

Maureen and Mike

# Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

## **Archives and Special Collections**

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: [library.archives@umontana.edu](mailto:library.archives@umontana.edu)

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

**Oral History Number: 049-009**  
**Interviewee: Hilda Denny**  
**Interviewer: Mary Melcher**  
**Date of Interview: May 26, 1977**  
**Project: Montana Women's Oral History Project**

*Note: When this interview was conducted, the interviewee requested to remain anonymous in the transcript and audio. Archives and Special Collections has chosen to lift this restriction now that the interviewee is deceased.*

Mary Melcher: I'm Mary Melcher. I'm interviewing Hilda Denny on May 26, and we're in Missoula, Montana. Mrs. Denny, you said your parents are both from Sweden?

Hilda Denny: Yes, they're both from Darchland, too.

MM: And they came over here—

HD: They came over, I know, by boat. I don't think there was any other way; I know they never flew. That I'm sure of. They were over by boat, no doubt. They worked in Michigan, and that's where they changed their name—in Michigan. From Klarg, that's the way I pronounce it. I don't know how you would pronounce it, you know. But that's how I pronounce it. To the name of Lund. My dad and my uncle, Gus. They both came over together.

MM: And did your parents meet each other in Montana?

HD: Well, I don't know where she met him, if she met him in Sweden or here on this side. Anyway, I know, I think they were married in Helena if I remember right. I don't know when she came over. If she was on that boat too, I don't know.

MM: You told me she had been working in a restaurant.

HD: She worked in a kind of hotel, I think. Do you want to shut it off?

(Break in audio)

MM: So your dad took out a homestead out the Blackfoot?

HD: Yes, well, I don't know whether he took it as a homestead or how they took that, or how they got that. But, anyway, both him and Uncle Gus was on this farm, you know, and part of it belonged to Uncle Gus and part to him. Well, he went back to Sweden. After he sold his part of the ranch to Dad, why then he went back to Sweden and he never came back. He died over there. So I had one or two letters from him after that.

MM: Were your mom and dad happy in America? Were they glad they came?

HD: Well, evidently. They lived here all the time. They never went back that I know of. At least they never told me, anyway, that they went back. I know a lot of people go back and forth all the time, but I don't think they ever went back.

MM: There were four children born on the ranch?

HD: Yes. Carl was my oldest brother and Gus was the next, two years younger and he lived until he was ten months old. Then I came, and then there's just a year between Mary and I. But there's two years between the boy that died.

MM: What did he die from?

HD: That's something I don't know. Mother never said. She had to get out in the snow and milk cows and bedded him down in a box and had him sitting inside the door in the cabin, I guess, because the cows was all around the cabin. I thought maybe he got cold. You know, there was no doctors. You had to go to Drummond to go to the doctor. So, I guess that's what happened.

MM: This was during the wintertime?

HD: Yes, it was in the wintertime.

MM: Well, how were you born, and your brothers and sisters? How were you born? Did a midwife come and help your mother?

HD: Yes, we wasn't out for doctoring, and somebody came in and helped her.

MM: Someone from the neighborhood?

HD: Well, I don't know. She lives out of Helmville. I know she came and took care of this neighbor lady when her daughter was born. She was here yesterday. We lived over along the river there near Helmville, so, that's all I have to say on that.

MM: What kind of jobs did you do around your house when you were growing up? What chores?

HD: Oh, I had to help work in the fields when I got old enough so I could work in the fields. I did all kinds of work in the field, except plough. I run behind bailing the hay and gardening and fieldwork. Then I helped with hay, grain rather, I didn't work on the hay. I helped with the grain and helped load that and place it into a sack. I did any other kind of ranch work, except plow, I didn't follow the plow. Rack hay and I picked hay and things like that. All that type of work.

MM: Was your brother doing that work too?

HD: Yes. Of course, the men all got paid, but I got my food, that's all I got out of it. We did go to grade school, but my dad didn't seem to want us to go to school. I don't know why. If he hadn't gone to school himself, or what, I don't know. Nevertheless, I was 16 years old the first time I ever saw a railroad. He had to load the grain, I think it was, because mother and Mary and I and Carl went all with him to Avon, and we stayed there overnight. Then we went on to Helena and then came back to Avon. So, that was the first trip out from the ranch that I can remember.

I know my brother, he was in and out, he saw the train coming and we were staying in the hotel, or I don't know what it was, motel or something that we stayed at, you know, and he says, "Here comes the train!" So I don't remember if it was the train that we were taking or what. But anyway, that's the first time I saw a train.

MM: So you spent most of your time on the ranch.

