OH #84.

SI Today I'm interviewing my grandmother, Abalona Peterson, in the kitchen of her home at 815 North Rodney, Helena, Montana. Lona migrated to Havre, Montana in 1918 from Copenhagen, Denmark.

LP Well, it was in 1918 when I decided I wasn't gonna keep on working in the fields in Denmark, milking cows and feed pigs and t'ings like that, so I bought a ticket and started to t'ink about going to United States. I remember the day when I stood waiting and I can still hear the boat say, "Whooo...," and I thought, for goodness sake, is it raining. I felt some t'ing running down my cheeks. I didn't know I was crying and somebody stood beside me and she did the same t'ing. Well, we wiped our eyes and the boat started to leave and we walked down stairs to see what we could see down there. We were on the bottom of the boat, that was the cheapest, you know. We didn't have much money so we had to put up with what we could get. We sit down in the room for a couple of hours and then they rung a bell and they asked us if anyone want any supper. They would have to come now, there was no nothing afterwards. You be here now and you eat all at one time. So we found the dining room. We had to walk off in a great big hall and the kitchen windows was opening and the steam came out and you could smell that food they'd been cooking.

Well, I didn't get sea sick the first day, but I wish I could say that about the rest of the trip, but I can't, but we had supper and we went in after while. That first night we had a pretty good sleep and the next day wasn't bad. It wasn't too windy. There was a fellow sitting... now, I can't remember... that shouldn't be in there... I can't remember what we called that boat we took. It was a Danish boat.

SI Was it a ferry boat?

LP No, it was a great big boat that crossed the Atlantic, you know, but I t'ink it was Christian De'Neen. So we talked about t'ings and then we went to bed and then the next morning about seven t'irty, the bell was ringin' again and we were told eight o'clock breakfast. Anyone want breakfast have to be there at eight o'clock and not'ing afterwards. So, we got up and got in for breakfast and we had a pretty fair breakfast and talked to one another... was getting a little acquainted you know and that day was real nice.

The next evening or the next morning we saw people pulling down the blinds and tighten' here and tighten' there so we know there was a storm coming. And after while we could feel the boat rockin', you know, going... it was quite a deal. I went upstairs and dropped my false teeth right on the floor and the fellow told me, "Oh, you'll get used to it." "No," I say, "I will not. Next time I come up, I'll leave them down stairs." I didn't do that all the time. I was lucky enough they hadn't broke when I came to New York, in fact, I still have them. No, that's the teeth, ya.
Well, for a good many days we had quite a bit of storm. You could hear the dishes and they were hoppin' out in the kitchen there and that was not a pleasant trip at all, we were on the water for 17 days from Copenhagen to New York and it was not really a pleasure trip, but then, I had asked to go. Nobody wanted me to, so I got what I wanted so I have no kick coming and then we came to New York, they used to put people over on Ellis Island. That's a little island. They couldn't send us there because there were prisoners there so we were locked up in a couple of rooms for a couple of hours and they always had several young ladies that were the government we had say in.... "The government know what time you were coming." There were somebody there to meet us and tell us, "Well, you could go to a restaurant and get something to eat and something." They were very good to us and it was kind of fun and one thing I found I didn't know what to do with... that was chewing gum. I said, "What in the Sam is that soft stuff?" They said, "You chew it... chew it." "Well, do you... can you swallow it? No, I don't want any of that junk," I said, so I didn't get used to chewing gum on the boat and I don't care for it yet! [Laughter].

SI Wow! They don't chew gum over in Denmark?

LP No. I don't know if they have chewing gum in Denmark, I really don't. I'd never seen an ice cream cone either, so I was... everything was so different, you know. There was no cows to milk. There was no calf or pigs to feed. So, I could see what I had asked for, I was going to get. I was going to get different work and meet different people and how true that are.

SI Yea... sounds like you must have....

