

EI-796/RIERSON

EI-796

ANN ELIZABETH (ANNA ELIZABET) NILSSON RIERSON

BIRTH DATE: JANUARY 20, 1915

INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 30, 1996

RUNNING TIME: 1:00:24

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL SIGRIST, JR., 11/1998

SWEDEN, 1920

AGE 5

PASSAGE ON "THE OSCAR II"

SIGRIST: Good morning, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, August 30th, 1996.

I'm in West Milford, New Jersey and I'm here with Ann Rierson. Mrs. Rierson came from Sweden in 1920 when she was five years old. Present also are various family members and a dog named Jingles. And the tape may also pick up some traffic noise in the back. Mrs. Rierson, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

RIERSON: January 20th, 1915.

SIGRIST: And what was the name that you were born with in Sweden?

RIERSON: Anna Elizabet Nilsson.

SIGRIST: N-E-L...

RIERSON: (correcting Mr. Sigrist) N-I-L-S-S-O-N.

SIGRIST: And Elizabeth, is Elizabeth that was in Swedish?

RIERSON: No, it's Elizabet, without the "H."

SIGRIST: But everything else is the same?

RIERSON: Uh huh.

SIGRIST: Okay. And where were you born in Sweden?

south
RIERSON: In Titemte, is the name of the village which is
of Malmo.

SIGRIST: Can you spell the name of the village first, please?

RIERSON: T-I-T-E-M-T-E.

SIGRIST: And then the name of the area.

RIERSON: That's in Skane, south of Malmo.

SIGRIST: Okay, spell Malmo first for me.

RIERSON: M-A-L-M-O. That's "O" with two dots over it. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: And then Skane.

RIERSON: S-K-A-N-E, with a circle over the "A."

of
SIGRIST: And can you tell me where in the country, what part
Sweden is this?

RIERSON: That's in the very southern part of Sweden.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you know anything about your birth? Did you ever hear a story about the day you were born?

RIERSON: Yes. (she clears her throat) Of course, they didn't have doctors then. They had the barna morska, which is "the children's nurse."

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

RIERSON: B-A-R-N-A, M-O-R-S-K-A.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

RIERSON: And my father was in the service and my mother's mother had to walk down the hill to get to the house where my mother was waiting me to be delivered. (she clears her throat) And it was icy, so she had to take off her shoes and walk in her stocking feet so she wouldn't slip on the ice going down the hill to the house. And I was delivered by the nurse and everything went well.

you
SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you what kind of a baby were?

RIERSON: No, no.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the village itself?

to
RIERSON: It was beside a little lake and all the women used go down the hill to the lake and wash clothes on the banks and visit while they did their laundry. And my mother worked part time in the beet fields, the sugar beet fields. The women would contract for a certain amount of beet crop and they would take care of first the planting, the thinning of the plants and then the hoeing to keep the weeds down and then the harvesting. And they, that's how they earned their money.

SIGRIST: Was there a special way that sugar beets were harvested that you know of?

RIERSON: No. They did it the hard way, by hand. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: And then what would happen with the sugar beets?

RIERSON: Then they went on to the factory and then turned into sugar.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the buildings in the town, the village?

RIERSON: I, I've been back there often.

SIGRIST: As a child, though, what, what do you remember about the actual village itself?

RIERSON: (an airplane can be heard in the background) Well, I don't remember too much about it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the house that you lived in?

RIERSON: (she clears her throat) We lived in a duplex and there was a family next door that had a daughter my age. And when we left to go to America, I had to part

with my doll house. And that friend of mine, that little girl got the doll house. And then they auctioned off the rest of the things. And my mother was heartbroken because she didn't really want to leave her family and go to America.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your doll house for me?

RIERSON: No. It must have been about a yard high and very plain. But it was wonderful to a little girl of five.

SIGRIST: Do you know where it came from?

RIERSON: Well, my father built it.

SIGRIST: Is there a, a story associated with your father building the doll house or giving it to you, or...?

RIERSON: No, not really. It was, I remember that it was a wonderful thing and when we had destructive children come to visit us, why, it was off limits. We couldn't play with the doll house then.

SIGRIST: Who were the destructive children?

RIERSON: (she laughs) Well, neighborhood children, you know.

SIGRIST: I see, I see. All right, so you mentioned the house was a duplex. Do you remember what the house was build out of?

RIERSON: It was, it was brick, red brick.

SIGRIST: And what was the location of the house itself? Was it in the village, out of the village...?

RIERSON: It was out of the village. When, it seemed to me that there was a road that went by right in front of the house. But there were no stores in the immediate vicinity.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how many rooms your part of the duplex had?

RIERSON: There was a kitchen and the living room and there may have been one bedroom. But that would be all.

