailing ships?

GUNDERSEN: He was, he sailed before the masts for two years and

then they had nobody to cook so then he went into
the galley and, and cooked in the galley, see? And
they always had a pig on the ship. So one day one
of the sailors throw hot tea in the pig's eyes so
my father had to butcher the pig, see?

SIGRIST: Are there any other stories that you remember that
your father told you about his experiences when he
was on the sailing ships?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, there were a lot of, a lot of, I have, I don't
remember so many of them anymore but he was, he
was sailing and he was, then he, then he sailed
onto some English ship, too, out of Liverpool. And
then Mom was, Mom worked in Liverpool. He met
my mother over there. They had, she was there
three years and then he went back to Norway. She
didn't. When he come back, then they got
married.

SIGRIST: What year did they get married?

GUNDERSEN: Uh, wait a minute now, I think it was in, I was born
in 1902, I think they got married in 1900, see?

SIGRIST: What was your father's personality like? What was he like as a person?

GUNDERSEN: All right. He was okay.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that you remember about your father when you were a kid growing up?

GUNDERSEN: I went with him out fishing and I, we had lobster pots and pulling the lobster pots and out fishing with a hand (trawler?). We went way off shore and the weather was fine. We gots lots of fish.

SIGRIST: So even though he had a farm, he still did a lot of fishing.

GUNDERSEN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Yeah. What did he look like?

GUNDERSEN: What did he look like? Well, I wish I could show you what I had. I had some pictures of our, our home

there.

SIGRIST: Describe him in words. Describe what your father
looked like just using words.

GUNDERSEN: He, he had dark, curly hair and brown eyes, see? And
all of us got blue eyes after my mother, I guess,
but none got them after him. And he, when he was
in this country they didn't think he was a
Norwegian.

SIGRIST: Why did he come to America?

GUNDERSEN: Because, he come to America so he could pay off the
debt on the house because, you see, and then he
was a lumberjack in the state of Washington.

SIGRIST: So where did he get the money to build the house?

GUNDERSEN: He borrowed it.

SIGRIST: From whom?

GUNDERSEN: From the bank. They were, the bank took the farm.

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

They, they took the farm for, so he payed it off
so much a week. I would be, uh, every month, I
guess what it was.

SIGRIST: And he felt that he could make more money if he went
to America?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, yeah. That's what everybody did. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

GUNDERSEN: Rakel.

SIGRIST: (misunderstanding him) How do you spell "Ragel?"

GUNDERSEN: Rakel.

SIGRIST: Oh, like Rachel.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, right.

SIGRIST: R-A-C-H, no, Kari [Janusz] says it R-A-K-E-L. Rakel.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, Rakel.

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

SIGRIST: Yeah. What was her maiden name?

GUNDERSEN: Ingebretsen, right? Rakel Ingebretsen.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

GUNDERSEN: Ingebretsen?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

GUNDERSEN: I don't know if I can spell it.

SIGRIST: Let's see. Okay, Kari [Janusz] is holding it up.
It's I-N-G-E-B-R-E-T-S-E-N, Ingebretsen.

GUNDERSEN: Ingebretsen. That is correct.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what you remember about
your mother in Norway.

GUNDERSEN: My mother come from, she come from the, from another
island near the city of Mandal. And then they
moved from there to, to the, to the mainland in

another place you call Sogne and, because the
grandfather don't like that island (?) He was
a sailmaker. He sailed the sea as a sailmaker,
Grandpa, my mother's father, and my uncle sailed
with him from when he was fourteen years old until
he was twenty one. And then he went out on a
different ship when he was grown up, or go up for
his mate's licence.

SIGRIST: His mate's licence?

GUNDERSEN: Yes. But then he fell overboard in the Biscay and
got lost. He went on the different ships. So
Grandpa went out again but they told him not to
go out to sea again. And he went out to sea and he
took sick, sick, sick on the ship and died on the
ship and was buried at sea, see?

SIGRIST: So that was the last time you grandfather went out.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, that was the last time. I can just barely
remember him. But he took me on the arm there one
time and (?). Uh, it's hard for me to remember
all this but...

SIGRIST: It's a long time ago.

