

ELSA FAGERBERG INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Elsa Eleonora Fagerberg was born December 7, 1916 to Oskar Fagerberg from Sweden and Bertha nee Nilson, who had come out from Winnipeg to join Bertha's brother Yolmar in 1913 at his Saanich farm. Elsa lived for 80 years at 588 Richgrove, formerly 4347 Wilkinson Road, in a house built by Oskar. Elsa's sister Clara was an office worker, and her brother George was a gardener. He worked for Layritz Nurseries then for himself. In the Depression the family grew their own produce and made extra money by entering contests at the Willows Fair. Elsa attended Strawberry Vale School, Mt. View and afterwards took secretarial training at Sprott-Shaw. She worked in offices for small businesses before going to the Motor Vehicle Branch 1961-77, from which she retired.

INTERVIEW WITH ELSA FAGERBERG

Interviewer: Louise Ditmars
Date: April 1, 1997
Location: 207-3965 Shelbourne Ave.
Sponsor: Saanich Archives

- Q: Can you tell me your full name please?
- A: Elsa Eleonora Fagerberg.
- Q: And can you tell me your birthdate?
- A: December the 7th, 1916.
- Q: And were you born in Victoria?
- A: Yes.
- Q: And were you born in the hospital?
- A: ...Royal Jubilee Hospital, yes.
- Q: And what was your father's name?
- A: Oskar Fagerberg.
- Q: And where did he come from?
- A: Sweden.
- Q: What about your mother, what was her name?
- A: She was Bertha Erika Nilson before she married.
- Q: And whereabouts did they meet?
- A: Probably at church, I don't know. In Winnipeg.
- Q: And what year did they get married?
- A: 1900.
- Q: Did your dad belong to any Swedish organizations around there?
- A: Well I think he belonged to the Vossa Lodge.
- Q: Would that be for new immigrants to help them get established?

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- A: Well maybe. It was about the only lodge I think the Swedes had at the time.
- Q: I think there were different groups around Winnipeg that stuck together,...each from different countries.
- A: All that's probable. The Swedes stuck together because there were new immigrants coming out all the time, and they were encouraging them to come. And things were tough in Sweden at the time they came out, just before the turn of the century.
- Q: I wonder what it was in Sweden that was so difficult...
- A: There wasn't that much work. I don't know exactly...
- Q: I guess when they came out to Canada, there was a chance to get some land, quite a bit of land.
- A: Yes, they could come out and be homesteaders. Homesteading was quite the thing, but not in my family.
- Q: They weren't farmers.
- A: No, Grandad was a blacksmith, and he worked for the C.P.R. And Dad painted houses. It was mostly connected with repair and painting and so on.
- Q: Now your dad also went to art school, didn't he? An unusual thing for this era. I think you told me somewhere between 1900-1910 he went to art school in...
- A: I think that would be the time period.
- Q: This was Rock Island?
- A: Illinois.
- Q: So what did he learn there, do you think?
- A: Well he had talent and I guess he polished it up a bit. That was the reason for him going there.
- Q: He could paint pictures, he could paint walls, he was quite a guy...So when the move came to Victoria, was it your parents who came first or someone else?
- A: Mother's brother I think came first. And then Mother's parents came, and then Mother and Dad came out to help them, because they were more or less farming. If you call..I don't know what they grew but they had a horse and a couple cows.

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- Q: A little mixed farm maybe. Do you know your Mother's brother's name?
- A: Yolmar...Nilson.
- Q: And Grandpa, do we know his name?
- A: Theodore and I think his second name was Bernard...
- Q: I wonder if we could find your grandfather's name if we looked in the old land records...I wonder if we could find him when he first arrived here?
- A: No you wouldn't be able to because the property was listed as...he bought the property from somebody who was listed as Gardom, Garnom or something like that. But there's another couple of names that got mixed up in it when I researched it...Until it was paid, which was about 1919 I gather, it wasn't registered in his name, it was registered in all these different people's names.
- Q: Even though he lived there and was probably working it all that time. So your folks came out when?
- A: 1913. Grandad was already here, he'd been here since 1911 or 12. He hadn't been here that long.
- Q: And where did your folks live?
- A: They lived with Grandad apparently.
- Q: And later on, they got their own place.
- A: When the house was habitable at all, we moved in...The same house. It's now 588 Richgrove. But it was home to me all my life.
- Q: It used to have a different address.
- A: We were on Wilkinson Road, so it was 4347 Wilkinson.
- Q: That's right at Carey Road?
- A: Yeah.
- Q: And who designed and built that house?
- A: Well my dad built the house. I don't know who designed it. I think there was a magazine or something with the picture in it, and floor plan and everything. But I don't know where it is now.