SIGRIST: And do you remember any of the furniture in the house? What sticks out in your mind about what was actually in the house?

table

RIERSON: I remember that we had this table, a big, square
in the middle of the room. And Mother had a red
tablecloth that was handwoven that always lay on that
table. And it was so bright and cheerful. And then
she had a blue flowerpot. She said that when she got
married, her parents were so poor they could not
afford a gift. So her mother said, "You look around
the house, Elvira, and see if there's something here
you would like. And that will be your wedding gift."
So she took the bright blue flower pot. And she
handed that down to me when she was still living.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

RIERSON: Elvira.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

RIERSON: Johansson.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

RIERSON: J-O-H-A-N-S-S-O-N.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about your mother's family
background?

RIERSON: Well, she had, she came from a big family. And her

father worked at the brick factory. And he always brought home his paycheck. But he loved his liquor and he had a lot of drinking buddies. And my grandmother was the most patient woman in the world. She put up with all of this and got along just fine. And, uh...

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

RIERSON: No, but they, my father was in the service and his family were wealthier than my mother's family. And so his people really didn't approve of the marriage. But, uh, that's about it. Mother's family was outgoing and busy and happy, you know. The others, they were more sedate.

the
SIGRIST: You said, you mentioned the wonderful story about flowerpot. Do you know anything else about the marriage ceremony itself, or any of the details like when it happened and anything that your mother or father might have told you about the ceremony or the circumstances surrounding the ceremony?

RIERSON: No, I don't think so. I don't even think we have a wedding picture.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year they were married?

RIERSON: Yes, they were married in 1914. Yes, I was born in 1915.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

RIERSON: His Swedish name was Anders, A-N-D-E-R-S. But when he came to America, they Americanized it to Andrew.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about his background. You said his family was a little bit wealthier.

RIERSON: Yes. He was in the service when I was born. You know, in Sweden they had compulsory military service. And I don't know, oh, he worked also in the same brick factory as my grandfather on my, the grandfather on my mother's side. The grandfather on my father's side was a farmer and had owned farmlands.

SIGRIST: What was your father's personality like?

RIERSON: He was quiet and, uh, I don't know. (she laughs)
The, the mothers always took care of the children. We didn't see too much of my dad except, you know, at mealtime and so forth. (children's voices can be heard

in the background)

SIGRIST: That was going to be my next question. What recollections do you have of your interaction with your father in Sweden?

RIERSON: I remember sitting on his lap when they played cards and pulling in the money when he won, and counting it and stacking it and playing with it. That was about the only close contact I remember having with him.

SIGRIST: What about you mother's personality? What was, what was she like as a person?

RIERSON: Well, she was a manager but she, if she had had an education, she would have gotten to be president. I tell you, she was, she was a sharp one. And what she did, she did well. And for not having an education, she taught herself English and wrote letters in English without having any education after she got here.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me some of your mother's jobs, tasks in the house in Sweden? What was she responsible for?

RIERSON: Well, she did the cooking and the cleaning and the

laundry just like, like all women do in their homes.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about cooking a little bit, in Sweden, and the process and the types of foods that you ate?

RIERSON: Oh. (she clears her throat) Her rice pudding is one that, is the recipe that has gone down through all the generations, so even my grandchildren make rice pudding like Elvira did. And Swedish meatballs and, uh, sylta. That's head cheese, S-Y-L-T-A, when they butchered. And liver sausage when they butchered a pig. And, uh, she, she was a very good cook.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for us on tape, sort of for posterity, how your mother made rice pudding?

RIERSON: (she laughs) Well, she put the rice pudding in, she started with milk and put the rice grains in with a dash of salt and a little sugar and, and a stick of cinnamon. And then she simmered, not quite simmer, lower than simmer for about two hours. And that's rice pudding.

SIGRIST: And what, what occasion would you eat that?

RIERSON: That was always brought to women when they had a new baby. That was a, and for birthdays they had rice

pudding.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. Did you have brothers and
sisters
in Sweden?

RIERSON: No.

SIGRIST: No. Tell me what you were like as a little girl, if
you had to describe yourself.

RIERSON: I was a very shy child and, of course, the spoiled
darling of the grandparents because I was the first
grandchild. And I was pretty, too. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Is there a story that would, that would reflect how
you were spoiled by the grandparents?

RIERSON: Well, I remember one time we were at my father's
parents' house and sitting at the table eating and I
dropped my spoon. And it fell under the table. And
my grandfather says, "Take your plate with you," when
I bent down to get the spoon. I was very much afraid
of him. He was a stern man.

SIGRIST: Did they live nearby, your grandparents?

RIERSON: They lived, at that time they lived on a farm. And

later they moved to Genarp but...

SIGRIST: Can you spell Genarp?

RIERSON: ...it must have been about five miles or so. Genarp is spelled G-E-N-A-R-P.

SIGRIST: Which set of grandparents were you closest to, emotionally?

RIERSON: To my mother's side.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

RIERSON: Definitely.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about your interaction
with them and the kinds of things you would do together.