GUNDERSEN: It is.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Tell me about what your mother was like as a
person.

GUNDERSEN: Very good.

SIGRIST: What are some of the things that you remember her
doing when you were a child? You mentioned
cooking...

GUNDERSEN: Yes, she cooked and she had to take care of the cows
and everything. And I, I had to go, we had two
big barrels in the barn in the winter time and I
had to fill them full of water, see?

SIGRIST: And what was the water used for?

GUNDERSEN: For the cows, they had to have water, see? And after
we cut the hay, I cut the hay like this. (he
gestures) I cut a lot of hay.

SIGRIST: What did you cut the hay with?

GUNDERSEN: With a sickle. (he pronounces it with a long "i", he gestures as he speaks) We had, we had a, (the rest up here?) and you hold on one hand and one hand goes like this. Oh I, I can do that yet. I did that up in Buffalo [NY] one time. The guy was cutting but he had a little bit difference here than the one we had because he had a (wrist?) right on, on the end so there was, oh, I cut plenty of hay.

SIGRIST: Did you have any machines on the farm in Norway?

GUNDERSEN: Not when I was growing up but they, but now they...

SIGRIST: Now they do but not when you were there.

GUNDERSEN: No.

SIGRIST: No.

GUNDERSEN: No. When, when we went out fishing, we had no motor.

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

Now everybody has got a motor. You had to row,
row.

SIGRIST: And what kind of fish did you catch?

GUNDERSEN: Codfish. Codfish and, and sometimes, I guess,
halibut, codfish and ling [ph].

SIGRIST: Ling [ph]?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, they, they called it out, I forgot what they
call it here. I used to know but now I get so
forgetful.

SIGRIST: You're doing a great job. You're not being forgetful
at all really. (Mr. Gundersen laughs) Tell me
about religion. What religion were you in Norway?

GUNDERSEN: Lutheran.

SIGRIST: And were your, were, did you come from a religious
family?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Who was more religious in the family?

GUNDERSEN: Well, they were all, the same they were. They were
eager to go to church. We had to go into the
mainland and walk through the city and walked all
the way up where the church was, see?

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the church on the
mainland?

GUNDERSEN: Well, it was a nice, nice church that was built in
19--, in 900.

SIGRIST: 1900?

GUNDERSEN: 900!

SIGRIST: Oh, in 900.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh, so it was an old church.

GUNDERSEN: Yes, it certainly was.

SIGRIST: Yes.

GUNDERSEN: But it was a beautiful church. But, you see, before they had a, it was beautiful painted but it was, some, somebody had painted it all over again. But now they come to find out so they washed it so all the original painting come, all the apostles and everything was painted there. And it was really beautiful.

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion at home?

GUNDERSEN: Well, we had that in school. We had that in school. When we went to school, we had to, we had to learn the, the book from the Bible, see?

SIGRIST: Did you do anything at, at the farm, at home? Did you pray or did you...?

GUNDERSEN: Oh, yeah, you always did. You couldn't sit down and, and eat unless you, you prayed.

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

SIGRIST: Do you, do you remember any of those prayers?

GUNDERSEN: You bet your life I do.

SIGRIST: Could you say, could you say them for us on tape in
Norwegian?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Go ahead.

GUNDERSEN: (he recites a prayer in Norwegian)

SIGRIST: Thank you. Do you remember any others?

GUNDERSEN: No, well, after you had, had your meal, then you
said, I can't do it, uh, if I had knowed this, (he
recites a prayer in Norwegian). That's what you
said after you had eaten, see?

SIGRIST: Thank you, thank you. Who was the most religious in
your family?

GUNDERSEN: Well, I, I don't know. They, they always, you see,

we went to church early in the morning. We had to go into Kristiansand and walk up, all the way up to the church at that time. And then we had to be home. Me and father went, we left home four o'clock in the morning on Christmas time and (?) and everyting and sometimes the pastor come out on the island. We had a little, uh, house there, what do they call it, (Norwegian), (pilot?) house, you know. But now, when I was growing up, we were only nine hundred people on the island. Of course, now they build a tunnel from the mainland to the island. And now there is seventeen hundred people on the island. It's all built up. There's not a cow on the island no more, nothing.