HD: Oh, yes, until I got started to going to out to work, you know and mother was having trouble with her leg, and she had trouble with her leg, you know, and I was in school and so I stayed home and helped her. But, she would work, push the chair around, kept a knee on the chair and push it around, you know, and do what work she could. It was up to me, so I lost a lot of schooling, but I still was determined I was going to have the eighth grade and so I'd go to Helmsville in the winter time and stay there and finish it up. I was 18 years old, I know, when I got the diploma. I still have it. Then, of course, I worked in Deer Lodge and I worked in Butte and I worked in Helena and I worked on the ranches around Potomac, you know, lots of different ranches.

MM: Can we go back to your childhood again?

HD: Yes.

MM: Okay, when you were a child, did you go to dances with your family?

HD: No.

MM: You didn't start going to dances until you were older?

HD: I don't know how old we were, but a family that lived next to us, Nelson's was their name, he and her husband taught us how to dance when we were about 17, 18 years old, maybe 16, I don't know. So we never went anywhere, you know, dances after I got out of school.

MM: Did you see your neighbors much when you were living on the ranch?

HD: Oh, yes, those kids and my family went to the same school and because the youngest boy

of that family, when they moved to the ranch, they stayed at our place for, he was three years old and I forget how much younger his sister is. There were two boys and a girl there. There was the two left—the girl that was here yesterday and the Doctor Nelson. He's a professor and a doctor over at the university. He taught out there. I got a card from him in they were in Stockholm, and I had a card from them, so I don't know how soon they'll be back. He told me three months when they left. Mrs. York told me that they'd be back sooner than that. But that's all I know.

MM: Did you, would you spend Sundays with your neighbors sometimes?

HD: Did we what?

MM: Did you spend, like, a day with your neighbors sometimes visiting?

HD: Oh, yes, we'd go skiing together. They had a little knoll of a hill, you know, and her mother and Mary and myself would go down skiing. Oh, we went skiing a lot. Even to the other neighbors and then the frost would break down on us and we'd have to get to the road in the timber and walk to carry our skis, you know, it wasn't very much fun. But we were afraid to take out on the flat, in fact, the truck wouldn't hold out there so we had to stay where the road was, because we knew we could get home. But we went sometimes three miles on skis.

MM: Did you make your own skis?

HD: Oh, no. My uncle made our skis.

MM: Your uncle did.

HD: Yes, he made a lot of skis for us.

MM: That was Uncle Gus?

HD: Yes. It was. We used to go to Cooper Lake, walk over the hill to Cooper Lake and fish through the ice. That was another thing we always did.

MM: You enjoyed that?

HD: Yes. I love ice fishing. Pulled out a lot of fish. We had so many fish. I was raised on fish. We had to eat fish three times a day and I didn't like that. I was getting tired of it and I wanted something else. Fish was there and we had to take care of each other, so we fried them and baked them and we did everything we could with them, but we couldn't let them spoil, you know. So then finally she canned some of them and so maybe we'd get a meal some other time, probably, after she'd canned a bunch of them, making sure they won't spoil. But Uncle Gus, of course, after he sold his part, he went everyday fishing. There was no law then on the fishing,

you know, you could go a fish as much as you wanted.

MM: And there were a lot of fish?

HD: There were a lot of fish, that's right.

MM: I bet it was beautiful up there then.

HD: Yes. It's beautiful yet, but now they got a road up to the lake so you don't have to walk over the hill, of course, because I figure that's about a mile to walk over the hill to the lake. And so I say I was born by Cooper Lake and, well, I don't know what else I could tell you.

MM: Did you have any books or music or instruments around your house when you were growing up?

HD: I always wanted to play the piano, but I didn't have a piano. We didn't have no music instruments at all. I believe Karl at one time had a mouth organ, but he never got anywhere with that. So, it was not music.

MM: How far was the country school that you went to?

HD: What?

MM: How far was the school away from you?

HD: Well, we had a school...They moved the school out and it was way down, I think it must have been seven miles to the first place we used to go to school. Well, then, they moved it up, oh I imagine it was about four miles at the last time, the last where they had it. We would go sometimes horse and buggy and sometimes we had a donkey. We had a donkey and we drove that. Then one day, the horse ran away from us and got caught between the trees. He was going towards home, all right, but he got into the timber and he got caught between the trees. So that made us walk home, see. We spent a long time walking home.

MM: How long, how many grades did your sister and brother complete? Did they go up to the eighth grade too?

HD: Well, I don't know whether or not. I don't know. But I was determined I was going to. I can't remember whether Mary finished or not. I can't remember.

