

Kaare Nevdal

**Interviewed May 31, 2007
By Holli Connell
Midway Village Museum**

Holli Connell: Could you state your first and last name please.

Kaare Nevdal: Kaare Nevdal.

HC: And Kaare are you married?

KN: Yes.

HC: And your wife's name?

KN: Muriel.

HC: Do you and your wife have any children?

KN: Yes, we have three children.

HC: And their names?

KN: The oldest is Karen Nelson and the next one is Sandra Rogers and our son is Mark.

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

KN: My background is that I was educated in Norway then we were in the war. I was the radio officer so I went to gunnery school and then coming here without any education I had some training in engineering and I worked at Ingersoll Milling Machine Company in the engineering department there for a number of years and then I went into the insurance business and there I got my CLU degree which is charter life underwriter and in order to get in the College of Life Underwriters you had to prove that you had a high school education.

So I wrote to Norway and asked if I could have a transcript of my school and I got it and it was even translated to English and I sent that to the College and they wrote back they couldn't decide from it so they sent it into the Department of Health and Education and the Health and Education Department wrote back that it was a high school dropout in seventh grade and the good thing about it was that nobody at Ingersoll engineering department knew that I was a dropout. So then before I could get into the College of Underwriting I had to take the GED test and now I guess you can go to school and learn how to take it but there was no school in those days. I just went to the Board of Education and sat down and took it and that came out in 98% of those who took the exams each year so I guess that policy is I have a high school education. I always thought I had more like some college.

HC: Now some things that I discussed with other interviewees is in Norway it was different than here. You completed an eighth grade schooling is what they called it and I think, again one of the other people I talked to said it sounds different than here where in the United States you have grade school, junior high and high school but in Norway the education is an eighth grade level is what they say but really it's a high school diploma. So that's interesting.

KN: In my case I went to school for seven years and then you were done and that's all you needed but so I went to work and worked for a year and a half or two years than I went back to school and that was a three-year school but I went to a private school where you could do it in two years so I finished the three-year course in two years. So I had a total of nine years but it should be 10 because I did three years work in two years and I even had good grades.

HC: Are you retired now?

KN: Yes, many years.

HC: And where are you from?

KN: I am from a small town called Ytre Arna outside of Bergen, Norway but now it's been swallowed by Bergen. It's part of Bergen, Norway now but when I grew up it was an hour bus ride into Bergen so that's where I grew up.

HC: And when did you come to the United States?

KN: 1948.

HC: And did you specifically come to Rockford or anywhere else?

KN: No, Rockford.

HC: May I get your birthday please.

KN: October 9, 1920.

HC: Why did you decide to come to Rockford?

KN: That's a long story.

HC: I have three hours.

KN: I would almost have to tell you then when I lived in Norway the war broke out and the Germans invaded Norway in 1940 and when I lived there I was 19 years old. I lived there than so after one year under the occupation I escaped with a bunch of other guys in a fishing boat across the North Sea to England and the Norwegian government was already there and the king was there and they had formed an Air Force, Navy and Army and the money that they needed to keep that going they received from the Norwegian Merchant Marine which was sailing all over the world. The exile government confiscated the fleet and all the money that they generated was used by the government for, among other things, to provide for the military.

So then they sent me to Toronto, Canada to train for the Air Force and while I was training there I came to Rockford to visit my aunt and uncle even before Pearl Harbor I was there in September of 1941 and then I came back again December the same year before I went overseas and I liked

Rockford very much and I said to myself that if I survive the war and for some reason I am not going to live in Norway I sure would like to live in Rockford. So the rest of the story is while I was training in Toronto I met a young lady and I said goodbye to her in 1942 and went overseas and flew with the Air Force in Europe and then when the war was over 1945 I wrote to her and asked her if she would come to Norway and we would get married because I had a job with the Norwegian Airlines after the war and she came. So then we were going to stay in Norway. I had a good job of the housing situation was so bad we had to stay in a hotel in Oslo and my family was in Bergen and then she got pregnant. After she was pregnant we can't have a baby living in a hotel so we decided we would have to leave so we went to Canada so we came to Toronto, stayed there for one year and like I said before I always liked Rockford so I came down here on a visit and check out things and my cousin and my family here wanted me to come. I was anxious so we came down here in 1948. So that's what happened.

HC: Was your son or daughter born in Canada?

KN: Our daughter was born in Toronto. My next daughter and my son were born here. So we had a very difficult beginning with her coming over here from there and not able to speak Norwegian. Most people in those days did not speak English so they didn't think this marriage was going to last but it's going to be 62 years now in December.