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Q: How many years did you live there?

A: All my life till now, so that will be eighty years.

Q: And is the house still there?

A: Yes.

Q: What was this house like?

A: Well it was a seven room house typical of the era, and it was brown and white...Theres a good picture of it in the heritage buildings book.

Q: Would you say it was pretty solid?

A: It had to be to stand up that long.

Q: ...Was it two stories?

A: Two stories. It was a seven room house with three bedrooms upstairs and a dining room, living room and kitchen and one bedroom which we converted into a den, downstairs.

Q: What about the property, how big?

A: Well it was originally four acres, but my brother, when he got married in 1935, had not quite an acre on the corner of Carey and Wilkinson where he built his home...And then...about [1990] or maybe before I sold property that was open space to the Saanich Baptist Church which is where they've got their building now.

Q: When your family first got there, was there anything on that property?

A: There was a house, down on the corner of Carey and Wilkinson. A small cottage and a barn. The barn is gone and my brother built his house where the original house stood, approximately. And now there are five more to keep it company on what they call Daffodil Place or Daffodil Way or something. Because across the street from the house the Vantreights had daffodils planted when they were building these other houses, so that's the reason for the name.

Q: And were there trees?

A: Most of the trees that are there were planted by my brother and in front of the Saanich Baptist Church there are a lot of sequoias, a row, and they're fair-sized now, considering they were grown from seed...They're seventy feet tall or

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A: something like that.

Q: When did your father die?

A: 1921.

Q: And you were quite small at the time. So there was your mother and yourself, and who else?

A: My sister, and there were just the three of us.

Q: What were your sister and brother's names?

A: George and Clara.

Q: So I guess George was the gardener.

A: George was the gardener and Clara worked in an office...George was quite well known for it because he worked at Layritz Nurseries for forty years I guess.

Q: I guess he was practising at your house early on. Did he pick out the kinds of trees to plant?

A: Yes, mostly. Most of the trees that are around our place were planted by my brother. The ones that were planted originally by Dad didn't fit in when we redesigned the front garden and put in the lawn. That was about 1926.

Q: What kinds of fruit trees did your brother plant?

A: Well the fruit trees weren't planted by my brother, they were planted by Dad, most of them. Mr. Layritz had a bunch of fruit trees, apples and pears and whatnot that were getting a little bit too big to transplant as nursery stock. You don't want too big a tree when you're transplanting it so we bought some of the ones that were getting to the stage where you didn't normally have them up for sale. They were Cox's Orange and Delicious. George changed some of them by grafting them. We grew a lot more saleable apples, Transparents and a couple of Gravensteins. And for awhile there he had one tree that he had fourteen varieties on...Besides selling apples we used to go to the Willows Fair and he had a fruit..you had a plate of apples and you went into competition with everybody else to see if you could..they had to be uniform and so on. And we won quite a number of prizes for fruit. And Mother got prizes for baking and my sister and I had a whack at it too. We had made jellies. We entered everything you could think of to make a little extra money. And she decorated tables with flowers and you had a certain sized table and you supplied the

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- A: flowers and the vases and the whole bit. And I tried my hand at making corsages. Anything we thought we could do, or we tried.
- Q: Your mother made some bread to enter?
- A: She made bread, but she got a prize for her buns, or rolls, whichever you want to call them. Dinner rolls I guess they would be. But she could never beat Mrs. McQueen and her bread. We tried. Mrs. McQueen said she would never've been able to make it only her husband helped her. He beat the dough to get it light and airy. He was part of the process...Kneading and what have you.
- Q: So in the twenties and the thirties your family worked hard outside, you had a lot of things going on outside. What kind of animals did you have?
- A: We used to have..Grandad had a horse. When Katy was gone we never replaced the horse, but we had two cows most of the time. And in the summer, the late summer, we'd get a couple of pigs and we'd slaughter one and use it and the other one we sold. Whoever the butcher was that slaughtered the pigs used to buy one and we'd keep the other one. And there was a Mrs. Gilham who lived in the neighbourhood, she smoked the hams for us.
- Q: Because times were a bit hard, particularly since your mother was a widow right then, would she trade things with the neighbours?
- A: Not too much, no. We used to sell milk by the pail and we used to sell a few eggs, but nothing too much in that line.
- Q: What were some of the schools that you went to?
- A: Well I went to Strawberry Vale and from there I went to Mt. View High and I ended up at Sprott-Shaw.
- Q: What did you do there?
- A: I took the usual course in stenographer and..I didn't take bookkeeping, just a general secretary's course.
- Q: I just want to talk a little bit more about the property. Did you really notice a big difference when the thirties came along after the crash?
- A: Not too much because we were just surviving...And things got a little bit better.