SIGRIST: But when you lived there, everyone got to the mainland by boat.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, sure.

SIGRIST: Right. What, what can you tell me about school in Norway? What do you remember about going to school?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, there was, the school was pretty good.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you began school?

GUNDERSEN: I'd say I was seven, seven years old.

SIGRIST: And what was your favorite subject as you were growing up?

GUNDERSEN: Well, you had, uh, mathe--, you had mathematics and writing and reading and everything. And you had to, the schoolteacher would hear you and the lesson that you could, if you know the, if you know it, see? You had a book from the Bible you had to learn. Now, when we got the book (?).

SIGRIST: Do you remember on eof your teachers from your childhood?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, we had one lady teacher and one man teacher. There was only two teachers. There aren't many teachers right now.

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

SIGRIST: Well, let's, let's talk about when you were there.
There was just a man and a woman.

GUNDERSEN: That's right.

SIGRIST: And, and why do you remember them? Why do they stick
out in your mind?

GUNDERSEN: Why I remember them? Because I often been wondering
about that, see? They were, the man teacher, he
was uncle to (?) when I went to school. So he
helped them out and the rest of them he didn't care
a hoot about it, no. And the other, the lady, was
the same way. I, I learned more here since I came
to this, and you know what I was after when I came
to the States so I could get a job so I could to
evening school, but no, I had to go to sea.

SIGRIST: Well, we'll, we'll talk about that once we get you to
America. When you were growing up in Norway, what,
what do you remember about the period during
World War One, 1914-1918.

GUNDERSEN: You know, I remember very well.

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

SIGRIST: Can you tell us what you remember about that time?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, they took, they took our house, the soldiers,
that new house. We had a big basement there and
they cooked there and I forgot how many was, lived
up there. And, and lots of them. And they
had one, two rooms downstairs and we only had one
room together.

SIGRIST: What was it like having to share your house with the
soldiers?

GUNDERSEN: No, it was no good.

SIGRIST: Who, what soldiers were they? What...

GUNDERSEN: They were Norwegians. They were Norwegian soldiers
but Norway was not in war at that time.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Why did they do that then? Why did they take your...

GUNDERSEN: Well, they have to, they have to have them out there for, they watch everything, that no enemy was landed there anywhere. So they, they blowed up the sailing ships. They were burning, I, I saw it, like a Christmas tree, put fire to them, all wooden. So the tugboat went out at night and got a hold of one, towed it into, to an island where nobody lived there. And tied it up there. And she lay there and burned for, for a long time. And after she was burned out, they towed her into the city and they, they were all copper them, them wooden ships. They put copper on the, on the bottoms so they wasn't, they were leaking so much. So they, they sold for over twenty thousand crowns, the copper from the old wooden ship.

SIGRIST: What, what else sticks out in your mind from that time period, uh, your own experience? You were sharing the house with the soldiers.

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

GUNDERSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: How, who...

GUNDERSEN: The government took it. We couldn't do nothing.
they just took it. That's all.

SIGRIST: Who, who fed the soldiers?

GUNDERSEN: Huh?

SIGRIST: Who fed the soldiers?

GUNDERSEN: The government.

SIGRIST: So your mother wasn't responsible for that.

GUNDERSEN: No, no, no, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: How did the soldiers treat you? You were a young man
at that time.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah. They, no, they were pretty good. Had a, we
had a kitchen, we had a stove. Mom, Mom did the

cooking there and everything and we eat there in
the kitchen. And then we had a one big room there
where we, me and Mom and two sisters, see?

SIGRIST: That's right, because your father is already in
 America.

GUNDERSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yeah, he's already here. What are the names of your
 two sisters?

GUNDERSEN: My two sisters was, the youngest one was Louise and
 the other one was, uh, Anna Louise, and the other
one was Aletta [ph].

SIGRIST: So Anna Louise is the younger sister.

GUNDERSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And Aletta [ph]?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Aletta [ph].

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: She's the older sister.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Are you the oldest of the three children?

GUNDERSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: So they're younger than you are.

GUNDERSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: How did the soldiers treat your sisters?

GUNDERSEN: Oh, they didn't bother them one bit. No, we went to
school and minded our own business and milked the
cows and took care of everything.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when World War One was over?

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

GUNDERSEN: Yes, I do.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

GUNDERSEN: I remember it was 1918, the war was over. (he pauses)
1918, yeah. And when I come, when I immigrated to
the United States to come through Ellis Island and
you had to have, you had a check for twenty five
crowns, twenty five dollars, see? And you had
to, you signed that check on Ellis Island so, so I
went. I signed the check and they cashed it
right there and then I took the train from there
to Boston. I couldn't get no jobs there. Nobody
wanted to give me a job. He says, "You go back
to school," he says. "Yeah, I wish I could," I
says. But the people that I lived with in Boston,
they didn't give a hoot about me. Forget it.

SIGRIST: Let's, let's get you to America first. Tell me what
you had to do to get ready to leave Norway.

GUNDERSEN: Had to do? Well, you bought the ticket.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much your ticket was?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, I think it was five hundred crowns. And, uh, you bought the ticket and then, I guess, you had to get the pass and everything. And they took you into, to Oslo, took you up to the America Consul in Oslo, looked your papers over before you could a ship. And everything was okay.

SIGRIST: Did you have to undergo any kind of medical examinations in Norway?

GUNDERSEN: Oh, yes, oh, yes, they did.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

GUNDERSEN: The doctor (?) in, on, uh, the American Embassy, they checked you over to see if that you, you are okay, and everywhere, see? And he says, "You are ready to go."

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about your desire to go to America?

GUNDERSEN: Well, (he laughs), they, they couldn't stop me. But

my, my father went home (?) and my father (?)
fifty, he was fifty, fifty when, fifty two and a
half when he died.

SIGRIST: Did he come back to Norway before you left for
America?

GUNDERSEN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Oh, so he had already come back.

GUNDERSEN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: So your mother and your father are both in Norway...

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...when you left to come to America.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Yes. Why did you want to come to America?

GUNDERSEN: Because I was like everybody else, because you can

make some more money. You know, at that time you got around, for a dollar you got about, I think you got about, for a dollar I think you got about eight, eight crowns for a dollar. It was a lot of money then. Everybody went (flocking?) over, over here to, but a lot of people, they had somebody to go to. And they had jobs to go to. I had nothing.

SIGRIST: What did you think you would find when you got to America? What did you expect to find in America when you got here?

GUNDERSEN: Well, I expect to find a job. That's what I did. So I went idle here for about six months. So my father wrote to me. he says, "You better come back home." I says, "No. I've been idle now for six months. I'm going to stay here for another six months." By then, I got a job at, uh, T.A. Scott Racking Company.

SIGRIST: The T.S. Scott...

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, Racking Comany.

SIGRIST: Racking?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah. They shipped from the shore or, or anything like that they did. They did, they did all kinds of work, (duct?) building and everything.

SIGRIST: And where was that?

GUNDERSEN: In, in Boston.

SIGRIST: In Boston.

GUNDERSEN: Boston, Massachusetts. I worked there until the job was finished, see?

SIGRIST: What, what did you pack to take with you? When you were in Norway, what did you pack to take to America?

GUNDERSEN: Oh, not much. A couple of suits and a hat and that's all.

SIGRIST: Did you take an object with you that was going to be

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

a memento of your life in Norway?

GUNDERSEN: No.

SIGRIST: Did, did anyone give a, a little "good bye" party for you before you left?

GUNDERSEN: No, no.

SIGRIST: No. What time of the year is it that you left to come to America?

GUNDERSEN: In the spring.

SIGRIST: And this is the spring of what year?

GUNDERSEN: 1921.

SIGRIST: 1921. And where did you have to go to get on the ship?

GUNDERSEN: I had to go to Oslo, yeah.

SIGRIST: And how did you get to Oslo? From your town, how did

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

you get to Oslo?

GUNDERSEN: There was a coast steamer. There was a passenger ship running on the coast at that time all over. Now that's all done away with, too.

SIGRIST: So you took, you took a, a boat to Oslo.

GUNDERSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And then how long were you in Oslo before you got on the big ship?

GUNDERSEN: No, we had to go to through the, the American Consul and everything and checked all the papers over and stamped the papers that you were ready to go.

SIGRIST: And, uh, how long did that take?

GUNDERSEN: Uh, it would take you about a day or so. Everybody has to go through the same, see?

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship that you took, the big ship?

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

GUNDERSEN: S.S. Stavangerfjord, Stavangerfjord.

SIGRIST: Had you ever been on a ship as large as the
Stavangerfjord before?

GUNDERSEN: No, but I was on a little coast (twice?). We went
between and we tied up every night. We were
fireman on her. We were passengers and, and
(firemen?) and everything. I was up six o'clock
in the morning, oil the engines, oil the (winds?)
and everything. And then we got sometimes
finished because after World War One the coal was
scarce, so we, we burned wood, yes.

SIGRIST: To make the ship go?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, yeah, feed, feed the boiler. We had coal
enough to bank the fire at night. Otherwise, we
fired it with wood but she steamed all right.

SIGRIST: Did any members of your family go with you to Oslo to
say "good bye?"

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, my father did.

SIGRIST: Tell me about, describe saying "good bye" to your
father when you were getting on the ship.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, he stood on the dock there and, and was waving
to me and that's it.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep on the ship?

GUNDERSEN: Oh, we had nice, we had a nice bunk.

SIGRIST: Who is "we?"

GUNDERSEN: I think, I think we were four man in, in the room
there, see? But we had nice, and they fed you,
they fed you pretty good.

SIGRIST: That's a nice ship, the Stavangerfjord.

GUNDERSEN: Yes, oh yeah, it is.

SIGRIST: How long did the trip take across the Atlantic?

GUNDERSEN: It took you about ten days.

SIGRIST: Ten days. And what sticks out in your mind about that trip on the ship.

GUNDERSEN: (he laughs) I don't know. I had a lot of activity, you know, you, there was always something to do. And, and the mealtime come and, and everything.

SIGRIST: What kind of food did they feed you? Do you remember?

GUNDERSEN: They feed you good.

SIGRIST: Yes.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did they feed you anything that you had never seen before?

GUNDERSEN: No. They feed you, you had, you had soup and, and meat and sometimes you had fish, different things.

SIGRIST: Were, who, who were the other passengers on the ship?
What were they, were they all Norwegians traveling?

GUNDERSEN: No, there were, there were different passengers on
the, there were Swedes and, and, uh, Fins and
everythings. And you know, uh, when we came
they found out they had lice on them. So they
separated them and they worked hard to, to get
them fumigated before we got in to America
because if they didn't, they would have
quarantined the whole ship and everybody in
there, too.

SIGRIST: Did you have to be fumigated?

GUNDERSEN: No.

SIGRIST: No, it was another group of people.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

GUNDERSEN: No, we were clean. You had to, we had to go to the

doctor and he examined you and saw that you were
all right. "No," he says, "that's nothing to be
ashamed of." He says, "I had lice," he says,
"when I, when I was a kid," (he laughs) the doctor
said, "so don't be worrying about that." No, we
were clean. And we came in and went through Ellis
Island, they took us off on a, on a ferry boat to
it from 20--, 30th Street, Brooklyn. That's
where they docked at that time. Then they took
us over to Ellis Island on a little, a little
steamer.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about Ellis Island and that
experience. You, you mentioned already about
signing the check...

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...so that you could get money. What else happened
at Ellis Island?

GUNDERSEN: What else happened? Well, you saw all kinds of
people from everywhere. Some people got, have to
ship them back if they find something wrong with

them. They were very strict at that time. But we, we were all right. And they checked you over and everything. And after we were finished on Ellis Island, we went over to the Barge Office, over to South Street, and they took, took you up in a dark room and they took, took your clothes off and put a light on you. "Now, now you are ready to go." You go, okay, see?

SIGRIST: And that happened at the Barge Office?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah, that's interesting.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah. Over, over in South Street.

SIGRIST: Right, on Battery Park, right there.

GUNDERSEN: That's, that's correct, that's correct.

