

**Margaret Dahlgren**

**Interviewed May 30, 2007  
By Holli Connell  
Midway Village Museum**

Interviewer and interviewee speak about computer skills and television.

Holli Connell: May I get your name please?

Margaret Dahlgren: My name is Margaret Dorothy Dahlgren.

HC: Is that your married name?

MD: That is my married name.

HC: You have a maiden name?

MD: My name was Danielsen. "Sen" because it was Norwegian.

HC: Is that "Sen" related to the Norwegians?

MD: The Danes and the Norwegians use "sen." The Swedes use "son."

HC: And do you have any children?

MD: I have one son, 52 years old. His name is a good Scandinavian name. His name is Anders which the Norwegians would call [Anmish] (not spelled out in interview) Anders Christian Dahlgren.

HC: Do you have an educational background and what is it?

MD: I have bachelors and Masters Degrees from Rockford College.

HC: And are you retired?

MD: I am retired. I have been retired for 25 years. I taught at Washington Junior High School it was then Auburn High School.

HC: And how long had you worked there?

MD: Totally, I taught for 21 years.

HC: And you are from Rockford?

MD: I am born in Rockford at the old St. Anthony Hospital when it was on E. State St, 1400 E. State St.

HC: And where were your parents from?

MD: My parents were born in Amot, and really just a 2 Hour Drive from the capital, Oslo. They were both from that area, went to school together, were confirmed together and in 1907 were married in Norway.

HC: And when did they come to Rockford?

MD: Okay, my father had been here as a 17-year-old boy. He had been in America in 1902 and he promised his mother he would return, he would see her again and so he returned within five years and then re-met my mother and they were married in 1907.

Why did he come to Rockford, well it so happened that he knew a man named Mr.[Jergens] who was living in Rockford and Mr. Jergens had a wife and two sons still in Norway and he asked my father if he would be willing to accompany them to Rockford and so he did and when he arrived here Mr. Jergens was working at what they always called the glass factory, National Mirror Works it became on Kishwaukee Street and there were many Norwegian immigrants got jobs there because one of the owners was also Norwegian. So it's kind of interesting how in the whole story of immigration how people gravitate toward their own and so we have read about the Irish section in New York City for instance and so it was here, so there was a Norwegian enclave here. My father said that he would go to the train station and meet immigrants coming in and if there were any Norwegians he could lend a helping hand, where to go what to do, that kind of thing.

HC: Did your mother come over then?

MD: No, my mother came late in 1908 and by then my dad had a place for her to stay and now I'm sorry I can't tell you the date, my mother was really not happy here and so then my father sent her and that boy that was born here, there had been a daughter born earlier but anyway he sent them back to Norway for a while because my mother wasn't happy but I think that cured her. She was gone I think for about a year with these two little children and came back to this Rockford was home.

HC: Do you have siblings?

MD: I had a sister who was 15 years older than I. There was a boy between us who died and went to Turner School. He died because of a ruptured appendix. In those days there was no penicillin, no sulfa drugs, you know. So I was born after that. So there was a 15 year gap between my sister and me and my sister died about 10 years ago. So I am alone.

HC: When you talked about your mother came back what was it that changed her mind by being in Norway and coming back here?

MD: You know I would just assume that things were better here. This is a very small town, a very small town and the reason many people left, as is true of many immigrants, is that there were no job opportunities. There was nothing. Though the streets are not paved in gold in America yet there were opportunities. There really were.

HC: When you talk about districts like in New York you talked about Irish districts was there a neighborhood that you could confirm was the Norwegian neighborhood?