RIERSON: Well, my grandmother wove rugs for the people in the community, so I used to like to sit on the bench and I'd watch her throw the shuttle back and forth to make the bright colored rugs that she wove. And my grandfather loved to garden. And, and he also like pigeons. And he would walk, he bicycled to work and he would walk miles if he could find a pigeon that somebody had for sale that was the kind he wanted.

But their house was on a hillside and it was overflowing with beautiful flowers and vegetables for their table and everything. So he had a lot of hobbies.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the type of, like what were his favorite flowers? Or is there a flower that sticks out in your mind that you associate with...?

RIERSON: No, but I remember the cabbage. They grew Brussels sprouts and they could stand out there in the garden all winter, even after they froze. And then, when they wanted some, they'd just go out and take them frozen, Brussels sprouts, and then cook them.

SIGRIST: Can you also talk a little bit about your grandmother's rug weaving? What, how big are the rugs and what does she use to weave them?

RIERSON: Well, they liked long rugs. And she could take the measurements for however long the person wanted the rug to be. And then they, the owner, would cut up the rags and have them all in balls for my grandmother to weave. And some people had only dull rags, rags. So she would save some of the bright ones when somebody came in with a whole basket full of bright colored rags. Then she would save some out of those and, and put them in borders for the dull ones so that all the

rugs were beautiful. And they would be, say like thirty inches wide and as long or as short as the person wanted them.

SIGRIST: And then, you said, was it a loom that she used for weaving the...?

RIERSON: Yes, a floor, a big, floor loom. A two harness.

SIGRIST: What games did you play as a child in Sweden, do you remember? (children's voices can be heard in the background)

RIERSON: Well, I remember there was a wooden fence across the road from where we lived and we used to go out there and climb on that and use it like a, like exercise bars, you know. And I remember going nutting in the fall.

SIGRIST: Nutting?

RIERSON: Nutting. The, uh, not hickory nuts, what are they? The little round nuts, and we'd go out there under the trees in the wild forest and pick baskets full of them to take home to have to cook with and to eat.

SIGRIST: How would they prepare nuts like that?

RIERSON: Just, hazelnuts, they were just ready to eat. You just cracked them.

a
SIGRIST: Do you remember a nursery rhyme or a little poem or song that you learned as a little girl that you still remember and say for us or sing for us on tape in Swedish?

RIERSON: Well, I remember the, the grace we always used to say.

(she recites the prayer in Swedish)

SIGRIST: Thank you. What does that mean?

RIERSON: That means "In Jesus' name we go to the table to eat and drink upon his word, to honor you and for our use, we get this food in Jesus' name."

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

RIERSON: Lutheran.

SIGRIST: Lutheran. And what do you remember about religious practices at that time before you came to this country?

RIERSON: Well, people always had their children baptized.
And

the records, legal records, are in the same books as the church records. So they were combined. And people went to church on Christmas and Easter and Christmas Eve.

SIGRIST: Can you describe how your family celebrated Christmas in Sweden?

RIERSON: Well, they always had, they celebrated before Christmas and after Christmas, you know, and it was a long period of holiday. And they had wonderful food and they had baked cookies for months in advance and filled the cookie jars. And always they had rice pudding (she laughs) and roast pork. And sometimes, if they were flush, they have a real smorgasbord of foods.

SIGRIST: Were there special decorations that you used in the house?

RIERSON: Oh, yes. They had a, the little dwarfs were their Santa Claus.

SIGRIST: Is there a name in Swedish for those little dwarfs?

RIERSON: At the moment I don't think of it. Jul Gobben,

Christmas man.

SIGRIST: Do you know how to spell that?

RIERSON: Jul Gobben, J-U-L, G-O-B-B-E-N, I think. Two "B"s.
(an automobile and children's voices can be heard in
the background)

SIGRIST: And what did they do? What did the little Christmas
men do?

RIERSON: (a barking dog can be heard in the background)

Well,

they carried bells and they, they were usually made
out of paper cut outs, a whole row of them like paper
dolls except these were the Jul Gobben. And they set
them up on the table, you know, for a centerpiece and
they hung them from the walls.

SIGRIST: Did you have Christmas trees in Sweden?

we

RIERSON: Yes, but they had no electric lights, you know, so
had candles that clipped on. Sort of like a
clothespin clip with a holder for the candle. And you
had to be very careful because they were dangerous.
They started fires if they got...

SIGRIST: Do you remember an incident, maybe in your family or in somebody else's family, where that happened?

RIERSON: Only once, when we had come to America. And that was the last time we lighted the Christmas candles. We got it put out quickly but it was a, a scare.

SIGRIST: Did you attend school in Sweden at that young age?

RIERSON: No.

SIGRIST: No. Were there any things, anything you were taught at home by either your mother or your grandparents? Either a skill or reading and writing, something that you were taught by an older member of your family that you remember?