SIGRIST: But it's interesting that they, they did part of your processing at Ellis Island and then they took you to the Barge Office.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, yes. And then they put that strong light on
you.

SIGRIST: What were they looking for?

GUNDERSEN: They were looking for lice. That's what they were
looking for but they find out that you're okay,
see?

SIGRIST: When the ship first came into New York Harbor, did
you go by the Statue of Liberty?

GUNDERSEN: Of course you did. You had, you had to anchor up in
a quarantine, right out by Fort Lafayette. And
then, what do you call that fort there on Staten
Island?

SIGRIST: Did, did you know what the Statue of Liberty was?

GUNDERSEN: No, no, I had never seen it before but I know, I know
who it was because we got that from France. France
built that, the Statue of Liberty, see?

EI-691/GUNDERSEN

SIGRIST: How long were you at Ellis Island?

GUNDERSEN: No, it wasn't long.

SIGRIST: How long? A couple hours?

GUNDERSEN: We stayed, yeah, could be two, three hours anyway.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if they asked you any questions when you were there?

GUNDERSEN: No.

SIGRIST: No.

GUNDERSEN: No, not that I know of, so we, uh, no, then, then we were ready to go. So the guy says to me, "How are you going go?" Well, you had a Fall River Line (Mr. Sigrist says something unintelligible to Kari Janusz off-mike) but they went, but we took the train. There was another guying going to Boston. So he says, in Norwegian I meant, "No," he says, "I'm going to Boston, too, so you stick with me," he says. So we went on the train to Boston.

So they were selling apples there, beautiful apples. I bought, I bought two apples, ten cents apiece. I gave him one and I had one. (he laughs) (?) We come in, we come into South Station in, in Boston and then we took a, I forgot how it, we went over. And he lived in East Boston with a family there.

SIGRIST: How did you find a place to live in Boston?

GUNDERSEN: Now, you see, they had to have an address, so, so they, that's the address that they were, a friend of my mother from the old country, see? So I stayed there with them.

SIGRIST: So you actually had this address with you.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: I see.

GUNDERSEN: You have to have that. You have to have that.

SIGRIST: When you, when you were going through New York City

to get on the train and then on the train to Boston,
in that, in that time did you see anything that
you had never seen before? Anything that was new
to you?

GUNDERSEN: Well, we, we saw the Statue of Liberty when we come
in.

SIGRIST: Yes.

GUNDERSEN: You had to pass that.

SIGRIST: What about in New York City or going up to Boston?

GUNDERSEN: Well, I can't (he pauses), you see, what the, well,
it got dark after that. At night, you see, you
didn't see much.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you tell me how you learned English?

GUNDERSEN: How do I learn English?

SIGRIST: How did you learn English? When you got to America,
how did you learn to speak English?

GUNDERSEN: Uh, I picked it up the best I could. So, when I started to work, you see, as I told you, I worked for T.A. Scott Racking Company and I lost that finger in Boston. (he gestures) So I got a hundred and twenty crowns for that, for that joint.

SIGRIST: And that's, that's your...

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...ring finger on your left hand.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. How did, how did that happen?

GUNDERSEN: I got it in the carburetor. I says, I said to Jack, "For goodness sake," I said, "I got my finger in there. Turn it back," I says. I slipped and the mud was slippery there. Oh, I had this one in, too (he gestures), but it took that one off. Then he took me up to High--, what is that,

Haymarket Police Station. Then they started to (he
gestures wrapping his hand), I says, "Give me that.
I can get the grease off better myself." So
I got some turpentine or whatever it was, so I,
"Oh," he says, "Now you're doing all right."
"Yeah, I got it pretty clean," I says. Yeah, so
they gave me a couple of drops in there and then
they sewed it up.

SIGRIST: How long had you been in America when that happened?

GUNDERSEN: Oh, I hadn't been here that long, but I just started
to work then.

SIGRIST: You had just started working.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, after I had gone idle for six months. I got a
job at T.A. Scott.

SIGRIST: When you say you were idle for six months, you were
looking for work at that time?

GUNDERSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What were some of the jobs that you tried to get during that six months?