MM: Well, did you celebrate holidays and birthdays?

HD: Oh, yes, we always celebrated holidays at our place, we had all the kind of extras—cake, extra cake for the holidays. And at Christmas time, of course, Christmas we had a Christmas

tree. We strung up colored paper and stuff like that, you know, and some other old-fashioned candy. Something like that, you know. We'd tie that on the tree. Oh yes, we always had a Christmas tree and it was up until the seventh, the seven days after Christmas, see, we never took it down until seven days after Christmas. Mother called it "On that day that God left." That, then Christmas is over with. So we, and I still have a Christmas tree, I have a little tree I put up here. Last year the lights went dim on it, so I don't know, maybe I'll have a tree another year, depends on. So, we had Christmas and New Year's.

MM: What language did you speak around the house?

HD: Swedish all the time until the school teacher came to Mother and said, "You got to quit teaching," because Mother was teaching us Swedish all the time, you know. I had lost the books and there's nothing that hurts me worse than that. When I moved over here I lost them both. I got one of them, I tell you, but not the main book.

MM: Of Swedish?

HD: A Swedish book, you know. I thought the world of that book because Mother taught us and I was very careful to take care of that book. But I don't know, I had the box sitting over in Arlene's garage and I don't know if somebody took it out of there because we had a rummage sale, you know, a moving sale there, so I don't know. I moved as much stuff up as I could up to this apartment, but there were lots of things that I didn't get with me and I don't know where they went. If they were sold, or what.

MM: That's too bad.

HD: But that book, I loved that book that book very much. So I lost that. At first Mary passed them, my sister passed them and I told her, I said, "Now, take everything but the catalogs," I says, "I want all the books." I guess, I didn't open the box until she passed it and I know she put those books in there, but, as I say, I told her not to put any catalogs in there.

MM: Well, how old were you when you moved away from home?

HD: What?

MM: When was it that you moved away from your parents?

HD: Well, I didn't move away, I went out to work and would be gone and then come back.

MM: Would you be gone just during the week?

HD: I'd come home on the weekends, you know, and because I'd be cooking at some places and I would get the weekend off and I would, well, I was 18 years old when I finished school. And

so, of course, I worked then after that at all different places, you know, and I don't remember if I'd be a year gone or how long. But I worked in Deer Lodge and I was, worked in Butte and I worked in Helena. I worked in all them places besides the different ranches, cooking on different ranches after I was older.

MM: And you wouldn't go home for a while.

HD: After my folks passed away. My folks passed away in '35, both of them. I don't know when it was. Of course I have it all written down in the Bible, so I do know that. So, and all the...

MM: You worked on different ranches and when you were younger you would go home during the weekend, but later you would stay away for a while.

HD: Get home once in a while, but it wouldn't be very often. I was working. In order for Mother to get by alone, I stayed and worked.

MM: Did you work in Missoula at one time when your sister was working there, working there too?

HD: Yes, I worked in Missoula, too. All along Potomac and all in there. I helped cook on Flathead Island and [Handine] and different places all along. And then we started the dairy when Dad lost the place, so we moved on. Then we got a house and started dairy, dairy. So that's what we was doing for quite a while after we moved in here. We had the old Higgins ranch out there; that's where we had running cattle. But then Karl would get sick and he couldn't run the routes and we had to hire all the help and then it was the same way when we sold the cattle. We came off the price for cattle and we got just about half price for them for what we sold them for. We certainly didn't make any great amount of money.

MM: Do you remember about when that was?

HD: No, I can't recall that year.

MM: It was before 1935, wasn't it?

HD: Oh, yes, because my folks died then. Oh, yes, it was way before that because they died a month apart, or what did I say the other day? About a month apart.

MM: You told me the other day about you and your sister riding bikes?

HD: No, I never rode a bike.

MM: You didn't ride a bike?

HD: No, horseback.

MM: You rode horseback.

HD: Horseback. Yes, and, no I never had a bike that I remember of. I would have tried to ride it. I know that there were some men, boys working for us that, and they had motorcycles and they said they were going to have me on their motorcycles. But they never got me there and I wouldn't go on it. But other than that I never really...

MM: I must have mixed up.

HD: Yes, you got me mixed with somebody else because I don't remember riding a bicycle.

MM: What did you do for entertainment while you were working?

HD: Well, of course, there wasn't much entertainment. We played cards, of course, and sometimes, you know and other than that, we were tired enough to go to bed early. That's because I worked awfully hard all my life and I really was tired out.

MM: Did you go to dances?

