

**FAMILY BACKGROUND** Born Kjell Arnold Øvrebo in Øvrebo, Rogaland, Norway on December 3, 1899. Øvrebo means higher or upper place-farm-home.

**WHY HE CHANGED HIS NAME** There were six children in the family: four boys and two girls. Kjell was the youngest boy, and Teddy was the oldest. Teddy immigrated to America at age 17-18, and Kjell came to him in Big Timber (Sweet Grass County), Montana. Teddy had taken the name Thompson from his grandfather on father's side, Tønneson. After a few days Teddy said to Kjell, 'We can't have a different name - two brothers. Let's go down to the courthouse and have it (Kjell's name) changed'. Kjell remarks that he shouldn't have done that but he was a newcomer and took his brother's advice.

Kjell was born in the county (parish) of Oгна; also baptized and confirmed there.

**PARENTS** Father was Karl Øvrebo and mother was Anna. In this valley community, Øvrebo was the furthest most place out in the parish, and that's why it was called the upper place.

**BROTHERS AND SISTERS** The six children were Teddy, Hans, Anders, Kjell, Marie, and Jean.

The family home was right on the river, Ognälva, and Oгна was on the coast. Egersund was the nearest town (13 km to the southeast) and Stavanger (north) the biggest city. Parents were farmers and made their main living from milk cows and sheep. They had a few beef for the home, but mostly cows and 130-135 head of sheep. Hans took over the farm. Teddy and Kjell immigrated to America. Anders became an evangelist, traveling in Norway. Marie was a seamstress, and Jean worked in an office, bookkeeping and all. Only Anders and Kjell are alive now.

**GRANDPARENTS** He remembers a little about his maternal grandparents; Hans and Jorene lived over 20 miles away. On Father's side was Tønnes.

**1 SCHOOL** At that time the community of Øvrebo was too far away from a regular school. So teachers came in to the home. One winter he had only three weeks of school. This lady teacher stayed with them in their new house that pa built. She left after three weeks, and nobody ever came back that year. The most school he had was for two months. The rural schools were run on a volunteer system more or less, as schooling was not required and enforced like today.

Arithmetic and everything was in the head - memorized - not on paper. It was hard to begin with, but that's the way they learned. They soon learned to answer quickly.

**CHURCH** The Lutheran church was six miles down (in Oгна) on the flat. They walked along the path on the southside of the nice river, which ran through their land all the way from home to church. Here are buried his parents, sister, and grandparents.

When Kjell returned to Norway he and Anders visited the church, which was celebrating its 800th plus birthday. Kjell as a child didn't realize the Oгна Church was an ancient monument. The church was built like a fortress, walls of thick granite rock with little windows like holes - fortified - so one could shoot out at the enemy. Monster walls.

The inside was fixed up pretty nice - 'an old-time carpet and a most beautiful, beautiful prekestol (pulpit)'. It was up high. The caretaker of the church allowed Kjell to pick up the baptismal dish of pure gold. (Note: One of the oldest settlements - 4000 years old - is located in Oгна, Norway. The Oгна Church was finished around 1300 AD and is an important marking point in church architecture which was changing from wood to stone - 'trekirke' to 'steinkirke'.)

CONFIRMATION Once a week all summer long, the 19 children in the group met and learned hymns, catechism, the Bible, and examination items by heart. Confirmation day was in the fall, and the church was packed with people. The kids were lined up in the aisle, boys on one side and girls on the other. The pastor walked along and asked questions of a group of four (2 boys and 2 girls) - about Norwegian hymns, catechism, *etc.* That's the way it was.

That evening in all the homes, there were confirmation celebrations. All the relatives came and they had a wonderful, big doing.

OTHER CELEBRATIONS A neighbor's wedding. When the neighbor's daughter was married, the relations and neighbors were invited; they ate for three days. A special cook came in to prepare the dishes. There was also a village man who was in charge of the community's weddings; Kjell makes the comparison of this man and Øvrebo to Jesus and Cana. After the evening meal this man gathered the people in the living room for songs, testimonies, and messages from the Bible. 'It was very very fitting and very nice.'

FAMILY LIFE Mother usually worked in the house, but in the fall on nice days, she'd come out and help dig potatoes. Hay was cut with scythes. But his father had been in America and used a horse-drawn hay mower. An American company began shipping them into Norway, and Dad bought one; he was one of the first in that area. The neighbors said, 'Oh, man! Isn't that something!'

Kjell never really knew how much land his dad owned. The farm was very large for Norway: 140-60 acres in useable farmland and more in the hills. As a rule, they took the animals up in the mountains during summer. At that time there were several, privately owned mountain pastures. They took their flock to a large corral; each family animal had to have an identifiable mark (earmark). One fellow with three or four helpers was hired to drive the herd up into the high mountains. Kjell, one fall, went to help the herder gather the sheep - almost two weeks of work. The sheep were taken back to the corral where the farmers picked out their sheep.