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- Q: I think your family began to grow more things and sell more things.
- A: ...Mostly flowers because they were easier...We still sold fruit. In those days florist shops weren't regulated like they are now where they have to buy everything from a sort of a wholesale distributing business. You could sell privately to...Ballantyne used to have plums and apples and cherries and different things he sold as well as flowers. Stores they specialize now.
- Q: So a small farmer could sell directly to stores...What kinds of flowers did you have?
- A: Well we had asters and zinnias and sweet peas and gladiolas mostly.
- Q: They sound glamorous...Did they take a lot of care?
- A: Well he had to dig the gladiola bulbs and take them in every winter. And that was a big job. We used to fill gunny sacks full of bulbs. So he'd try and keep them segregated so they were all one colour.
- Q: ...This was your brother's area mostly...
- A: Well he worked at Layritz Nurseries and then he started growing some stock on his own. So he was in the business most of his life.
- Q: Did you ever have a greenhouse?
- A: No...just cold frames.
- Q: How many asters do you think you could produce?
- A: Some weeks we'd get about eighty dozen...but that was when they were producing most...Their season isn't too long.
- Q: Was it late summer?
- A: Yeah.
- Q: What other survival techniques did you have? There you were on the farm. What about clothing?
- A: Well hand-me-downs were the thing that once in a while you got. And you sewed most of your own clothes because, or you got your big sister to do it.
- Q: Who in your family was it?

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- A: Clara, it wasn't me. I have done a little sewing but not much. Mother used to sew clothes when we were small. When we got a little fussier, you had to create your own. You bought patterns. Otherwise you laid it down on the floor and just made it the shape of a dress.
- Q: Were the patterns very expensive?
- A: No. I don't know what they would be worth. About fifty cents I guess.
- Q: What about preserving stuff for the winter?
- A: Well we canned the surplus whatever it was...It could be beans and peas and tomatoes mostly I think. We canned fruit too like peaches and pears and cherries. I don't think we canned any applesauce much. That came later because you kept the apples rather than..
- Q: If you had the fifteen varieties you could make them last all year possibly.
- A: Well Transparents didn't last very long so if you wanted to keep them you had to make applesauce and can it.
- Q: Did you ever dry any apples?
- A: No.
- Q: ...Did you have a big boiler to can with?
- A: A washboiler to start with and then we got a pressure cooker...I don't think it took less time because certain things you cooked for twenty minutes with the fruit. But vegetables so they wouldn't spoil, I think they cooked them for three hours...So with the pressure cooker you got more, at least it took less time.
- Q: Did you ever have very many vegetables go bad after canning?
- A: No. I had more of recent years that the lids didn't seal properly than I had years ago.
- Q: What kinds of lids did you use?
- A: Kerr-Mason and Bernardin.
- Q: Those are the snap lids that you use once and throw away. How did you get around in those times?
- A: Well we had a car most of the time. Dad had a Model T and

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- A: George got a new Chevy in 1926, and it was a Chev touring. And in the thirties he bought a used car, a Ford I think, what year it was I don't know. But he got it in the late thirties and Clara took over the old Chevy. She was driving the Chevy to work. And then she got a newer car so she drove. As long as she was working she was driving to work. And we had a sucession of Dodges...Clara bought one Dodge in 1940 I guess, or '41 and we had Dodges ever since. And George had Ford products, so we were a divided family as far as what we drove.
- Q: So in 1935 George got married. Who was his wife?
- A: Well she was a Lindquist originally. Myrtle Florence Lindquist.
- Q: Did he move away?
- A: He built the house on a corner of the property, so he was a next-door neighbour all the time.
- Q: So he kept on in the gardening business. Was he working for himself by this time?
- A: No, he was working for Layritz as long as they were in business. But then Layritz died in 1954 and after that I don't know how many years they kept on as Layritz Nurseries, but then they were bought out by Mr. DeWilt. He was there a short time and most of the staff had left by then, and he gave up the nursery business. He went broke or something.
- Q: So was that it for the nursery?
- A: That was it for the nursery. Then they sold the property and there's no nursery there at all now.
- Q: What did George do after that?
- A: He went on his own and he used to go gardening at different places. He'd take care of their house, you know the garden. He did a lot of work in the Uplands. And there was a family out on the Pat Bay Highway...He worked there for a while, Mrs. Guttman. She had a considerable sized property and had a lot of trees and shrubs around her place. A very nice garden.
- Q: What about Clara? Where was she working?
- A: She was working at Smith, Davidson and Leckie and now it's become just plain Leckie and Company...If it still exists. But it was a wholesale paper outfit.