LP In eighteen days... that was in 1890, we landed in New York and it was a beautiful day, the day we landed. The sun was shining and we t'ought we could see across the big waters, see the buildings and it was really somet'ing. We waited till somebody came and told us we had to go places and they already knew our addresses. They pretty smart people in the United States. They told one bunch to go to this one and another bunch to go to another restaurant, if we want something to eat and there will be people... there'll understand you. You can talk half and half, they'll get to understand you and it was lot of fun, but we did get something to eat and they were playing harmonicas and it was an awful racket. We t'ought it was a terrible racket and everybody was knitting, the women was sitting with big bags and somebody explained it to the one that could talk to us. They were knitting sweaters for the soldiers. They got the yarn, the government give them the yarn, but they had to knit the sweaters, ya, so we found that much out, ya.

SI Did they pay them for knitting or they just did that...?

LP No, they didn't pay them for knitting, but they gave them the yarn and they were given to the soldiers, ya. So, that was it, we learned that much. So, we got on the trains and I was
told where to go and there was a big bunch with me and we pretty soon got acquainted with one another. It was kind of nice. In the train, they would call out people there, went round, you know, and want to check your suitcases. "No, thank you." I never give them any more than a nickel and they pointed their fingers inside their hand, turned the finger around and said, "More, more, more". I said, "No, thank you", [inaudible] and I dropped a nickel and walked away. So, they got so when I give them a nickel, they didn't say any t'ing and got along with what they got. You may have to check it. [Discussing the contents of the coffee pot].

SI Yes. So you got on the train in New York and came all the way to... to....

LP Well, I was in then... I can't remember, I think we changed trains, but I have forgotten, but I was in Minneapolis and we all went and had something to eat and that was my last meal until I came to Havre, Montana, two days after and I was hungry. We came into the depot in Havre and I was sitting in there wondering... my sister had saved up for the government, she would meet me. But it took nine months on account of there was a war with Germany and we were afraid to go across the Atlantic for nine months. So, it took that long, so my sister had left. I sit there at the depot so a couple I had met on the boat, they come over and asked me if I had know my sister. Well, I said, "I'm pretty sure we'd know one another and I am also sure she isn't here." So, they went to the post office and the post office told them, they used to have her address, but she had left for Seattle and they did not have her address. So they came back and told me that.

Well, I said, "She worked on a poor farm." So they went and called up the poor farm and they came back and they said, "Yea, we talked to the people, and she worked there and they comin' in and they going to take you home and they'll help you get to your sister if you want to get to her." So, they came in after while and they showed me an envelope with her writing on it so I know they were the people she had worked for and they made signs to me to come in the car. So, I went in the car and we went home and I was hungry; you know I hadn't eaten I'd left Minneapolis.

SI Two days!!

LP So, she warmed the coffee and she put some bread and butter on the table and I hurried up and ate a couple of slices of bread and butter and then they showed me the bedroom where I was to sleep and that was a nice room in there.

SI This was at the poor farm?

LP That was at that poor farm. Then they showed me something I had never seen. They opened up the door to what they called the toilet room and I had never seen a toilet. I had thought, "Well, the people aren't going to drown me or anything." I know what it was, but I never seen it before. Believe me, when I used
it, that door was closed tight (laughter). Gotta have some fun in it. That first night there was nothing, they left me alone and I was glad they did. The next morning, I heard when they got up and I got up and I went down there because I t'ought I am not going to lose out on breakfast. They had a hired man and we were sitting there and I listened in to every word they were talking. If there was anything I caught, I marked it down and practiced saying when I got into my room and it went that way for several months.

There was one t'ing, she was nothing of a housekeeper and I like to work, you know. I was always happy when I be doing something. I scrubbed everything in the kitchen and the dining room when need, and I even went over in that little house they lived in and kept that clean, washed the curtains and ironed them and hung them up. I t'ink they t'ought that was just wonderful. But one day, how I got to stay there, they make signs to me pointed on my shoulders and my head and I thought that must mean my coat and my hat, I saw they had their car out. So, I put on my coat and my hat and we went into the commercial store in Havre and they talked to a couple of ladies and out come a young man and him and them, they had a big talk. I t'ought to myself, I hope you know what you're talking about and this one fellow, he turned around and he said, [Danish for] "I can talk Danish." Well, I say, "Isn't that wonderful." Of course, I didn't say it in English, I couldn't, but then I can find out what's going on. "Yes," he said, "Your sister cooks in a Danish restaurant in Seattle. They talk nothing but Danish."