EMIGRATION Why did Kjell emigrate? 'Just about like all the rest of them. I had kind of in my spirit - adventure spirit.' Dad talked about being in America and it got into Kjell's blood. Two weeks after his father died, Kjell applied for emigration. At that time he had been in the Norwegian Army for three years; he needed a visa to enter America and permission from the Army and government to leave. He waited so long and was so excited. When he

received an affirmative answer from Uncle Sam, he packed.

He went to Stavanger to catch the boat, Stavangerfjord. There were three Norwegian ships traveling to America then: Stavangerfjord, Oslofjord, and Bergenfjord. Of these, the Stavangerfjord was the biggest. He traveled to Halifax, Canada where the boat lay over for five-six days loading and unloading people and freight. Then it continued to Brooklyn, New York. From there he took the train to Big Timber, Montana. Kjell traveled together with a girl. Some Norwegians stayed in Brooklyn or New York; others went further. One fellow went to Tacoma, Washington where a store had been willed to him by an aunt.

**FATHER IN AMERICA** Kjell's family in Norway was not rich, although they had a wonderful home and lived good. But young people wanted to be going somewhere, and that's how Dad came over to Wisconsin as a young, single man. He stayed there three years until he had sunstroke. He returned to Norway and married, but he never got over that sunstroke. That's why he died so young at 54.

**KJELL'S BOAT TRIP OVER** 'Wonderful trip over - that was my favorite traveling and rougher is how I like it!' There were two stormy days on the Atlantic when waves were splashing over the deck. Most people couldn't be out, but he was - every chance he got. 'That was nice - oh, that was nice. I loved it. I couldn't help it.' They landed in Halifax on April 30, 1923.

**SETTLING IN** Kjell was at his brother's place near Big Timber, Montana for two weeks. At this time, Montana was sheep country - had millions of sheep. Kjell personally worked for one owner (Jewish) who had 49,000 sheep and 4000 cattle. Everyone had more sheep than cattle until the war and the British came in. Young people then wouldn't be herders because of the low wages. That's when Montana switched over to cattle, which can be turned out and care for themselves. But there were still some sheep barons around Timber Lake.

Kjell's brother, Teddy, was in WWI and had a leg shot off. He never married, bought a ranch (not sheep), and had one or two hired men. When he was old, he sold the ranch and retired to Big Timber. Kjell tells a story of his brother's illness and dying. Kjell had a difficult time traveling to Montana that winter to care for his dying brother.

**WORK IN AMERICA** Like most Norwegians, Kjell came from a farm, so that's what he did. His first job was working for a Norwegian rancher for two years.

After marriage Kjell rented a farm and had 72 registered Herefords and 800-900 head of sheep. He had two awful dry years when he couldn't get enough feed for his stock. He sold out and moved to Seattle, Washington.

He was aware of fishing up north in Alaska and went to PAF (Pacific American Fishery), asked for a job, and got one. He liked fishing so well that he stuck with it for 22 summers.

His first 12 seasons were spent in King Cove, Alaska (a village on the Alaskan Peninsula in the Pacific Ocean). The next two years were on Dallgoi (?) Island. When PAF in southeastern Petersburg (between Juneau and Ketchikan)

sold out the traps, Kjell knew the owner - Bob Thorstenson (?). Bob wanted Kjell to work for him in Petersburg. But Kjell, at the time, was employed as a carpenter working for a construction company building dorms and the cafeteria at the college (University of Washington). The owner of the construction company offered Kjell another job with a Seattle project. Kjell chose to return to fishing and accepted the job at Petersburg.

After seven years, Kjell's wife who was a practical nurse at a Seattle rest home, had a heart attack and stroke. Kjell quit his job and returned to Seattle. She was hospitalized six weeks. He cared for her at home for 19 months until she had a second heart attack and died. Bob Thorstenson asked Kjell to return to Petersburg twice, but Kjell said he couldn't.

**FISHING IN ALASKA** There are two types of fish traps: floating and pile. The floating traps were used around Petersburg, but the pile traps were used in King Cove in the Aleutian territory. The pile traps were anchored on the bottom and consisted of three parts: a lead, a heart, and a spiller. Once into the spiller, the fish couldn't get out. The fish were picked up by the 'tender' (men on boats) and taken in to the cannery. Kjell ran a tender for four years. Usually one or two men per station watched the traps. This was his favorite job, because there was a lot of shooting - sea lions. One season he shot 104 sea lions and wounded as many, which he couldn't claim. He loved to do that. But Bob asked him to run a tender, so he did. (Note. Seals and sea lions often raided the traps and thus were shot as a menace to the fishing industry.) The US Navy required that the traps were all pulled out and put on the beach in the fall, so the fishing crews were the first out in spring and last gang to quit in the fall.

Work ran from April to October depending on the weather. The fishing season officially began on May 29 every year then. Fish traps were voted out and became illegal. His wife and family lived in a place in Seattle, which they bought, and his wife worked at Needham (?) rest home for years.

