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Ribbons Of Memories

By Ed and Gerda Sundberg

Gerda and I are in our mid-fifties. We have survived and enjoyed nearly thirty-five years of marriage, three sons, three daughters-in law, and four grandchildren.

We are not sitting back in our rocking chairs waiting for the kids to drop by or bemoaning the fact that each year our hair is a little greyer. We don't have time for that. And we're not flying off to Timbuktu, Shangri La, or any place else to "start a new life."

In 1972 we began taping the memories and tales of our immigrant parents for our grandchildren. That project gave us a new picture of our parents and the lives they lived. It also opened a door to a study which will keep us busy for the rest of our lives. We are collecting the tales and stories of Scandinavian and Nordic immigrants or their descendants. Copies of all the tapes we have so far made have been sent to the Scandinavian Archives at the University of Washington, Seattle, Washington. Copies have also been sent to the Danes Worldwide Archives in Aalborg, Denmark, to be used by students and scholars of the Danish Migration.

The Emigrant House in Vaxjo, Sweden, under the direction of Dr. Ulf Beijbom, has and will receive copies of all the Swedish tapes; the University of Turku, Turku, Finland, will get duplicates of all the Finnish tapes, and the University of Oslo has suggested putting the entire index on their computers for use by scholars. Dr. John Hinton, Dean of Instructional Services at Cabrillo College, Aptos, California, has been most encouraging and helpful in the development of the project.

Most of the year we are at home. I teach at Cabrillo College. On long weekends and during several weeks of the summer, we load up our little truck and take off to interview here, there and yon. Of course, our flower and vegetable gardens go to pot, but they soon revive with a bit of tender loving care. The gardens seem to realize that over two and a half millions of Scandinavians and Nordics came to the United States between 1850 and 1920 and that each one of them or their descendants has a very special story to tell of the immigration.

Sadly, we have learned that each time one of the "old timers" dies, we lose more than a loved one – we also lose his memories and tales of immigration and becoming an American. My step-father said, "The history books tell what the big people and the generals thought and did; your tapes will let the world know what the little guy did and thought."

"The last year before Ed received a sabbatical leave," Gerda explains, "we wandered across the country seeking out the Scandinavian enclaves. We met people and made arrangements to come back with a tape recorder. More than once we went to the local church and met the minister. He listened to our project plans and offered his help. Often he took us to the "old timers" and introduced us. Door after door was opened as was heart after heart. We came as strangers to so many people; we left as friends.

"Seems like we fell in love with each and every person we met," I have written and said. "It doesn't make any difference how big or little a person thinks he is, he has a story to tell and we get it on tape. Can you imagine a woman telling about living her first nineteen years in a sod house? Can you imagine an old man remembering his turning over a swatch of virgin soil a half-mile long? Can you imagine fourth-generation youngsters still speaking the language of their forefathers with the old dialects and vocabularies now lost in the countries of origin and speaking English without an accent, too. Well, it's all on the tapes.

That is not all! We also learned why they left the "old country," how they crossed the ocean, how they learned English, where they settled, and how they built their first homes. We learned how they managed jobs in the cities and towns and how they survived the hardships of the frontiers. Some of the stories provoke laughter; some encourage tears. But they are the stories of people – the lives they lived and the lives they still remember.

The project was not started to "save our marriage" or to fill the gap of the boys leaving home and making homes and careers of their own. It has, however, given us an important common interest. It has brought us new friends. It has expanded our lives and our enjoyment of living. Just as important, it has established and preserved an experience of the people of an important ethnic heritage who have contributed to the beauty, the arts, the industry, and the

development of the United States.

We are both over fifty. We survived the birth and the maturing of three children. We enjoy our daughters-in-law and the grandchildren. But we can't stop yet! Over two and a half million Scandinavians and Nordics came to this country. We hope to interview as many of them or their descendants as we can to preserve their stories and memories for the future.

"We feel sorry for the people who have 'nothing to do' or have 'TV-itus,' " Gerda just said over my shoulder. "They don't know what a wonderful world of real people they are missing."

And this summer Gerda and I will meet more wonderful people. We are going to the Scandinavian countries to interview remigrants – those who came to the United States, but who returned to the land of their birth. They, too, will have tales and stories to tell and people to remember.

We want to capture their experiences on tape for the future students and scholars of the Danish Migration.

Ed and Gerda Sundberg -- there is much to be said about this happy couple who devote practically all their free time to recording on tape the memories that immigrants and their progeny have of the transition from Scandinavia to America. Their upcoming summer project is to interview remigrants in Scandinavia. Ed's parents came from Sweden while Gerda is a Danish immigrant. Ed teaches English at Cabrillo College and they reside in Watsonville, California.