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Q: Did she make a big wage?

A: Oh of course. She started at fifteen dollars a week. [laughs] Well it was better than my thirty cents an hour on my side...Wages are up and so are the prices. But when you talk about wages and people saying they worked for a dollar a day, a lot of people did.

Q: When World War II came along, was there a big upheaval then for your family?

A: Not really, because there wasn't anybody that was of draft age...I was trying to think what I was doing but I was working in an office.

Q: You were just starting working, after you got finished in Sprott-Shaw. Where did you go first?

A: I went to the New Method Laundry, and I was part-time supposedly, while they put in the laundry marking system. And I was trying to keep track of the numbers that were issued to each person. Everybody had to have a number and somebody would forget to cross it off when they'd issue it and two people would have the same number and the laundry would get all mixed up...And we used to have a lady who looked after the missing laundry and she said, she came and asked me what was a certain person's number and I told her. And she said, but he got the wrong shirt dear. She called everybody dear. But I wasn't there more than a few months and I went to work with my sister at Smith, Davidson. And after they changed, when Leckie came into the picture, he didn't approve of two sisters working in the same office, so I was the one that got pushed out the door. And I went to work for Wood Motors after that. And I survived there until it changed hands and they decided they no longer wanted me so then I went to work for the government in the Motor Vehicle Branch. And I retired from there in '77.

Q: So you started there in 1961. What were working conditions like? What was the length of your day, when did you start and when did you finish?

A: We worked from 8:30 to five I think...And then things progressed and we got flex time and you could work more hours a day and less days a week...I still worked the same hours I think because that was the hours that my ride to and from work was working...A Mr. Lawson that lived up the road from us on Miller. He worked the Motor Vehicle at the time and then he went to work for Vital Statistics I think.

Q: Did you like the government job better than the others?

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- A: Well it was different, I was doing different things. I wasn't using my shorthand. And I ended up being in charge of statistics on accidents and convictions and what have you.
- Q: Were working conditions better at a government job than a non-government job?
- A: Not necessarily better. They were different and your job was more secure maybe.
- Q: I suppose you had to have your coffee break morning and afternoon and you had to have your lunch hour.
- A: We did have coffee break morning and afternoon but I didn't always take coffee breaks, sometimes I had a cup of coffee because you were allowed to do that if you weren't accessible to the public. And we were sort of in the background.
- Q: Where would you go for coffee if you were going to go out?
- A: We didn't go out of the building. They had a place, a room where you had coffee with everybody else. And somebody would be assigned to make the coffee by the week, and do the dishes for everybody. And I didn't drink, I decided I didn't like their coffee, so I didn't drink coffee and I didn't see washing the dishes if I wasn't partaking so I gave up.
- Q: Where was the Motor Vehicle Branch?
- A: On Menzies Street at the old drill hall at the time. They moved up to Douglas in the old press building afterwards. But I wasn't there then. The move came after I left.
- Q: I just want to jump back to early days. You said you once belonged to the Luther League. Is that a church organization?
- A: It's a young people's group from the Lutheran Church. And at that time we were affiliated with the States so it was the Pacific Northwest District Luther League. And afterwards when they joined the Canadian synod and it was, we were no longer...I think we gave up the Luther League.
- Q: What kind of activities did they put on?
- A: Well we used to have beach parties with weiner roasts and things like that. And we used to have meetings once a month I guess it was.
- Q: ...How did you see Saanich change? I guess when you first

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Q: lived there..

A: Well when I first lived where I did, there was 120 acres behind our place where they operated a dairy farm...there's Northridge Subdivision in there now so it's altogether different.

Q: So in general Saanich was..

A: sparsely populated. Now you don't get any property but what it's got a house. Well there is a little bit of acreage across Wilkinson Road where the nursery used to be because Vantreight grows potatoes and daffodils and such in different places throughout the municipality and they have quite a sizeable piece. I guess its about ten acres or something like that across from us, or across Wilkinson...I think Vantreight's about the only one that has large farming areas...When I was growing up there were strawberry farms and daffodil farms out in Gordon Head. Now there's nothing in that line anymore. I think the last person has given up too.

Q: Thank you so much for sharing your memories with me today.