They had already find out I was a good worker and they could get the county to pay me a little for staying there so they were already after keeping me there. They said, "If you go there you'll never learn to talk." "Oh, I am going to learn to talk, that's going to be wonderful no matter what I do, I want to learn to talk." Well, that fellow said, "That's the great idea and the county will pay you $20 a month and they say you pretty good already and they'll be glad to let you work for them for a while." Well, of course, I thought they'd be nice to me. For two days there was nothing I could do but be nice to them. So, I started working there and it went pretty good, but I still couldn't understand if that was a poor farm or if it was a prison. They only had four old men and they were mean to them and that hurt me. The old men they kind of found out the hard way.

She told me the next day I made the butter and I had made butter in Denmark. To get real good butter is to get all the milk out. You keep washing it until you get all the milk out. Well, I did that, but she told me not to give anything to them old fools and from then on she called them old fools. That didn't take me too long to find that out. Well, it went for a while and one day I took a big chunk of butter, put it on a plate and took it in there and made signs to the men... I pointed out to the kitchen, that meant I was pointing up there and then I pointed under the table. They know I meant for them to put it under the table, so, they did get butter. It made me mad. She told me sure it were good enough for them old fools and then went out for lunch. Them old fools or them old men, they did allow
them to go out in the laundry room and wash their clothes. They
could keep everything clean themself. It wasn't kept too clean,
but everything was pretty dirty when I moved in so I know she
wasn't too particular about that.

SI    Yea.

LP    Every time when I'd make butter, she took the butter into
town and she came home with a new dress or fancy shoes or she
would have a permanent. I thought, "That's funny, that's always
when she take that butter to sell. Well, that butter belong to
the county." Of course I didn't say any't'ing and several months
went ahead. I'd been there for about ten or eleven months, I
t'ink eleven months. One night the fellow that took care of the
furnace, he used to be a school teacher and he'd gotten to
drinking and he was sent there, he run away. The other fellows
couldn't run the furnace and Havre is close to Canada. It get
very cold there and when I come over, them old men were sitting
in there just shivering, but they did have an old stove. I went
in, I found some wood and I started the fire for them and then
came the lady I worked for and she made... now I could talk some
English then... and she said, "Did you start the fire?" I said,
"Yes, them old fellows freezing, their hands were shaking."
Them old fools start their own fire. You don't start any fire.
I said, "What is it to you, you don't pay for the coal, you don't
pay for nothing, you get hundred dollars a month, you get a free
car, you get everything and you're not nice to them old men!" I
wish you could've of seen that lady's face. She started to think
"she's not so dumb as she look" (laughter). So, she walked away
and we didn't say anymore that day, but she come back again and
the next evening the man went down and started the furnace. It
was so hot you couldn't breath when you got up in the morning and
she asked me if it was hot enough for me.

SI    Oh!

LP    I say, "I am going to scrub the floor and I'm leaving."
"Leaving? Where can you go?" Well, I had learned enough to
say, "That is none of your business." and I said it! She left,
she didn't say any more. She was starting to get scared. She
thought I would to talk and I noticed what was going on and it
wasn't so good. So, I scrub the floor good and clean and then I
put on my clothes and I told her good-bye and I walked into
Havre... there was four miles. I froze my one ear, but I had
that fixed up and I got somebody to get my clothes into town.
It's not hard for a Scandinavian to get work. Scandinavians has
the name of being good workers, ya, and I got to work for some
other people. The first job I did not like. I only stayed for a
couple of weeks. Then I got to work for another family. They had
a brand new, real swell house and I was taught how to work in a
nice place and they treated me like their own. That was really
part of my first year in America and I stayed with those people,
they were so good to me, for a long, long time.

Then I met some Danes and I also found Scandinavian tourists
and, oh boy, I was really in heaven now. I talked to people
often and it was swell. I liked everything. Those people I had met, they got to run the Odd Fellows Home in Helena and they wanted me to go along with them. Well, the people I worked for, they begged me and begged me not to go. But still, it was too much of a temptation. I thought, if I go where there's children, I'll probably learn to talk better. So, I went with them to the Odd Fellows Home in Helena. They had 23 children and 18 old people and those children, they learn me really to talk English. They come over and ask me to say armistice and I said 'ar'mistice and they clap their hands and they laughed and they teach me everything and I let them laugh at me. I thought that's the only way I learn to talk and I stayed at that home for a year. Then I t'ought, now I want to go someplace else so I can learn something else.