HC: Speaking of the language barrier than, when you came to Rockford to stay you and your family. You spoke English?

KN: No, not very much. I had a little English but the first guy who hired me in the insurance business he said don't ever lose your accent and I haven't lost it.

HC: And what about your wife she didn't speak English either?

KN: She's from Canada. As a matter of fact she became Norwegian when she married me see so she came in as a Norwegian and we had been there a little while and she gets a phone call from the Board of Education inviting her to come to learn English and she said something to them well I'm not so sure I need to learn to learn English. The truth is she sounded like a corn fed girl from Iowa, the middle of Illinois.

HC: So did she help you learn English?

KN: No question about it she helped me a lot because we spoke English between us always. But she lived in Norway long enough to pick up a little Norwegian. In fact she's pretty good at it. So we only spoke Norwegian when our kids were around and we didn't want them to know what we were talking about because we could converse but no she is very good in English. She helped me.

HC: Your children, they didn't learn Norwegian in the home than, you spoke English and that's what they learned when they grew up here?

KN: Yes and then they corrected me. I was reading Bible stories to them and I said "Bengamin" and my daughter said it's not Bengamin it's Benjamin. Whatever I said wrong they corrected me which helped me.

HC: What did you do before you came here, what was your job in Norway?

KN: Well at that time I had just finished school the second time I was back two years and I took a job at a factory. There was a textile factory there and I had a notion of maybe becoming a textile engineer but then came the Germans and that took care of that. So I worked in a factory until I escaped a year after they came so that's what I was doing, factory work at that time while I was holding my own.

HC: What was your life like them in Norway before the invasion?

KN: Before the invasion, life was very good in so many ways but we didn't have material things to speak of but I thought we lived very well and the family situation was good even though I lost my mother when I was five years old but we were five children but we got a wonderful stepmother when I was 12 and two more brothers and there was no difference between us and till this day there is no difference so I had a very good family, very good family life. So that part was fine but in Norway we weren't well to do. Nobody was in those days. Today they are rich over there because they found oil some 20 or 30 years ago and now they are living today they say it's the best in the world. I don't see how they could live any better but growing up it wasn't easy but because of the family life we had a good life.

HC: You had been to this country before you actually move to Rockford?

KN: Yes.

HC: You had been here to visit family when you were in Canada?

KN: Yes.

HC: How long did it take you to make arrangements to come and live in Rockford while you were in Canada with your wife?

KN: I can't tell you just exactly but it didn't take very long. I would say a matter of no more than three months.

HC: When you left Norway to come to Canada how did you travel?

KN: I flew.

HC: And your wife as well?

KN: What happened was when we decided because she was pregnant and the housing situation I tried to book passage for us to go but we couldn't get on a plane for months because there were

so few planes and so many business people. There wasn't any tourism at that time. So I couldn't get a ticket anywhere and then I told my boss with the airlines one day I said to him you know I'm going to quit because of the housing situation and we're going to go to Canada. Oh no, he says I need you here he says okay I will make a deal with you if you can get my wife over, pay the ticket and get her over I will stay for six months; a few days later he arranged it so she flew back to New York and from New York to Toronto and then six months later than I told him I have been here so now I'm leaving. What they promised me and everybody else was they were going to build apartments and we were going to be right there at the top of the list but nothing happens in that six months so that's when I decided I was going to go too so I left and they even paid half my fare when I left. I worked it out good so that's what happened.

HC: Now when you were in the war you were fighting for who?

KN: The allies. British, Americans.

HC: And what did you do?

KN: I was what you call a radio gunner. I was in the plane I was on the radio for one hour and then I would go in the top turret in the airplane and I was there for an hour, then in a raider booth for an hour. You see we were out there 10 or 12 hours at a time and our job most of the time I was there was to chase submarines in the north Atlantic.

HC: And when World War II was over you went to Scandinavian air and worked there?

KN: Yeah. Then it was flying as the radio officer all over Europe.

HC: So when you moved to Canada after six months you came over to work in Canada before Rockford?

KN: Oh yes

HC: And what was that again?

KN: What I did?

HC: Yes

KN: What I could find. First I worked in a shop making oil burners and the funny thing was that shop was owned by a Norwegian woman but I never met her. I never saw her; she never saw me and all the people who worked there were Polish and spoke Polish. So I worked there for a while and then I got a job with a company making stoves and my job was on the assembly line making electric burners for the stoves so I was there for a while and that was it and then I left and came here.