RIERSON: Well, the little girl next door had this wonderful book that had a picture of a rooster in it. And when she would read out of the book and then put a hat over the rooster and leave it overnight. In the morning there would be a gift under the hat that the rooster had laid. And so I wanted a book like that and my father went to Malmo one day. And when he came home, he said, "Okay. I have found a book with a rooster for you. Now you will have to learn to read." So I read and I read, I learned one page at a time to learn

how to read in that book. And sometimes the rooster would lay a piece of candy for me. Sometimes it would be an apple. And sometimes it was a cookie that was alarmingly like the ones my mother had in her cupboard. But it was great incentive for a little girl to learn to read.

SIGRIST: Could both your parents read and write?

RIERSON: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: And was Swedish the only language that they spoke?

RIERSON: That's right.

old
SIGRIST: Tell me what you knew about America as a five year
in Sweden.

RIERSON: Well, my father had a younger brother that had, that lived in America. In fact, he had two brothers there and a sister and that is why we went there. But the second brother had brought his family for a visit the year, in 1919 I think it was. And one of my cousins was a year older than I and, and the second cousin was about four years older than that. And they used to play a lot with me. And I learned the word (?). And

then the only other word I knew in English was poison because when we were playing in the yard, if there was something that my older cousin didn't want us to touch, she would say, "That's poison." So I knew that word. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Your, your father's brothers, two brothers in America.

Where were they in America?

RIERSON: In Iowa.

SIGRIST: They were in Iowa. Why were they in Iowa?

RIERSON: Well, they were farmers. And my Uncle Olaf was the first one to come and I don't know why he settled in Iowa. He must have known somebody that was there ahead of him.

RIERSON: Tell me why your family wanted to go.

RIERSON: Because my uncle came home and said the street were paved with gold and everyone could get rich in Iowa, so they should come there. And my father was gung-ho to go and my mother didn't want to leave. But he won out.

SIGRIST: You said that your father was working in the brick

factory, right?

RIERSON: That's right.

SIGRIST: And, and worked in the brick factory until he came
to
the United States?

RIERSON: That's right.

SIGRIST: I see. Did he come before you and your mother?

RIERSON: No, we all came together.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about leaving?

RIERSON: That's what I said. She doesn't, didn't want to
leave. She didn't want, she had one brother in
Chicago and she was looking forward to seeing him.
But she was leaving her, her mother and father and two
sisters and two brothers. And later one of her
younger brothers did come over, too, but he only
stayed about five years and then he went back.

SIGRIST: What do you remember of the whole process of getting
ready to leave? What, what did the family have to do
prior to leaving Sweden?

RIERSON: Well, they had to sell all their property and, uh...

SIGRIST: You mentioned the auction already. What, and, and giving the doll house to the neighbors. What do you remember about the auction specifically? Were you present?

RIERSON: No, I don't think I was. I was probably someplace with one of the grandparents or somebody.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever relay to you later how she felt about the auction?

RIERSON: When, when she, not about the auction, but when she was passed one hundred, one day someone said to her, "If you had things to do differently in your life, what would you do?" And she didn't even think for a minute. She said, "I would never have come to America." The reason was she didn't want to leave her family but I think she had a better life in America than she would have had, had she stayed in Sweden.

SIGRIST: We should say, for the sake of the tape, that your
mom
passed away when she was one hundred in '90---...

five
RIERSON: Yes, one hundred, yeah, she was one hundred plus
months.

born
SIGRIST: So it would have been actually 1992,'93? She was
in 1892 you told me before we started.

RIERSON: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: So, yeah (observing the gesturing of others in the
room) '93? '92,'92 she died in.

RIERSON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: 1992. Tell me about, do you remember any kinds of
examinations having to happen before you left the
United States, (correcting himself) I mean before you
left Sweden, excuse me? Physical examinations?

RIERSON: I don't remember any there but I can tell you about
the examination before they let us off the boat.

SIGRIST: Okay, well, we'll get to that when we get you on the
boat.

RIERSON: Okay. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What do you remember about packing? We talked a little bit before we started the interview about what your family took with them, but can you tell me again what they actually packed up to take to America.

RIERSON: My mother had an uncle who was a carpenter and he built two huge wooden trunks. And I remember they were stained orange. (children's voices can be heard in the background) And my mother packed her valuables in that. And she put the featherbed in the bottom and packed the breakables in and around it.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the featherbed for me, please, on tape?

RIERSON: It was a handwoven cover, green wool with red and black stripes in it. And full of goose feathers. And it was a terribly important part of the household. Of course, after she got to America she didn't use it except when the weather got twenty below zero they used it for a cover.

SIGRIST: And then what other, you mentioned her valuables and the breakables, but what were those things?

RIERSON: Well, there were, some of the things that she left, she took back later when she visited. So I don't

really know which ones came with us on the boat and which ones she went after later.