I got to work for the government at Fort Harrison. And they had a great, big, fat cook there and her husband worked on the outside. Well, she asked me, you know, when they wash the dishes, I heard her say to one of them, "I bet she never work in a big place like that. We going to have trouble with her." I said, "Can I have a tea towel?" and they gave me a tea towel and I start away with it and she came over and said, "Have you ever worked on a big place like that before?" "Oh, I worked in a place like that in Denmark," I said. So she didn't say any t'ing. Anything she cook, she never let it be cooked done and they let them get away with it. I t'ought that was terrible, but there was nothing I could do about it, you know. I also discovered when the milkman came in the morning, him and that cook, they were in together. A couple of times I saw a big ham she gave him and he took it out there and that made me mad because I've been honest all my life and I couldn't stand to see that, but it was nothing I could do about it. I didn't stay there too long. Then after that I got to work for Governor Dixon up in Helena and they were very, very good to me and I worked there for about a year and then I got married.

SI Is that where you met Grandpa?

LP Yea, yea, yea... so, that was my travel to United States and my first two years, ya, in United States. In Denmark, when I talked to somebody that had been in Canada and they told me the girls in America, they didn't milk cows, they didn't feed pigs, and they didn't do this and they didn't do that, I say, "What am I staying in Denmark for, why don't I go over and see what they are doing." So that's the way it was, ya.

SI You grew up with lots of brothers and sisters too, didn't you? You had a big family....

LP Ya, you see my sister, one sister had already been here and was home and there was still another one. She should of stayed in Havre, she studied for the government.

SI She's the one who went to Seattle?

LP Ya, she went to Seattle and oh did she get mad because I
didn't come down there, but it was hard traveling when you can't talk.

SI  Oh, yea.

LP  I thought, I am going to learn to talk and my mind was made up.

SI  Who taught you to write?

LP  Huh?

SI  Who was it that taught you to write? How did you do that? That must of been kind of difficult too.

LP  Oh, that came by and by, ya. In about in March, I had the first letter. I had written lots of letters to Denmark but, of course, the travel was slow over the Atlantic. It was in March before I heard from Denmark again from November on, you know. That I was quite a day when I got them letters and not one had passed out. When I left they had some sickness in Denmark caused from the German war, I t'ink they call it the Spanish sickness. I was told about it by a lot of people that I had to wear uniforms and my face covered up and I went in the hospital and told them good-bye. But all of them were well, none of them had passed on, they were all well by the time I heard from them. So, I was very lucky with everything, ya. I still can't understand today why I didn't get terrible lonesome, but I didn't. I thought I asked for it and now I had to take it, ya, ya. They had one dog at that poor farm and he liked me and he went with me when I took my long walks and that was my companion. It was kind of, in a way, it's fun to think back on it, ya.

SI  Yea.

LP  The first letters I wrote, I said, "United States is different from Denmark. There is no talk of business, you don't hear anybody stealing and you don't hear anyt'ing." Of course, not that I couldn't hear anyt'ing. I had been here a year when they wrote back to me, you not bragging up United States so much as you were. You found out people steal there too and do crooked business there too. So I wrote back, "Yes I got my eyes opened." [Laughter].

SI  [Laughter].

LP  United States is a wonderful country. I don't think you would go to any other country and be treated like United States treated me. I went into the store, I had seen patent leather shoes and I want some of them and I told him patent leather. He didn't even laugh at me, he went and got a pair of patent leather. "This what I wanted?" and I nodded my head. I didn't do too much talking, I just made signs and he said, "Patent, patent leather." Now how could he help laugh when I asked for a pair of patten leather shoes, but that's the way they treat you
in the United States, ya. It was a lot of hard times and a lot of fun days the same, ya.

SI Did you keep in contact pretty much with some of your old friends in Denmark?