HC: And how did you travel from Canada to Rockford?

KN: That's a long story too. You know today when I think about it they talk about legal immigrants. Do you want to hear how I got here? It took less than three months to get the papers than the last time we were down there they gave me the paper and said all you have to do is stop in at the immigration office downtown before you go like a performer it sounded like so the next day the day before when we were going to take the train and come to Rockford we go down there in the office, immigration office and we were sitting there looking at the papers and everything and they go back to their office and I looked over everybody behind there were sticking their heads together and they called me over and they said you came through Canada on Scandinavian Airlines? I said yes. You landed in Halifax? I said yes. Well we have a problem. I said what's the problem? At that time Scandinavian Airlines had not signed what was called the Atlantic Agreement and the law says that anyone who comes with the carrier whether it be in an airplane, a ship through Canada without having a signed agreement those passengers have to stay in Canada for one year before they can enter the United States. So I said well I'm stuck then. I'm not going to stay for another year so I said I can't enter from here can I enter from Mexico? Oh yeah. Can I enter from England? You can enter from anywhere except you cannot enter from Canada. Well than I can enter from Norway? He said yes. I said okay so I went home and right then I made up my mind well I'm going to go to Norway somehow and I said to Muriel I know what I'm going to do I'm going to go down to Montréal, I didn't have any money, I'm going to go down to Montréal and there are a lot of Norwegian ships there and I am going to get my self a job on a ship and I will work my way to Norway and I have some money over there that I couldn't take with me and some of the airline owed me had put in a bank for me and I said then I will buy my ticket and come back to Canada and then you can come from Toronto by train up to Rockford. I will go right to Rockford and you will come up and we will meet in Rockford. My father-in-law thought I was crazy but he drove me down to the station and I took off at night and went down to Montréal and I called a friend of mine who lived there who had been in the Air Force with me and he said oh my wife is away you can stay here so I stayed with him a few days and I went down to the docks and looked for Norwegian ships and I went to all the taverns and looked for sailors and wherever I came I got the same answer. There were no ships going to Norway they were all going to the continent of Europe and India and South America. And so after awhile I had to give up. So I called my cousin in Rockford to tell him that because we were in touch the whole time so I called and told them what happened and he said are you broke would you fly and I said yeah but I haven't got any money for that and he said how much does it cost? I said \$300. I'll send you the money he said and within two hours I had \$400 from him and my buddy he says it's nice to have a family like that and I said yeah it sure is.

So then he took me down to the airline and in those days it was hard to fly, to plan months ahead. I came down there and asked how soon I could get a ticket to Norway over England and they started talking about a month from now, six weeks and I said oh I want to go sooner than that and they came a little closer and I said I want to go sooner than that and they said there's a plane going this evening and I said that's the one I want. They thought I was going to try to escape from somebody. I got my ticket and got on board and flew to England, changed planes there and then to Oslo Norway. I went to the bank, got my money, went to the airlines, two months went to another airline the same. They were just loaded and there was no place so that I went up to the Scandinavian Airline office and one of the guys was a big shot there we flew together during the war so I went to him and said you know this is a lousy airline you're working for you didn't sign an agreement and I'm stuck. I had to come all the way here to the United States. Can you help

me? Sure he says. Why don't you go see your family in Bergen and come back and let me know so I went to see my folks and my family and came back and two days later he fixed me up. So I came to the United States and I sat there in a plane before we landed and I said this is so crazy somebody is going to be suspicious the way this is going. So I was nervous and we landed and the guy looked at the paper and he shoves it in a drawer and he said you are going to Rockford and I said yes. Hope you like it there and I said yes. He never knew where it came from or anything so I could have come from Canada no one would have known it. The whole trip was unnecessary. Just what you call red tape.

Not only that when I went from Oslo to Bergen to see my folks I went out to the airport and talk to my old boss and I said I need to go to Bergen how about giving me a free trip to Bergen for old times sake. He said oh I think we can fix that but I have to check with headquarters and I said okay. Just sit around I will check with them. So I'm sitting there waiting and then came the crew and they were going to go on board the airplane and it was a flying boat that I had been flying hours and hours on before and they said we're going now and you better come with us and I said I'm waiting for, and they said come on. So I go down there and the captain says you just follow me and I go behind the guy who's controlling the tickets and everything and went to the plane and went up and sat down in my seat, take my jacket off and sit there and somebody called hollering my name and I didn't answer and one of the crew says they know you were up there so I had to come down into the dispatcher's office and he said there is a telephone call for you so I pick up the phone and the guy from headquarters said Mr. Nevdal we have decided you can have a free trip the only thing you have to pay for is the insurance and I said well that's fine and I said thank you very much and you better tell the dispatcher so I handed the phone to the dispatcher and he said yeah, yeah okay and he hung up and he said the only problem is the plane is full we have no seats. So I said is there any weight problem. No we have plenty of room as far as weight. I've been standing in that airplane so many times I can stand up to Bergen and the captain looked so we let him do that and without saying anything they agreed. I hopped on board. It helped to have connections.