MD: I would say the east side really. The Southeast side were the Swedes; there is a close relationship between the Swedes and the Norwegians. I always tell my favorite story that the one thing that the Swedes have going for them is that they have such wonderful neighbors, anyway, the Norwegian number has always been much smaller than that of the Swedish population and then in 1908 there was established here in Rockford and organization, a church called the Norwegian Danish Lutheran Church and of course that too was a place for people to meet and greet as we would say. Many of the single women who came worked as maids in homes, you know wealthy homes and they would have Thursday afternoon off and where would they go? Well, Ladies Aid, Willing Workers or whatever the group was in the church and then in 1915 I can't remember how many people, dad was one of them that organized this fraternal organization, branch of a national organization called Sons of Norway and originally it also was a what they've been called a sick benefit society and by paying very nominal dues and a little extra if you were ill you have in the sense some kind of insurance. That aspect of our local lodge was dropped a long time ago because of course Sons of Norway as a fraternal organization also has a very fine, tremendous and all encompassing insurance program too, everything from annuities, infant insurance and that kind of thing.

HC: I forgot with other Swedish clubs. One of the things, I live downtown and I notice when I drive downtown there are flags that the city has put up that are Swedish flags and I know that we have many different immigrants from all over the world that locate here and the Swedish was a larger group than Norwegian.

MD: Much larger.

HC: But Norwegians were just as strong I believe. A lot of the people I meet say they are Norwegian rather than Swedish.

MD: Many of us have integrated and married Swedes of course.

HC: And is that what you did?

MD: I did, I did but you know there was also a Danish population here in Rockford and it was even smaller than our Norwegian.

HC: And you had mentioned that church that you had blended with the Danish?

MD: Yes and that church now again I can't remember a long time, I guess in the 40s there was a named change and is now called Our Savior's Lutheran Church.

HC: And where is that located?

MD: 3300 Rural St. Now our original church was on 4th Ave in the area of Zion, Immanuel, First Lutheran and really in the Erlander home area, southeast Rockford and remember our high

school was downtown where the Board of Education is now so there was really the heart of Scandinavia and 57 years ago our church opted to move out in the country to 3300 Rural Street where there was no bus service. I mean it was out in the country, in the fields.

Someone asked me the other day I went to a high school graduation and they said you know how do you feel? He was asking my impression of being 84 years old and being at a high school graduation. How did I feel? It's wonderful. I don't want to be 18 again but the joys of being 84 is that you do get invited to a graduation and you see these fine young people who have the world ahead of them and what's going to happen and so on. That's one of the fun things and then to sit and talk with someone. Nothing old people like better than to tell you how it was back then. You know when it cost me, if you can believe, I think \$300 to go to Rockford College and that was hard to come by and now I don't know what it is but I know it's 25 to 30,000.

I can remember in the Depression my father had the chance to buy, they were renting apartments and my father had a chance to buy a house for \$2000 over on 20th St, a bungalow, really a very nice little bungalow. He didn't have \$2000 and that's hard for my son to figure out and probably hard for you to imagine because many of us are lucky enough that we can write that off and just do it. And so I guess the greatest thing to adjust to in old age are the changes. Mildred Berry, who taught at Rockford College, I met her when I was a freshman at Rockford College and she influenced me a great deal and we really became friends and she would say you know you are part of my family and she said to us as freshmen, there was a French philosopher named Henry Bergson and he said that the only thing certain in life was change. I mean as freshmen in college that was kind of a funny idea but I mean if she liked to hear that well we could tell her that but we didn't. We did not believe it. I believe it now as I look back and as an older person I would have been happy to hear and I will remember what you have told me today about what your husband does. I won't understand it but I will know some words and the words will fill in the blanks in my crossword puzzle but the changes. The world ahead for you young people is exciting.

HC: How different was the education that your father and mother received and what you received and did they embrace you going to high school and college?

MD: Yes they did.

HC: What was their educational level?

MD: Their education, they were literally through with their education, they started at seven and they were through by the time they were confirmed and again they had no I mean it's not true anymore, there are more opportunities but for them living out in the country there were no possibilities. So, my father wanted me of course to go on to school and again now we are going through the same we hope our children will get a college education or some kind of special training. Everybody is not college-bound but we want our children to have a skill of some kind.

HC: Your father and mother when they both came over here your father worked for the National Mirror Works and your mother did she work?

MD: She stayed home. My mother never worked, never drove a car, no, never worked in the United States.

HC: Were there any language barriers?