LP Oh, yes, I sure did. I had letters every week after it got so the boats could get across the Atlantic, you know, ya, and it was wonderful. But my sister was kind of hurt because I didn't come down to Seattle. Well, I was kind of hurt she didn't stay in Montana, she signed up with the government. So why didn't she stay? She could of gotten in trouble. If I'd gotten in trouble, she could have gotten in trouble.

SI She had told you that she was going to be in Havre then, didn't she?

LP Well, yes, we had written together even before I had got the ticket, but I had the ticket for nine months before the boat would go across the Atlantic, you know. She thought she wanted to get to know the whole United States because she was great on traveling, ya. She talked good English and it was easy for her, but she had worked at that poor farm and she told me afterwards, she felt exactly the same way as I did, but she said it was none of my business so I didn't do anything about it. Well I got so mad, when I saw them ask for a match to light their pipe. Some people would give them fifty cents off and on and they would buy a little tobacco and something and she charged them a dime for a match and, oh, that made me mad, ya. But she was sure surprised that morning when I told her, I said, "I know you get $200 a month, they give you a car, free gasoline and everything. You don't pay for anything, just having a good time. You make me do the work and you just having a good time." I wish somebody could of seen her face, ya.

SI She probably never had anybody tell her something like that before.

LP No, well, they called me over to the courthouse one day and they say, "Did the old men ever get any butter?" "Well, I stole some." "What do you mean to say you stoled some?" "Well, maybe that's not the right word. I really did not steal it, the cows belong to the county and I made the butter and I think that butter belong just as much to the old men as it did to them and me, ya."

SI Yea.

LP I say... I also... I can read a little... "I also saw in the paper that one day you paid for 400 pounds of sugar. Why did you pay? Didn't you know what was going on?" Well, one fellow spoke up, "I'm new, I'm just elected and they will know what is going on from now on." They were chased out of there two weeks after.

SI Oh!
LP They never asked me to come over to the court house again. Well, they were in together. Sure they were in together. I said, "You people must know what is going on." They didn't like when I said that. [Laughter].

SI Boy!

LP Ya, ya!

SI Did you ever keep any of the old letters that you got from your friends in Denmark? Did you ever hold on to them?

LP Did I what?

SI Did you keep any of you old letters?

LP No, not too much. There was a farm I had worked on for 4 years and we [inaudible]. That woman, she always said if it hadn't been for me, she wouldn't of been alive. She had tuberculosis and they had four small children. The children would make her nervous and I would chase her into her bedroom and I would take care of the kids and she wrote to me, "If it hadn't been for you, I would not have been alive today." She was 5 years older than I were, ya. I keep in track with them all... all of them, ya. Oh, I don't know if I could of done any better by staying in Denmark. I'm still glad I came to United States. If I had come instead of being... see, I was 29. If I'd come when I was 16 or 17, going to school, I could of learned something. It would of been something.

SI Yea.

LP But it was too late for that, ya.

SI Well, did you go to school in Denmark?

LP I get to school, but they can keep you out of school in Denmark if you are a good worker in the field, ya. I went to grade school until I was 8 years old and then at 9, I was sent out to work and I never had a penny from home from that day and I was never home a day to stay. I took care of myself and I am doing it yet now I'm ninety, ya, ya. But Denmark is a very good country, it's a very good country. Didn't keep you out of school if... they can make you pay a fine of 3 cents a day, but if you need the kids in the field, they can keep you home because that's what Denmark is... agricultural country, that's most of their living, ya. All they had to do was bring me up, I could pitch hay and I could tie up grain and all day they say give it to Lona, she'll do it and, boy, I showed them I really could do it, ya. [Laughter].

SI Boy, it was probably nice to come over here and do some other kind of work.
LP Ya, that's what I t'ought when I heard people talk about the United States. I t'ought that can't be that good as they say it is, but it surely am. I'm tickled to see you like coffee.

SI Oh, yea, how's yours doing? It's probably getting kind of cold?

LP I'm going to drink mine, it's just right now. Have you got enough, you t'ink?

SI Yea, well, if you... whatever you think. We can stop any time you want. Boy, this is really interesting.

LP Ya, I think there were a lot of people that felt sorry for me, but they really wouldn't have needed to. If I did happen to get a little bit lonesome I thought, "Well, I wanted to come so I got what I asked for, ya."

