



2018

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### Recommended Citation

Hansen, Mary Ann (2018) "A Voice from the Past: My Grandmother's Letter from the S/S Stavangerfjord," *The Bridge*: Vol. 41 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol41/iss1/6>

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# A Voice from the Past: My Grandmother's Letter from the S/S *Stavangerfjord*

by Mary Ann Hansen



Front row, from left to right: my mother, Ester Margrete Hansen; my sister, Karin Solveig Hansen; my brother, Jens Peter Hansen. Back row, left to right: my grandmother, Mette Otine Hansen; my grandfather, Jens Marinus Hansen. *Photo courtesy of Mary Ann Hansen.*

My parents, Ester Margrete and Svend Aage Hansen, immigrated to the United States with their not quite three-month-old baby, my older sister, in October 1949. I remember my mother said it was a hard trip over the Atlantic with such a small baby, but they survived the trip and eventually made their way to Columbia City, Indiana, where my father had relatives and where they lived for some time. The initial idea, according to my mother, was to spend a year in the United States and then move back to Denmark. In the end, however, my parents became American citizens and had two more children, my brother and myself, in the United States. 1953 was the year when they got their

first visit from home, when my paternal grandparents came to visit. At that time, people had to travel by ship, and it was a long journey back and forth across the Atlantic. I recently found a letter that was written to my parents and siblings (I was not born yet) by my paternal grandmother, Mette Otine Hansen, from the *S/S Stavangerfjord* on my grandparents' trip home to Denmark in 1953. The letter covered the duration of the trip, which, according to the two dates written in the letter, lasted about ten days. In the letter, Otine describes daily life on the *S/S Stavangerfjord*.

\* \* \*

*S/S Stavangerfjord* October 9, 1953<sup>1</sup>

Den Norske Amerikalinje [The Norwegian American Line]

Dear Ester and Svend Aage, Karin and Jens Peter,

Now I'd better tell a little bit about our trip home. We didn't leave New York until Tuesday evening around 10. We were out on deck when we sailed. It was a beautiful sight, with thousands of lights on shore, so it was midnight before we went to bed. We eat breakfast between 8 and 9 and lunch at 12:30, and have coffee and cake at 4 and dinner at 7. And, of course, coffee and tea are served with every meal.

On Wednesday evening we were up in First Class before dinner to have a cocktail with the Captain. He bade us welcome and shook each of our hands. We were also served some fine "smørrebrød"—no bigger than a Danish 5-øre coin—but we were just about to have dinner, so that was fine. There are not very many of us in Second Class and even fewer in First Class. There are many people in Tourist Class.

There was a dance on Wednesday evening, and we went up to see that, and last night there was a movie. That was fun. Otherwise we spend a lot of our time sleeping and eating. Wednesday morning I lay in bed feeling sick. I'm not sure if it was seasickness—I didn't throw up. We had taken some tablets and I think we got a headache from them.

It is mostly Norwegians who are on the ship. We talk with them some. We can understand them better than the Swedes.

We have just sailed past Newfoundland. On Wednesday there were big waves, but today the weather is nice, but cold. We should have brought our winter clothing along. It's not as warm as it was where you live.

Today it is Wednesday again. Tomorrow we will be in Bergen and on Friday morning in Oslo. On Friday evening we will take the train to Copenhagen, and then home on Monday. I have been in bed with a cold and a headache all day, but luckily I have plenty of time to lie in bed. Now I am starting to feel better again. It is colder out here on the ocean, but the weather is still nice every day, so it looks like we will make it through without running into storms.

I think we got spoiled by the coffee in America because we don't think the coffee onboard has much flavor. I am drinking mostly tea—you probably can't believe that. But the food is good. The waiter tells us we are not eating enough!

Friday, 10-16-53

Now we are almost in Oslo, so we are getting closer to home. Yesterday was bright and sunny and calm, so we could really enjoy it. It was beautiful sailing into Bergen with all the fjords, and also beautiful sailing into Stavanger. We were out in the town a bit in Bergen. We will also have some time to go into town in Oslo. Tonight we will take the train to Copenhagen.