MD: Well, not too many however there was one difference, we did not have bilingual education in the schools but there were programs in the public schools at night at Turner School I had two uncles who came to this country in 1928 and 1929 and they went to Turner School on Broadway, the abortion clinic, you know. They went there to school at night to learn English so they could become citizens and I mean that was just expected. They were here and they would be citizens and they would vote. I have not been wildly enthusiastic about bilingual education and I also realize that times are different and that there is that elements of change but personally I can remember my uncles learning English. Language was not a barrier in Rockford for Norwegians or Danes because, as my aunts would say, they would go shopping on Broadway and in every store and the stores had names like Tobonson and Chelstrom and Olsons and Linden and Larson's and Ekbergs. Oh, they all knew Swedish so my aunts would say it was difficult for them to learn English because where they did their shopping on Broadway and 7th St there were so many people in their same situation.

HC: Did your parents become citizens?

MD: Oh yes.

HC: Do you know how long the process was?

MD: No, that I don't know. I suspect, I don't want to answer this but afterwards I will tell you something interesting. And education, yes you were to go to school.

HC: And you mentioned your uncles came here to become citizens is that on your father's side?

MD: My father's side. They came and stayed with us for a while and found jobs. There were several factories in town were owned by Norwegian families and there was one what they called short Elm Street, Rockford Showcase Company and I know that one of my uncles got a job there and then one uncle, and aunt and cousin came in 28, that boy was a little older than I but he had to start in first grade at Turner School and I was in first grade but then they jumped him ahead as time went on then in 1929 another sister of my fathers came and brother-in-law and another young cousin and so through the years those two boys were like brothers to me because we graduated from high school in 38, 40, and 41 but they ultimately found employment, the one uncle in a new factory in town called Rockford Screw Machine Company which became Rockford Products and the other one at Barber Coleman. But again that was the work ethic you know you came to America to do better and they did the traditional thing they bought houses, ultimately your goal was to buy a house and live here, live better.

Then following World War II of course there were wonderful opportunities for all ethnic groups to go back home and visit the relatives as my mother and dad did in 1950. That was really a red letter time for them.

HC: Were you able to go with them?

MD: No. I did not go with them but they went and actually I was even luckier than they because I was 25 years old in 1947 and I was accepted as a student at the first Oslo University Summer School. So I spent the summer in Norway. I was the first person in our family to return to Norway, it wasn't a return for me, but I kept saying I am going home to Norway because my father always talked about going home to Norway and I said the same thing even though it wasn't my home, Rockford was my home but anyway that was a very special experience because there had been little travel of course because Norway was occupied until 1945 so when I was there in 47 they were still experiencing rationing of meat; it was difficult to get certain things and of course my family back here, the aunts and the uncles and my folks and sister were eager to know what life was like over there and I wrote copious notes in a daybook in a journal so that I could tell them everything, what I had to eat and when, everything and that was a very special experience in my life that I could do that and you know there were no airplanes. I went by ship and it took 10 days to cross the Atlantic Ocean and you know as a history teacher I thought of Columbus and the Vikings who ventured out in that big ocean because it was big and as I said it took 10 days to cross the ocean in 1947.

HC: Is that how your family came over as well by ocean?

MD: Oh sure, sure.

HC: Did you meet family?

MD: Yes, they were close enough.

HC: Family you had not met?

MD: No, oh no. Oh, I didn't know anyone and my dear father had given me a list, my brother so-and-so is married to so-and-so and then when I saw these people of course I forgot everything he had ever told me you know and I actually for a split second wondered why I had come. They did not speak one word of English so I had to speak Rockford Swedish and Norwegian which was not always, I didn't know the words. I can remember that young kids would imitate me they would say to me isn't it pretty here? And I could only think of one word and that was \_\_\_\_\_ (Norwegian word not spelled in interview) it is pretty. But you can say things are beautiful and they're amazing but I didn't know those words, I didn't know those words so that was a different experience too but it was fun. It was wonderful and I wish my son had had the experience.

HC: Has your son or any of your grandchildren been there?