The reason my wife didn't have to do that because remember she went first and she flew to New York. She didn't land in Canada and then she flew from New York into camp. She was not affected by the Atlantic Agreement. It was only me. So anyway I got here at a few days later there she came with our daughter.

HC: You had an aunt and uncle in Rockford did any family come here after you?

KN: No. Visiting but not to stay.

HC: After you and your wife came here you had mentioned the jobs. What was your first job again?

KN: Ingersoll Milling. I started out as a pipe fitter and worked as a pipe fitter for 2 1/2 years and then they put me up in the engineering department and I was there for another eight years so I was there for 10 or 11 years.

HC: Where did you live when he first came to Rockford?

KN: I lived on the northwest side in a small house that my cousin and his partner built and sold to me.

HC: And how long did you live there?

KN: I lived there five years and then we moved to the northeast.

HC: In a home as well?

KN: Yes and we were there for 34 years.

HC: And was that something you owned?

KN: Yes.

HC: And did your cousin also build it?

KN: No. We bought one.

HC: How different was your first home here compared to how you lived or the living conditions in Norway?

KN: It wasn't much different in my first home, no.

KN: How about the second home?

HC: The second home had more room and we were a smaller family with more room so it was better than what I had there.

HC: With your children they went to school here in Rockford then?

KN: Yes.

HC: Were you insistent on education with them or was that a big part for them to continue education? Once you came here and you and your wife are building a family was education important?

KN: Oh yes.

HC: And did you become a citizen?

KN: Yes, as soon as I could.

HC: And your wife as well?

KN: Oh yes.

HC: When you got here where did you see yourself in five years?

KN: I don't know but I worked hard. I worked a lot of jobs. I did whatever I could do to get through. That's the thing about being here that you can do so many things and when I worked in the engineering department at Ingersoll I remember the chief engineer asked me into his office and reviewing my work and he gave me a raise and I said thank you very much now I can quit some of my part-time work and he says you do part-time work? I says yeah. He says what do you do? I sell insurance and I mow lawns and then I work in a laundry, working a laundry I threw that in, that was with my cousin. I was working there but not for pay. I was helping my cousin because he started a Laundromat so I was helping him but I did sell insurance and I mowed lawns on the side. So I worked hard and that's why after five years we could move into a bigger home. Yeah.

HC: Did you integrate yourself into the community through any organizations or churches or anything like that when you were here?

KN: Yeah, church right away.

HC: And what church?

KN: Our Savior's Lutheran. I got very much involved there and still am very much involved and that was very meaningful to us. Later I was very active in Rockford Kiwanis Club. I've been past president. I've been a member there for 42 years and I was very much involved in the insurance industry. I was teaching insurance guys at Rock Valley College CLU which was the degree you could obtain and I was teaching that and I was teaching business insurance and another group. So I have been involved in a lot of things.

HC: But the church was the first one that you and your wife were involved in?

KN: Yes.

HC: Did you meet people from Norway at that church or people that you might've known?

KN: I've met some but more importantly I integrated because I didn't come here to be with Norwegians I came here to be with Americans. Of course the church was a Norwegian background but it isn't anymore because we have integrated. It was started by immigrants but there are fewer and fewer immigrants coming. As a matter of fact I can only think recently in our church now I think that two of us may be three who came from Norway.

HC: Is that on Rural Street?

KN: Yeah.

HC: They have the large pipe organ?

KN: Yes.

HC: Interviewer shares her story about going to an organ concert there.

HC: Were you involved in any political actions here, I mean once you were able to vote, did stuff like that?

KN: I never miss the vote but I have been really involved. I've given money to them but I'm not a member of a party or at least one of the parties I think I am.

HC: Politically from Norway to here did that change at all how you were politically involved?