GUNDERSEN: Well, I, I tried to get a job because I was, I sailed on the coast home as a fireman. I told you that. And then I, I tried to get a job here because I didn't have no, no experience in carpenter work or anything like that like most of them did. So I, oh yeah, and then that job was finished so I went, I went down to Maverick Square in Boston, in East Boston.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the place?

GUNDERSEN: Maverick Square. So I met, I met this Swede. And he was talking to another Swede. So the other Swede says, "Do you know any firemen?" "Yes," I says, "I do. But do you know of any jobs?" He says, "Yes, I do." He says, "there will be a job down in Quincy on a tug named Nahanada [ph]. So you go right down there now." So I went over to South Station, I took the train down to Quincy and I went down to Shepherd's Coal Dock. And I waited there and another tug come in. So the

captain says, "Are you waiting for the Nahanada
[ph]?" I says, "Yes." "You can go home and come
back here in the morning. She wouldn't be in
here before in the morning." I says, "Oh, okay." So
I did. And I went down there early in the morning.

And here I met the guy. I says, "Are you from the tug
Nahanada [ph]?" He says, "Yes. The chief is sitting
on the bow deck. You'll see him when you get
there." "Okay." So I went down there. I saw the
chief. I says, "Are you, are you on the, are you
the chief?" "Yes." "Well, I'm looking for the
job." "Now," he says, "I want to know what tug
you've been on before." So I says, I says, "I was on
the H.P. Weiss [ph] when we towed all this
equipment down from Portland, Maine to Quincy."
"Were you on that one?" I says, "Yes." "The job
is yours," he says. I had eighty dollars a month
and our food, and we lived good.

SIGRIST: Did you live on the tug?

GUNDERSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

GUNDERSEN: Yes, sure, yes.

SIGRIST: Did you send money back to Norway?

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, I send some. I send some and saved some. I said, "I've got to got to save some and save some." And my sister was going to be confirmed and I send home, I send home nice, send her a nice dress, you know and the same with the other one. I bought some silk. So they were well pleased with that. But then there was a place in East Boston you could send money through. And then they had a Seaman's Church in East Boston. I sent home two hundred crowns for my sisters and they never got it. So I (even asked him?). Now I says, "Can you tell me why they didn't get that money I, I sent through you?" "Oh," he says, "they're going to get it now. They're going to get it now." "They better get it now," I says, "otherwise, I'm going to somebody else." I said, "My father was in this country." I said, "He knows the rules and regulations here." I says, "If you don't cough up that money," I says, "and, and send it home..." So, they got it

around Christmas time, see? Finally they got
it but he was a crook. A lot of seamen send money
through there and they never got it. He stole
it.

SIGRIST: That leads me to ask you, did you ever experience
other instances of where, prejudice against you
because you were an immigrant or people taking
advantage of you because you were...

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, they did one time. I, I got a little job there
and they tried to cheat me out of two days pay. So
I says, "Oh, ne," I says, "that doesn't go." He
says to me, "Oh, yes," he says. I says, "Listen, me
and (Oscar?) worked on this tug the same day
and now you're trying to cheat me out of two
days pay? Forget it. Now I'm going to go out and
get ahold of somebody," I says. "Oh," he
says. Oh, then he called the secretary. "Oh," he
says, "oh, that's, you won't do it," he says.
"You're trying to cheat me out of two days pay.
Me and (Oscar?) started here the same day." Oh,
yeah, see? So that was finished. So then, when I
went on the tug Nahanada [ph], that was before I

went on the tug Nahanada [ph].

SIGRIST: Mr. Gundersen, we need to end now. We're all out of
time.

GUNDERSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: We've, we've been talking for a whole hour now.

GUNDERSEN: Have we?

SIGRIST: Yes. But I want to thank you very much for letting
me ask you questions. (Mr. Gundersen laughs) You
have a great memory. You remember all kinds of
stuff. (Mr. Gundersen laughs) This is Paul
Sigrist signing off with George Gundersen on
October 25th, 1995 in Brooklyn at the
Norwegian Christian Home and Health Care
Facility. Thank you very much, sir.

GUNDERSEN: You're welcome.