SIGRIST: Can you just name some of the objects that you know came from Sweden?

a

RIERSON: She had soup bowls that were, that had a picture of sea gull going round and round on the edge of the soup bowl, white with blue design. And some things she left there with my father's mother to store. And when she went back to get them, my grandmother had been using them and had broken some, so she was heartbroken. (she laughs)

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Do you remember taking something that was yours specifically?

I

RIERSON: I had a doll that was given to me the last Christmas was there. It must have cost a mint in those days. It's about eighteen inches tall with a porcelain head and beautiful blonde hair and joints, jointed wrists

and ankles. And I still have it.

SIGRIST: Who gave you that doll?

RIERSON: It must have been my, my mother's people. They must have all chipped in.

your
SIGRIST: It's nice you still have that, as you still have mother's featherbed, too, as you said before.

RIERSON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of your clothing at that time? Can you describe what a little girl wore at that time?

RIERSON: I have pictures that were taken. And we had little white lace collars on our coats. And button shoes, although we wore toffler, the wooden shoes, most of the time.

SIGRIST: Can you spell toffler, please?

RIERSON: Well, when we got dressed up, then, we put on our shoes.

SIGRIST: How do you spell toffler?

RIERSON: T-O-F-F-L-E-R.

did
SIGRIST: Can you, when you wore the wooden shoes in Sweden,
you wear them inside the house as well as outside?

when
RIERSON: Oh, yes. Well, most of us left them at the door
we came in and walked in stocking feet around the
house.

SIGRIST: Where did you get the wooden shoes?

put
RIERSON: Oh, they had a local man that did the carving and
leather tops on them.

SIGRIST: Is it, so they are, they are a wooden sole but a, a
leather top.

RIERSON: Top.

SIGRIST: I see. Like what we would call a clog over here?

a
RIERSON: A clog, uh huh, exactly. In fact, there hasn't been
change in the design since those years.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about saying "good bye" to your
family?

RIERSON: I don't remember the saying "good bye" part except I remember my mother crying and crying and crying.

SIGRIST: Was there any kind of family gathering prior to your leaving?

must

RIERSON: If there was, I don't remember but I'm sure there have been.

SIGRIST: All right, well, what do you remember about leaving the town and going to wherever it was you had to go to, to get on the ship?

RIERSON: I think we went by train. I'm sure we went by train to Gothenberg [Goteborg]. And, uh...

trip?

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about that

RIERSON: No, nothing.

SIGRIST: What about being in Gothenberg?

RIERSON: I don't remember a thing about Gothenberg. (Mr. Sigrist laughs) I only am guessing that that's where we left from because, I don't think there were any ports farther south.

on? SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the ship that you got

RIERSON: The Oscar II.

SIGRIST: Ah, you came on the Oscar II, which is a Danish ship.

(the beeping sound of a construction vehicle backing up can be heard in the background) Tell me what you remember about seeing the ship for the first time or...

RIERSON: Well, I remember that we had a cabin, which is unusual. So many people went class, but there were only the three of us in this one cabin. And I remember that I got to sleep in the top bunk. And that was nice. But I also remember, I was used to drinking milk and the milk, I don't know what it was. It was some kind of a mixture of some, imitation for milk. And it tasted awful and I couldn't drink it. So my father met someone that knew the ship's officers and he complained to him about it. And so every day they sent one quart of real milk to us to drink. And I didn't drink it all. My father would drink most of it. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me what you did on the ship during the day.

RIERSON: Well, I can't remember much about that either. We walked around a lot, I know that. And my mother was seasick most of the way, which didn't help any.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your mother's seasickness?

What sticks out in your mind about that?

RIERSON: Well, I felt so sorry for her because she, obviously,

was miserable. And she was sad and miserable, both.

(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Were there ways that they tried to treat her sickness

that you remember?

RIERSON: No, I don't think so, no.

SIGRIST: Were there other children on the ship that you recall?

RIERSON: I don't remember that either, no. I must have blanked

out.

SIGRIST: Do you remember eating on the ship?

RIERSON: Yes. I remember we had a lot of oatmeal, it seemed like. And then the milk problem and that's about it.

York? SIGRIST: Do you know how long the ship took to get to New

days. RIERSON: I think it was somewhere between five and seven

when SIGRIST: And do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty
the ship arrived?

Statue RIERSON: I remember my father waking me and saying, "The
of Liberty is coming up." And at that time I already
had a sore throat and so he, they couldn't leave me in
the cabin while they went up to see it. So they
wrapped me in a, a blanket and my father carried me.
And we got up there and stood and waited and waited
and waited. And then, when they got to where they
should have been able to see the Statue of Liberty, it
was so foggy nobody could see anything and everyone
was so disappointed because they hadn't seen frihets
gudinnan, they called her, the Statue of Liberty.

SIGRIST: I have to ask you to spell that. (he laughs) I'm
sorry.