KN: Norway to here? Yes, maybe not. The system in Norway I lived under it but I was not really in agreement with it. It was more socialistic. It wasn't exactly socialistic but it was borderline socialistic and I wasn't for that. Here I am a conservative in most areas but not in everything. I know we have to live together and all that so I'm not a hardliner but I tend to be free enterprise and as a matter of fact the thing when I came here people would say to me was how do you like America? You know that was the first question I got for the first three or four years, how do you like America they have nice cars. Everyone was so car conscious and I said cars are nice but there are other things that are more important to me and the thing that I found has been important to me is the freedom, the freedom that we have in the United States. Some of it has been eroded but the freedom when I came to be whatever you want to be. In the old country's you didn't have that but here you do. In the old country not only Norway it was very important who was your dad, what did he do you know, your pedigree. Here they don't ask you just go ahead and do what you can do and the other thing was to have papers to prove that you can do this or that. Here you don't need papers. They just let you loose and do what you can do. Matter of fact when I worked at Ingersoll the best engineers there, some of the best had no engineering degree and the chief engineer he told me that. So that is the freedom that you have here and that's a big difference and that's because of the policies so politically I favor the system here much better than in Europe.

HC: How were you treated when you came here?

KN: Very well, very well.

HC: And did you have neighbors at your first house?

KN: Yes. We got along very fine, no problem. From day one I've been received with all my accent and everything, I was so well accepted on the job or in the neighborhoods, where ever I have been. They tease me a lot like in Kiwanis I will never get away from being Norwegian and I have been there 42 years because every meeting somehow something comes up and they will tease me a little bit but I love it. They wouldn't do it if they didn't care see.

HC: Are you a naturalized citizen?

KN: Oh yeah

HC: Was there anything that was difficult to adjust to?

KN: Valentine's Day. For me to adjust I haven't adjusted to it yet.

HC: Were you nervous or your wife and all with the decision to move down here at first? I know you were excepted once you were here but were you nervous at all?

KN: No. We were both very happy to come. She grew up in Canada but she has always admired the United States and she was very happy to come here even though she was happy in Canada too but there was no problem.

HC: When you actually came here you mention cars did you have a vehicle when you got here?

KN: No. I don't know how long it was first few months I didn't have one and then I bought for my cousin's dad's car so that was my first one.

HC: What was that?

KN: I think it was a 37 Chevy coupe and I fixed it up. It hadn't been out of town for many years and I drove up to Toronto Canada 620 miles with my kids in the back in the coupe but it worked out fine.

HC: Is there anything else you think of that you want to add reflection of what it was like to be here to come here to America. You had some wonderful stories.

KN: No, the only thing is how thankful I am for this country. First of all you know I lost my country there for a while Norway was occupied. I had no idea if I would ever get back to Norway when I was in exile because it looked like Hitler was going to win. Then came Pearl Harbor and I was in Toronto, Canada in training when that happened and that I knew that now the United States would come in and that's the only way that we can win the war over the Germans is with United States help and that's what happened so I am forever grateful to the Americans, to all the soldiers when I think of all of those who lost their lives, plus we had a reason to fight because we had been taken but the Americans went way over there and fought, I am forever thankful for them and for the United States. I am so thankful for what the country has done for me. I will be until the dying day.

HC: Were you able to visit your family once you've established life here in Rockford?

KN: Yeah, the first time I went back I had been here nine years and I got such a feeling that I had to see my dad and my mom and my uncle had just died and I thought that could've been my dad because he was older so I could afford it. I had the money but there was all kinds of other stuff we needed. But having a good wife as I did she realized that it was important to me and I went home to visit them after I had been gone nine years that was 1957 and have a wonderful time there for two weeks and then in 1965 I was able to take my whole family over before my dad died and he died the following year and that was really the highlight of my life as far as I

was concerned and I took the three kids. My oldest had just graduated from high school and the others were younger and then we flew over and that was because my hard work my family didn't even know that I had been putting away money and putting away money apart from everything else and I had the money and the ticket and away we went. So that was great and since then later when the kids were gone my wife and I went over several times since and I have been by myself now the last few times and all my siblings have been here visiting me once or twice. So it's been good.

HC: Has your wife been up to see her family as well then?

KN: Oh yeah. Went back and forth all the time. Nowadays she only has one brother left there but I had three brothers and sister in Norway. We talk every month at least and now we have a computer and it's much easier. I've read the Norwegian newspaper on the computer every day. My hometown newspaper so things are so much easier now than when we first came here.

HC: When you communicated when you first came here was it just letters?

KN: Just letters. Talking on the phone was very expensive in those days.