HD: Why, yes, when my brother got big enough to go to dances, yes. Yes, my brother was, of course, my sister, she got married and then, of course, and just left me and Karl at home so, and Karl never married either and so he'd take me and some other girl and we'd go to dances and had a good time that way. But, I never had no steady boyfriend until I got 50 years old and then I married a guy. I was half 60 when I married him and he died in '64, so that was that.

MM: You've always taken care of yourself, pretty much, you've always worked hard.

HD: Yes, I've always worked hard.

MM: You've worked at a laundry, too?

HD: Yes, I spent several years at the laundry. Missoula Laundry and I worked some in the Florence Laundry and I did chamber work in the Missoula Hotel, in the Palace Hotel and they wanted me down in the Atlantic Hotel. Well, I went there for a week, but I didn't like it. There was too many men running around half dressed, and I didn't want to be there. So I told the Amanda, of course she was a friend of the folks that run that place, so I said, no, I wasn't going to stay there. So, I just worked for maybe a week, I don't know. I didn't like it. I couldn't stand it. But I worked a long time in the Missoula Hotel and a long time in the Palace Hotel doing chamber work. Making beds and cleaning. But I did all that kind of work.

MM: Did you keep going to dances and social affairs when you were older, too?

HD: Well, I, as long as my brother was living, I, he and I would go, you know, and had good times together. But then he went out to the coast and went to work, and he got cancer in the head and that got to him, too. I went out there for the first operation and cleaned up his apartment and bought some new blankets and put them in for him and fixed that up. I didn't go back the second time. But my sister lived out there, so she could help and, but I know I bought blankets and things and cleaned up his place while I was out there.

MM: Did you like being a single woman before you were married?

HD: Well, what could I do? I wasn't one that was running to bars like so many of those women do nowadays, or did at that time, too, go to bars. I wouldn't go. Never went to the saloons or bars or anyplace like that. If I couldn't enjoy myself in the neighborhood or go to the dance and enjoy myself, I didn't go anywhere. So I stayed home.

MM: Were you living in apartments then most of the time? Did you have a house?

HD: Well, of course we had a house to live in as long as Mother and Dad was alive. Then, of course, we had to rent a place after they passed away, you know, because we didn't own anything in town, we had to rent it.

MM: You and your brother?

HD: Yes, and then he decided to leave and go to Washington, and so he did and he had one examination by a doctor here and I don't know if he did try into him or not, I don't know. Anyway, he got cancer in the face and did. So, he finally passed on.

MM: Where did you meet your husband?

HD: What?

MM: Where did you meet your husband?

HD: Oh, here in town. Yes, they lived on, he lived on with his dad over on Third. Cherry Street, I think it was called. Yes, he lived right there.

MM: Did you have a long courtship with your husband?

HD: Well, it was not too awful long. Then he went to service, you know, and then he wanted to come down to California, and I said, "No, I won't be coming to California." So then he came home, of course, then after he came home then we decided to get married. I worked hard all the time. He was on the Milwaukee when I married him and then he couldn't, we couldn't find a stove to cook on to go to Moller, stayed there at Moller, but there wasn't a stove in the

house. But all fuel and everything is furnished for you, but we couldn't find a range and I didn't have the money to go to the store and buy a new one, so that was what blocked us there. So he worked something in mercantile, but he worked for the Forest Service a little. So I told him one day, I says, "Why don't you go down and try to get on the MP?" So he did. He went down there, and sure enough, he got on. He was there when he died, on the MP.

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

MM: Did you and your husband make decisions together in your marriage?

HD: Well, we liked to go fishing. We went fishing about every weekend and had a good time fishing.

MM: Would you sit down and talk about what you were going to do when you had to—

HD: Oh, I don't know what we done. Things like that, I can't remember. We traveled, of course, whenever he had his vacation. We always took a trip, and we went everywhere. I was down in Omaha and—I don't know—different places like that. So I saw different towns, but still I didn't see anything in the town when I got there because we didn't have the money to go out and go around and see anything. We just rode on the train and saw what I could see out through the window. That was the only thing I saw. As far as taking me to anything when we got there, he didn't have the money and neither did I, to go to anything. We went to his sister's 50th wedding anniversary down in California one year. Of course, that was nice and stayed there. We were down there about a week, I guess, stayed with them. That was the last I was down there. I was invited to two of his cousins' weddings, but I never got down there so that was that.

MM: So you continued working after you were married.

HD: Yes, I've been working ever since. Well, he didn't want me to work, see. I wasn't going to work, no, no, I wasn't going to work. But I found out I had to so I finally went back to work.