N. RIERSON: F-R-I-H-E-T-S. And the next word is G-U-D-I-N-N-A-

SIGRIST: And that's the Statue of Liberty in Swedish?

RIERSON: It's, it's freedom's goddess, is the exact translation.

who

SIGRIST: I think you're the first person we've interviewed
came from Sweden who has told us that.

RIERSON: Oh.

SIGRIST: A great piece of information. You said you already
had your sore throat. Can you, were you getting sick
on the ship?

RIERSON: Well, yes. I, I was, I had a sore throat when I had
the, what seemed like a cold coming on.

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about the ship landing?
You mentioned earlier that you were going to tell us
about the medical exams prior to getting off the ship.

RIERSON: No, they just did a cursory examination as you got
off. We passed that. That was okay. They let us go
off. And then, when we got onto the Ellis Island
building, we had to go through a more complicated one.
And I remember, my mother had never been to a doctor

in her life. She just had dealings with the nurse when her baby was born. And she, the nurse took out the thermometer, and Mother said that in Sweden they always took the temperature under the armpit, in the armpit, under the arm. So the nurse takes this out and puts it in my mouth and my mother said to me, "Well, bite on it but not too, don't bite on it but hold it between your teeth." And the nurse started jumping up and down. She was afraid I was going to bite on the thermometer. So she quickly snatched it away. And then they put me on a cart and I went down this long corridor and Mother was walking along beside me, with another nurse had a hold of her arm. And the next thing I knew, when I turned around, my mother was no longer with me. And they took me into this little room and, that had several beds in it and put me in a hospital bed with sides on it so I couldn't climb out.

SIGRIST: How did you feel?

RIERSON: I, I kept thinking my mother would come back quickly,

though I wondered where she was. And they undressed me and left me in the, in the bed. And I kept thinking, well, "Where is my mother?" And eventually I needed to go to the bathroom and I wanted to know where the pot under the bed would be (she laughs)

because I couldn't see any and at home we always had one under the bed. So I tried to climb out. I couldn't make it. So, the nurse came and I, I said in Swedish that I needed to go and she brought me a glass of water to drink. So, it took a long time for me to figure out what that pan was that she would bring once in a while. It looked like something my grandmother cooked potatoes in. And I looked at it and she would take it away again and when she came with it the next time, why, I thought, "Could it be? No, I wouldn't want to do that in Grandmother's potato pan." So, finally there was a little girl that was put in a bed in the same room and she spoke English and, so I could see what she did. So that was okay. But before that I would crawl clear up in the far corner of the bed when I had to urinate because you can only hold it so long, especially when you're five. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: How long were you at Ellis Island?

RIERSON: Five days.

bit

SIGRIST: You were detained five days. You talked a little about the nurse. What other recollections of the staff in the hospital do you have?

RIERSON: Some of them were, were kind and some of them were not. I got the riot act read to me when I wet the

bed. But others were more kind. And there were, evidently, volunteers that came through with toys for the children because a woman came one day with a cart that was loaded with stuffed toys, little stuffed dogs. And she gave the other girl one and gave me one. And I thought that was really great. And when they took us away, when we were being released from detention, I thought the dog had to stay in the bed because I thought it belonged to the hospital. But when we got a ways away, I saw that the other girl had taken hers and I've always regretted I didn't get that stuffed dog with me. And I looked for it when I was at Ellis Island now but I didn't see it. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: I'm sure it's long gone. (they laugh)

RIERSON: I know.

SIGRIST: What other memories do you have about that experience?

Of course, you're five years old and you're alone, basically. Were your parents allowed to visit you?

RIERSON: No, and my parents didn't know whether I was alive
or

dead. They didn't speak English and they didn't send any counselors that spoke Swedish. So they worried about me and I thought they had gone on and left me.

I thought I would never see them again. And it was, it was a very difficult time. And they separated the men and the women at night. My parents told me later. And so my mother was alone all night with all these other strange women, you know.

SIGRIST: Did she tell you stories about her experiences?

RIERSON: Yes. She said it was terrible. She said they had this hard bread to eat and the kids played football with it in the daytime because it was that hard. And she said, and they only put one knife here (she gestures) and then, at the table, and then they'd skip about six feet and then there'd be another knife. So they didn't have silverware for everyone. And she wasn't used to the strange food and it was a, she was very sorry she had left Sweden.

about
SIGRIST: You, you mentioned the food. What do you recall being fed while you were in the hospital?

RIERSON: I don't remember what I ate. I really don't.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing anything that was new to you that you had never seen before while you were detained at Ellis Island?

I

RIERSON: No. It's just the bed and the, and the pan and the,

remember it was very bleak. There were no curtains at the windows or anything and I was used to having curtained windows. It was all very sterile and cool.

children SIGRIST: Was there any entertainment provided for the

that were inside the room.