On Wednesday evening they had a celebration dinner on the ship—it was really nice—and dancing afterwards. There has not been any horserace betting, but there has been Bingo. Now I have to go down and finish packing. I will write again when we get home.

Our warmest greetings and thoughts to all of you, you four dear ones, and a thousand thanks for the good time we had with you and for all the nice things you did for us. We hope Svend Aage made it home all right. It was a long way for him to drive alone.

Say hello to everyone over there.

Dad and Mom



STAVANGERFJORD  
DEN NORSKE AMERIKALINJE  
THE NORWEGIAN AMERICA LINE

9-9-53

Kære Ester og Svend og alle derhjemme

LUFTPOST

Kære Ester og Svend og alle derhjemme, Kære og fars venner.  
Nu maa jeg hellere fortælle lidt om vor Rejse hjem.  
Vi kom ikke fra New York før Fredag Aften kl 10 vi  
var jo inde at se da vi sykkede det var et flot tog med alle de tusinde  
lys rundt omkring saa det blev skinnende inden vi kom i byen. Vi rejste  
Morgenmad mellem 8 og 9 i Frikøbt kl 10 og Raffe og Tage kl 4 og  
Middag kl 7 hvor gang naar vi jo Raffe eller The. Onsdag Aften var vi  
oppe paa fiske Klasse for vi spiste og drøkte Cocktail sammen med  
Kjætevennen han bod os Velkommen og gav Knaud til os alle og vi fik hin  
Smørrebrød til de var ikke store enden dansk fern fers men vi skulde  
også med at spise med det samme vi er ikke saa mange paa  
anden Klasse og mindre paa fiske Klasse da er mange paa Fiskebænk  
Onsdag Aften var der dans vi var da oppe at se til og i Aften var der Dans  
Det var helt morsomt ellers gaar tiden jo med at se og spise. Onsdag Formiddag  
laa jeg i sengen jeg var ikke om det var søge jeg havde ikke oppe har taget  
nogle billeder og tror det er i Kasse det af dem. Det er mest Nordmand der  
er med vi snakker jo da lidt med dem vi kan bedst forstaa dem end  
Jænkene vi er lige sykket om over Fundland som Onsdagen var der store  
Priser i Dag og det fint tje men holdt vi kunde vi godt bruge vor Vinkatje  
det er ikke saadan en barne som hos jer. I Dag er det Onsdag igen i  
Morgen skulde vi bare i Dagen og Fredag Onsdag i Dato Fredag  
offen skulde vi saa med tog til København saa gaar det jo hjem  
i Mandags har jeg i Sengen hele Dagen jeg var saa fortvilet og havde  
Hovedpine og jeg havde jo for tid at blive i Sengen mi er det snart over  
igen der er jo mere holdt herude paa Havn men ellers fint tje  
hver Dag saa det ser ud til vi slapper over uden storm. Vi er vist blevet  
forvandt med Raffe i Amerika for den Raffe vi faar her smager  
os ikke jeg drøkte mest The det kan i nok ikke rigtig forstaa  
vi spiser jo ellers fint her. Igenere siger til os vi spiser alt for lidt  
Fredag 8/10-10. Nu er vi saa snart i Dato saa hygger det jo hjem  
i Dato var det fint solskin og stille tje saa vi kunde rigtig nyde det  
der var vel nok skönt ind til Dagen med alle de store fjelde  
og saa ind til Stavanger vi var lidt inde at se paa Dagen vi  
kan ogsaa godt faa tid at se paa Dato vi skal med tog til København  
Onsdag Aften var der Vestmiddag den var fin og dans bagefter  
der var ikke meget Høstendelst men Dagen var skøn jeg med og paa bagefter  
saa skal jeg skrive igen naar vi kommer hjem. De kæreste Hilsener og tanker  
til jer alle i Kasse jer og Sissie tak for den gode tid vi havde her og for alt det  
gode og gode og alle de smukke dage som jeg har haft her. Tak og alle

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The original letter has the date 9-9-1953, but since it is unlikely that the journey took a month, the family assumes that the letter was misdated and was actually written on October 9.