SI Yea.

LP But people are very friendly to you in this country. You go into the banks in Denmark, you have it different. You don't name... you don't call them you. You had DAD in Denmark. When you talk to a banker, you have it different. Well, we don't have that in United States, thank goodness for that.

SI How did that work?

LP Well, you talk to anyone that have a fancy job in Denmark, you have a different way of pronounce when you talk to them.

SI Oh?

LP Ya! Of course, I went home on visit, I said you to all of them. I say you'll have to excuse me in Denmark... in United States there's only one class of people. I said, "We're all the same, ya."

SI Boy, I bet they didn't like to hear you say that.

LP No, they didn't like that. They said, "You better go over there and stay over there. I said, "Believe you me, I am." You see I went home after my husband passed away, ya. No, they didn't like, I talk a little too much sometimes.

SI Ya, they were probably jealous of you.

LP Ya, ya!

SI You sure got raised when you were growing up with your family different than Mom, didn't you?

LP Well, that comes by and by.

SI That must have been hard to change.
LP It comes without you know it really, ya. In that job where they had that nice house and they were so good to me. Oh, they were good to me, and I really liked that very much! I learned how to keep a nice house and how to set a table nice and it was swell, ya. They were very good to me. I only had one trouble with her. One day I know she was a little mad at me and finally I found it out then. She bought a new hat and I liked it and what did I do but I go in and buy one just like it. Well, she said, "The maid is not supposed to wear the same kind of hats." She said, "You can have two of them now because I wouldn't walk down the street with the same hat that you had." Well, there was a little difference you know, but then I was glad she told me. She went and got another hat and I said, "No, I don't want two hats the same. One is enough and I am going to keep mine." So she went and bought another one so I learned that much, ya.

SI She had to be unique, huh?

LP Yea, yea. Yea, there's a lot of things to learn and I probably could of gone to school, but I was little afraid to start. I thought I'm to dumb to start anything and that's why I shouldn't have felt that way but I did, ya.

SI You sure caught on to everything real fast.

LP Ya, oh, I caught on pretty good. They didn't fool me too easy. When I worked in Fort Harrison, every Thursday I had to cook the supper. Well, the head cook there, she never let anything be done. On the day I cooked, all we had was boiled beef and scalloped potatoes, well she would come from her mid-day nap about three o'clock and start the fire and get them potatoes so I could stick them in the oven and at five thirty there was supper. Well, I was there all afternoon, I put them potatoes in at two or noon and let them bake really slowly and when they started to eat, they said, "Who cooked the supper? Who cooked the supper?" and I was shaking all over. Finally I got brave enough, "What's the matter with the supper? I cooked it." "Well," they said, "them potatoes are done, the first time we have potatoes that were done and are they ever delicious. Why don't you let Mrs. Littlejohn wash the dishes and you cook the meals." I say, "If you say one thing to Mrs. Littlejohn, I may just as well move out." "Well," they say, "we know that, so we not going to say anything." But that was it, I did find a lot of things that were done awfully funny, ya. But it was interesting to work for different company, you learn something new in every company.

SI Yea.

LP Ya, I had one thing happen. She knew Scandinavian can't say t'ird [third] right. Anything with th in it is awfully hard for the Scandinavians to pronounce and they moved me from the second floor up to the t'ird floor, and I came and was going in the kitchen and I heard they had an argument so I stopped outside the
door and I heard the fellow say, "You ask her when she come in, she can not say it." "Well," he said, "You know I like that girl. Look how nice and clean she keeps everything in the kitchen here. I can't ask her anything. You go and ask her." Well, I finally open the door and went in there and I said, "What's going on in here?" They poked on him in the back and said, "Ask her, ask her." "What are you going to ask me?" He said, "Did they move you?" "Ya, they moved me today." "What floor you on?" "The one above the second." I said. [Laughter].

SI That fooled them.

LP [Laughter]. Then they know I been listening in the door but I could not say t'ird because it didn't sound t'ird. I don't say it right yet. They had a minister at the church I belong and he was Swedish and he couldn't say it. [Laughter]. So that was a lot of fun too, ya.

[END OF INTERVIEW]