**MEETING SPOUSE** When sheepherding in Montana, Kjell was provided with everything he needed. At the end of the season he was given an annual check, which he sent to his bank in Norway. He lost every bit of his money during hard times (Norway's depression). He wrote and asked for part of his money, but they said no - he was in America making good money. Then he decided to save his next money and get a little education. When he had enough he wrote to his dad's cousin in Cooperstown, ND, inquiring about the college in Grand Forks. His uncle knew and talked to a professor there and told Kjell to come. So Kjell quit herding and attended school three years, graduating as a seminary student. And, there he met his wife.

They were engaged three years before marriage. During these years he went back to Montana to become a sheep rancher, and she returned home to a big grain farm in Saskatchewan. After being married in Saskatchewan, they returned to Big Timber and rented a big ranch with sheep and cattle. She never liked Montana. He never liked to fight with his wife, so they moved to Seattle.

**CHILDREN** They had two boys, Gordon and Einar. Gordon lives in Deming, has his own boat and fishes up north every year. Einar lives in Ferndale.

**CITIZENSHIP** Kjell liked America and wanted his citizenship; he did not want to return to Norway or to stay here and be a foreigner like some Norwegians. When he applied for his first paper, he needed three witnesses to prove he was a legal immigrant. After three years he applied for his final paper. Again he needed three witnesses and to take an examination on American history, federal-state-county government, *etc.* He passed the test in Big Timber

and was granted citizenship; he was about 30 years old then and already married.

**NORWEGIANS IN AMERICA AND LANGUAGE** Sweet Grass County was about 75% Norwegian: Norwegian Lutheran Church, Norwegian in the schools, Norwegian all over. When the war came on, some of the Norwegian farmers sold their farms for a profit and moved away. Even though new people moved in, 'there are still quite a bunch of Norwegians in Sweet Grass County.'

He learned English the hard way - 'chopping as we go' and he's still chopping. 'Well you know that. You can hear that.' Very few Norwegians - except for the very young - spoke English real well. He was older (24) and didn't pick it up well or quickly. He only heard 'baa-baa-baa' from the sheep while herding in Montana. When he went down to school, it was hard. When he finished school, he could really help himself, which he did by reading newspapers, *etc.*

**RETURN TRIPS TO NORWAY** Kjell visited alone the first time. Five years later, Gordon, his wife, and granddaughter asked him to accompany them on a trip to Europe because he would be able to speak Norwegian when they traveled through Norway. His two brothers and Marie were still alive then.

**SPEAKING NORWEGIAN** His children understand a few words. His wife spoke Norwegian very well even though she was born and raised in Iowa (of Norwegian parents). She and Kjell spoke Norwegian some at home to the boys, but that stopped when the kids started school.

Kjell says, 'I will say a prayer because that's my life. Kjaere himmelske fader, vaar takk ...'

At college he trained to be a minister. After he received his diploma he was sent to interview two churches. He liked one place, and they liked him. The congregation was half Norwegian, half Danish, and a few Swedes. They told him that he had to work out his own living besides working at the church. Well, if they couldn't support him, he just couldn't see doing it. That's when he went to ranching.

He did spend some time filling in at church and was a Sunday school teacher in Big Timber and in Seattle at Lutheran Brethren. He's gone to church every Sunday, health permitting.

**OTHER STORIES** Kjell tells about a WWI incident, which happened right outside his home by Ognå. He was up and out early one morning and saw searchlights circling a small beautiful island. As it became more light, he saw a submarine periscope; the water was too shallow for the boat to submerge. The English ship encircled it with a line and hoisted it right up and took them.

Then in 1914 there was an awful battle between the British and Germans outside of Helgoland. The big German boats were just coming out of the bay as the British were passing. The water was terrible rough that day and the Germans had trouble hitting the smaller, pitching British boats. The British got better aim and really whipped the Germans. Bodies drifted up along the Norwegian coast. Kjell and others (in the Reserves) were called upon to pick

up all the dead, drifting bodies on the ocean, both English and Germans. They pulled out one British officer who was floating in a life jacket. Everything below the water was peeled off. But on his wrist was a big wristwatch with a picture and address of his wife. It was sent back to Britain and his wife came there to see his grave. Kjell didn't do much in the Reserves after that as his father died, and he left Norway.

THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS TRANSCRIBED NOT FROM THE TAPE, BUT THE ARCHIVE SHEET FILLED OUT DURING THE INTERVIEW Doesn't like 'new' Norwegian language. Comparison: Norwegian Bible (O.N.) 'Jesu doede' - Jesus died. (N.N.) 'Jesu duaja' - word used in old Norwegian to describe a 'critter' dying. Said 30,000 Germans came to Norway (neutral country) in WWI. His family took two German boys for three years: Diedrik and Billy. Went to school with rest of children, learned norsk, very fond of those two boys. Remembers first time he went fishing with grandfather - four years old - used a birch rod and braided horse hair line. Spent a lot of time fishing in river that ran through family home. Salmon - lots, smoked them, gave them away. Fly fishing - British made lures or copies of: dusty miller, Jock Scott, silver king.