MD: Oh, yes my son has been there several times, yes. As a matter of fact he took me back for my 80th birthday. That was my birthday present and that was fun because he made all the arrangements, carried the suitcases.

HC: Did you fly this time?

MD: Oh, of course. I don't know I know the Queen Elizabeth is now going over but I don't know if there are opportunities if there are freight ships that will maybe take a few passengers but there are no Norwegian American lines. There are cruise ships out there in the Caribbean that are Norwegian line but no, I don't think so.

HC: Earlier on you had mentioned your father was not able to buy a house for \$2000 did you live in an apartment?

MD: We lived in a two flat.

HC: Is that where they lived when they came over?

MD: No, they lived in other places and actually they had another experience. My father homesteaded out in Montana but that was before my time. Again, he had a brother who came with him in 1902 and they worked on farms out in North Dakota and his brother fell in love with someone and got married so he did not return to Norway ever but he homesteaded and had a farm near Great Falls Montana so during World War I my father homesteaded. You know you had to live on the land for nine months or a year and then the land would be yours, hundred and 60 acres or something so my father, and it was land adjoining his brother, so my father took his wife and two children, a boy and a girl out there. Again, my mother hated it. She did not like it and I don't think they had adequate housing. All my sister ever talked about were the cute little baby sheep and it was not a happy time so they came back to Rockford.

HC: And then stayed in the flat?

MD: Yes and then lived in Rockford. Dad was always active in things Norwegian. Anything Norwegian and as I say was a charter member of Sons of Norway and maintained that interest until he died in 1967. And my mother died in 1967 also so left me and my sister to carry on the Norwegian traditions.

HC: And what year were you married?

MD: 1952.

HC: What did your parents think of you marrying a Swedish person?

MD: Oh that was fine. You know the rivalry has just been fun and games, fun and games.

HC: Is there anything else you would like to talk about? I think there is a lot of good information here. You have such a wonderful history. It's very interesting coming from- interviewer talks about her family background.

MD: I regret that I didn't listen better to my father. You know it was amazing, my father really learned to write very well. He had good penmanship and now my mother never learned to write English. She could speak English but she never learned to write English but she was home. She sewed and she cooked and did those things. But dad was out in the work force and ultimately



was a foreman at Barber Colman Company and again it was interesting he got the job because a Norwegian trained engineer from Oslo, Norway came to Chicago and he established a plastics division at Barber Colman and my dad became one of his first workers and so dad, you know and what did they make? Well they made something called Bakelite which is really the forerunner of all of this plastic world we are in and dad worked at Barber Colman until I think he was 72, 73 and they had their trip to Norway in 1950 and that was wonderful and of course it's true now families go and come, all ethnic groups you know.

HC: What was your mother's name again?

MD: Name was Marie.

HC: And your father's name?

MD: Christian.

HC: And your son's name?

MD: Is Anders Christian. They had a good life here. This was home and it's the same story for many people. We don't trace our roots back to coming over on the Mayflower that kind of thing. We are not eligible to be DARS and so on. This was home and they were good upstanding citizens. Dad was on the library board once and I think that's interesting because he only had two grandsons and my son is a professional librarian. I think that's kind of neat.

HC: Was that at the Rockford library?

MD: Yes.

HC: Was it something he did early in his life or later on?

MD: No, later in life. I'm sure he was appointed by Mayor [Bloom] who was one of his friends. It was an interesting experience for him. I know they tried to pass a referendum and it failed and my dad was unhappy but that's the way it is and the editor of the newspaper here in Rockford at that time and for a long time was T. Barney Thompson who interestingly enough had Norwegian roots. So as a child I would go down to see Barney Thompson with my father and he belonged to Sons of Norway, not as an active member but he did claim his Norwegian roots and when I went to Norway Barney Thompson asked me if I would write a story of my stay at Oslo and I did. I wrote five articles for him that were published in the Rockford newspapers.

HC: And what year was that?

MD: That was 1947.

HC: That would've been with your maiden name?

MD: Yes, Danielsen, right. Margaret Danielsen.