MM: Did you have any close neighbors around where you lived then?

HD: Yes. We lived up the Rattlesnake for nine years, and then we finally borrowed some money and bought the down payment on a place out on...it was Ellis at that time, but then they changed the name on it to Burlington in the 2500 block—2225 Burlington. Of course, that's where I was living when he died. I stayed there until I got it paid for. But the taxes eat up all the money that I had earned, because I had no way of making any money then. So I had to use all my money that I had earned for taxes on everything. I couldn't improve the place very much. We did get a good wire fence all around it, except in the back. I wanted to get that load of rocks...There was an awful pile of rocks back there, and I wanted to get them hauled off before we put the fence across the back but never got anybody to haul them. They said I didn't go to the right people. Now, I could've gone to, they said, anybody that was building fireplaces and things like that. They would have hauled them. Well, I didn't know. So I never got them hauled. Never did get the...The fellow that's bought it now, he tore down all that good wire fence and all that with the iron posts and everything, and put up a slatted fence—a board. You know, one board on each side of the post? I don't know what kind of fence you call them. He hasn't even painted it, I don't think. I don't know. It wasn't painted the last time I drove by out there.

MM: You told me the other day that you were in the Scandinavian Club?

HD: Yes.

MM: Was that here in Missoula?

HD: Yes. I don't know whether they still continue or not. I'm going to ask John. He's living here now, and he was a member. I don't know whether he still is or not.

MM: What type of activities did the club have?

HD: Oh, we had card parties, and we had dinners. Once a year, we'd have a big dinner. Otherwise, it was, everybody had their turn, of course, at these card parties. That's what we did most of the time.

MM: What kind of card games did you play, do you remember?

HD: Oh, pinochle.

MM: Pinochle?

HD: (unintelligible) and things like that.

MM: Do you remember when women got the vote in 1920? No? Did you start voting then?

HD: Well, when we had a right to vote, I voted, yes.

MM: Were you happy to be able to vote?

HD: Of course, as I say, I didn't have much schooling on it, but anyway I went and voted when I had a right to vote. I wanted to vote and have voted, I think, every year since. I don't think I missed a year. I don't know, maybe I have.

MM: Did you ever participate in any sports? Did you ever learn how to swim or anything like that?

HD: No, never. No.

MM: So you never—

HD: We played football...Not football, but baseball. Got hit between the eyes with a ball, so that was the end of that. That was among the neighborhood kids. We were having a picnic

someplace, and then we'd play ball and things like that. Anyway, my brother-in-law, he threw the ball and hit me right between the eyes. Of course, I couldn't do anything after that. I never picked up another ball.

MM: Would you say there were a lot of jobs available for women? Were there a fair amount of jobs that you could...you did? I think you did do a lot of different jobs. You worked as a maid, you worked for the railroad, you worked—

HD: Yes. I worked in different places, but I don't know. I never had no trouble when I was in the age for working. I never seemed to have any trouble getting a job. I could always get a job. That was one thing.

MM: Did you usually make enough money on these things?

HD: Well, of course, I didn't make very much money, but in a way I got some so I got a chance to get some clothes or one thing or another. Some money, spending money. I never got rich on it because I never gotten more than a dollar a day at the most at any time. Like when I worked in Deer Lodge, I learned a lot there because she taught me how to entertain, and she had a lot of company and showed me how to entertain. She taught me how to set a table, so I learned a lot while I was at the Beelenburgs' (?). I guess it was Beelenburg. What was the name of the banker over there? I worked for Beelenburg too. I worked for...But Beelenburg wasn't the banker, I don't think. I think I said the name of the banker the other day when you was here, but I don't remember it now.

MM: You spent time with the neighbors—

HD: What?

MM: You'd spend spare time with the neighbors when you were working?

HD: Well, not much time. I was working, I didn't do much running around or anything. No, when I had a job, I stayed on the job. I didn't run around. I just worked all the time.

MM: Okay, that's all I have. Thanks a lot, Mrs. Denny.

HD: Yes.

[Break in audio]

MM: Mrs. Denny, do we have your permission to use the information that you have given us in what we're going to write up, but without using your name?

HD: Where's this going to be written up at? In newspapers or in books or what?

MM: No, we're going to hopefully write up a chapter for high school textbooks using all the information that we have.

HD: Oh. Well, I don't know, I guess there's nothing wrong about that. Of course, I tried to give the best I knew about my life and what I had been through.

MM: It would be okay if we used it without using your name?

HD: Yes.

MM: Okay, thank you.

HD: I don't want my name on it.

[End of Interview]