RIERSON: I don't remember any.

well,

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about when they released you, uh,

actually, do you remember how they treated your illness? What, what was it that you had?

sore

RIERSON: Well, actually, it must have been just a passing

throat because they thought I had, I was coming down with measles and I never did break out. And there were, there was a measles epidemic, evidently, that had claimed some lives and they were worried about it spreading.

you

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you were treated medically, if

had medicine or what...?

RIERSON: No, I think they, they just waited for time to take care of it.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me seeing your parents for the first time?

see
RIERSON: No. I was surprised. That was it. Surprised to they were there.

family
SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the details of how your was released off the island?

RIERSON: No, but they had planned to meet my mother's brother in Chicago and when the people of Ellis Island put the immigrants on their specific trains, we went on to Chicago but there had been no contact with Uncle Frank. He had been there and gone home. And he didn't here that we were there until he got a letter from my father written in Iowa after they had arrived, we had arrived at our destination.

Iowa
SIGRIST: What do you remember about going from New York to (correcting himself), to Chicago?

RIERSON: I remember that we had never seen an ice cream cone and at one stop a vendor came through the train selling ice cream cones, so everyone was buying them

for their kids. So my father bought one. And then my mother always carried a table knife in her, in her purse so that she could use it to peel or whatever she needed. It was very handy when you were traveling. Even today it's nice to have one. And, so we ate the ice cream with the knife. My, my father, he could eat peas with a knife. He was so dexterous with it. And they use their knives like spoons, you know. And so we ate the ice cream cone with the knife. We shared it all, the three of us. And that was a big treat. We were first, our first visit with ice cream.

SIGRIST: What happened when you got to Chicago?

RIERSON: Well, Uncle Frank wasn't there so we just had to go
on
to Iowa. (a vehicle can be heard in the background)

SIGRIST: Did your parents know how to do that?

RIERSON: Well, I don't know if there were people at this
train
station that told them how to transfer or what have you. But they were well, they were used to having a lot of immigrants come through there. So it was probably set up.

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about when your family

arrived in Iowa? What, what sticks out in your mind about when you finally got there?

April

RIERSON: When we got there, it had been raining. It was when they have spring rains in Iowa. And the roads were muddy, the, the wagons that came to pick up the people were mired down in the mud. And my Uncle Olaf had on a horsehair coat because it was cold, also. And my mother looked at this and looked at the muddy streets and she says, "What are we letting ourselves in for?" It was very disheartening.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me, when you finally got there, how you spent your first night once you got to Iowa?

RIERSON: Well, we were to stay with my Aunt Hilma and her family.

SIGRIST: Hilma? H-I-L-M-A?

RIERSON: That's right. And they had two daughters younger than

I. And so we stayed with them for a couple of months. And our first nice experience there was the second night we were there, she popped popcorn for us and we had never seen popcorn. And my mother loved popcorn from that day on.

SIGRIST: Tell me, tell me about the actual house and the, you know, where you lived once you got to Iowa. You said you stayed with them for two months?

with
RIERSON: No, well, yes. We stayed for a couple of months

them and my father worked as hired man for his brother-in-law, for my, Hilma's husband. And way back down in a field was the original log house that had been when the farm was first homesteaded by people other than them. And we went down and looked at it. And it had two rooms, three rooms; a kitchen and a living room and a bedroom. Real small. And it hadn't been lived in years for years and it was run down. So they fixed the roof and they painted the inside and cleaned it up and washed the windows. And we moved in and we lived there until October of that year.

SIGRIST: You arrived in what month?

RIERSON: In April.

moved
SIGRIST: You arrived in April. Were there ways, when you into the log hut, were there ways that your mother and father tried to make it feel like what they knew in Sweden?

RIERSON: We had the red tablecloth on the table and the blue bowl, with the flower pot, sat on the table. So that was a touch of home. And then they went to the local furniture store, which was also the undertaker's parlor, and they bought a sofa and a bed. And I borrowed a bed from my aunt for me to sleep in. And, when they got through buying the very necessities, the man that owned the store gave them a clock as a present. And I remember when Mother put it up on a shelf after my dad had wound it, she said, "The door won't shut." And he, no matter how he worked, the little round door on the face of the clock wouldn't shut. She said, "See, that's why he gave it to you. It's not worth anything. Take it back to him!" But my father said, "You can't take back a gift." And so, for all those years, that clock ticked away the hours with the little door standing slightly ajar.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what life was like in, in a farm community in Iowa in the early 1920s? What was everyday life...?

RIERSON: Well, for one thing, it was a Swedish community and there were a lot of Swedish people there, and so they got together. Every Sunday, they would have a, a big get together and families, four, five or six families

would have a big Sunday dinner and the men would play cards and the women would wash dishes and work and, and gossip. (she laughs) And that was nice.

hired

SIGRIST: What kinds of, you said your father worked as a hand for his brother [sic, brother-in-law]. What kinds of things did that entail? What were his jobs?

plow

RIERSON: Well, they, they raised corn. And so they had to plow the corn fields with horse drawn plows. And they had cattle. And so every morning and night you had to milk the cows and turn the cream separator that separated the cream from the milk. And there were calves to take care of and pigs to feed and it was a lot of work, just like almost any agricultural endeavor.

you

SIGRIST: And what about your life? Was there a school that you were going to?

RIERSON: Yes, there was a school just a mile away. And so I could walk it really. And there was one family that lived on the other side of the farmer's section and they were Swedish and so they interpreted for me those few months that I went there. Because, you see, school didn't start until September and then we moved

in October, so I wasn't there too long. And I remember sitting on, on a bench and people coming around me and saying, "Are those shoes Swedish?" And I was so embarrassed because I wanted to be an American. I didn't want to be considered a Swedish novelty.

SIGRIST: And what kind of shoes were you wearing? The wooden shoes that you had in Sweden?

RIERSON: No, they, they, I was wearing my dress shoes to school.

SIGRIST: Oh.

RIERSON: And, uh, that was, I learned to read. And when I came home after about five or six weeks in school, I came home and I said to my mother, "Almost everyone at school speaks Swedish now." I thought because I understood it, it was Swedish.

SIGRIST: (construction vehicles can be heard in the background)

Where did your family go to in October?

RIERSON: Then there was a chance to rent a farm, or take over a farm that, the family was getting a divorce. Nils and

Frieda Anderson [ph] were getting a divorce and they just wanted to get rid of everything so they could be parted. And they sold, for a flat price, the crop unharvested in the field, the cattle, the pigs, the chickens, a lot of their furniture and farm machinery. And they just sold it to my father for a flat price. And when he finally got the corn harvested, he got less for it than he had paid for it so, so we were, we lost money at the start, you know.

SIGRIST: I was wondering how your father had enough money to buy the farm in the first place.

RIERSON: Well, I guess they must have borrowed. I think he probably borrowed from my Uncle Olaf (children's voices can be heard in the background), who was a well-to-do farmer at that time.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay on the, the farm that your father bought?

RIERSON: He didn't buy the farm. He rented the farm but he bought the...

SIGRIST: Crop.

RIERSON: ...the crop and the animals.

SIGRIST: I see. So you were still living in the, where were you living at that time?

RIERSON: No, there was the house on it, too.

SIGRIST: Oh.

RIERSON: And so we, we moved into the house, a two story house.

SIGRIST: And how long did you stay there?

RIERSON: We lived there, I think, two years, two or three. And

my second sister was born there in 1921, so right after we moved there my mother must have been pregnant. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: And what was that sister's name?

RIERSON: Agnes.

SIGRIST: Agnes, we actually, we just have a couple minutes left

and I just want to get some family information in here at the end. Can you name, was Agnes your only sister or brother? Did you have other children, (correcting himself) did they have other children born here?

born
RIERSON: No, I have, then Gladys, that's Kim's mother, was
seven years after that.

right
SIGRIST: And I should say Gladys and Kim are here with us
now. Yeah, so Agnes, Gladys...

RIERSON: That's all.

also
SIGRIST: That was it. So, so the three girls. And then I
wanted to get in when you were married. Do you
remember what year you were married?

RIERSON: I was married in 1936.

SIGRIST: And your husband's name?

RIERSON: Albert Rierson.

SIGRIST: And just give me a quick run down of his background.

RIERSON: He is from Norwegian parents, so we always said our
four boys are "Norswegians."

SIGRIST: (he laughs) "Norswegians." Was he born in this
country, though?

RIERSON: Yes, he was. His parents were married in this country.

SIGRIST: And you were married in '35 [sic] and...

RIERSON: (correcting Mr. Sigrist) '36.

SIGRIST: '36, excuse me. And did you have children?

RIERSON: I have four sons.

SIGRIST: Can you name them, please?

RIERSON: Walter, Severt, Michael and Thomas. The reason I hesitated is Severt was called John Severt and now he goes by the name of John but when he was growing up he was called Severt.

SIGRIST: How do you spell Severt.

RIERSON: S-E-V-E-R-T.

SIGRIST: My final question for you is how you think of yourself
in terms of nationality. Do you think of yourself as being Swedish, as being American? How do you think of yourself?

get
RIERSON: I think of myself as American. I tried so hard to
rid of my Swedish accent. And when I finally got rid
of it, why, then accents became popular but I couldn't
find mine. But I go back to Sweden periodically. I
have made four or five trips back, so I enjoy my
Swedish background. I treasure it but I'm an
American.

me
SIGRIST: Well, great. Ann, thank you very much for letting
come out and interview you for the Oral History
Project. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Ann
Rierson on Friday, August 30, 1996 in West Milford,
New Jersey. Thank you.

□