

FAMILY BACKGROUND: Sigvald Stenersen was born on March 15, 1912 in Sand Point, Idaho. He gained the nickname Steve from men of Polish and Italian ancestry on the road crew in Idaho who couldn't pronounce his real name.

PARENTS: Father was Soeren (Sam in America) Stenersen, and his mother Jensine Vik. Father was a yard foreman for Humboldt Lumber Company in Sand Point, Idaho, where he worked 16-17 years. Sigvald doesn't remember when his father immigrated to America, but his mother came about 1909. She accompanied Soeren who had returned to Norway for his third visit. She probably was his fiancée at the time; she was 16 and worked two years as a doctor's housekeeper before marrying Soeren.

Both parents were from the same community of Eiken, Vest-Agder, about 45 km north-northeast of Farsund on the southern coast of Norway.

GRANDPARENTS: The paternal grandparents were farmers in Eiken. Sigvald believes that Soeren emigrated from economic necessity; there were many children and it was hard to make ends meet. Also, 'everyone was dreaming about striking it rich in the US'. His paternal grandfather had emigrated to and worked as a carpenter in America for a few years.

Father went to Wisconsin first where this lumber company was located; it was a big operation in the early 1900's. When the company moved to Sand Point, Idaho, Soeren moved also. Two of his brothers worked for this company, too.

Mother had three sisters who immigrated to California. They all emigrated because of hard times. After confirmation most young people had to leave the family and work out or go the seters. Mother never became an American citizen. She still speaks and reads English after 50 years back in Norway. Both parents did quite well with English.

The Soeren Stenersen family returned to Norway in the fall of 1914. Sigvald remembers only one thing from this trip: being picked up and moved by a Negro porter who was cleaning the train seats.

Dad would have stayed in America, but Mother didn't like it, even though conditions were better for her here. They thought maybe the trip would just be a visit, but then WWI broke out. They stayed in Norway and bought his mother's homeplace. Dad and a neighbor built a small sawmill, which they operated part-time. Along with farming, they made a go of it.

CHILDREN: There were six children altogether, but the youngest died when he was one year old: Sigvald, Inga Marie, Ingeborg, Gunvald, and Aasulv. All are married and live in Norway, except for Sigvald. Ingeborg is married to the postmaster and also works; Gunvald is a retired lineman for the power company; and Aasulv is a schoolteacher. The youngest of his three daughters will attend Lutheran Bible Institute (LBI) in Seattle in 1984-5. There is still a lot of family contact.

His father wasn't wealthy in America, but was a hard, strong worker and had a good job for a working man. He gave Sigvald a balanced, realistic picture of America. There were literally hundreds of men who left their district and worked mainly in New York and Brooklyn. Those that came home always painted a more rosy picture.

CHILDHOOD IN NORWAY: All the children had chores at five - six years of age. Sigvald often thought it was terrible never to have played as a child, but he profited from this life style also. He never was afraid of work or fired from a job; he learned to carry responsibility.

Chores included haying, picking rocks, and picking huckleberries - 'blaabaer'. The latter was almost enjoyable. He picked the berries, which his mother cleaned. When the berries were sold, half of the money was given to Inga who took care of the smaller kids.

The nearby bus route brought buyers in. In five hours the berries were on the ocean to London. They were sold by the liter, but Sigvald doesn't remember the price. He made enough money in his 14th year to buy his confirmation suit - quite a feat in those days.

SCHOOL: Sigvald was six and a half when he began school in a small schoolhouse 500 meters from home. The school had a total of 12-15 pupils divided into four different grades. It was held three months in the winter with the teacher alternating between two schools every two weeks. He attended school for seven years and then was confirmed.

He spent two winters at a 'fortsettelseskole' (continuing school) somewhat equivalent to an American high school. Eiken was a community of 800 people, and very few continued with schooling. When a minimum number of students were signed up, a teacher and space were contracted. His father encouraged his education as did his grade school teacher, (also a sergeant in the Norwegian army), who offered to loan Sigvald money to attend college. Sigvald says, 'But no. I was going to dig gold'.

WORK: After confirmation, males were supposed to be grown up - got long pants. So, he went to work on a county road crew for two and a half years (from age 16 - 18) when he completed school. At this point the farthest he'd been from home was Kristiansand about 60 American miles away. But the dream was that everything was so much better in the United States; if you applied yourself, you could do something.

EMIGRATION: Sigvald wanted to emigrate before he was 21, and actually came in April 1930 at the age of 18. All he had to do in preparation for emigration was obtain his birth certificate from Idaho. With him he had \$25 and a small suitcase, bargained for in Kristiansand, containing a couple changes of clothes and an extra pair of shoes. He borrowed 640 crowns from an uncle for the ticket from Oslo to NY where he planned to stay for five years and then return to Norway. His mother didn't want him to go, but his parents didn't stop him.

THE TRIP OVER: Sigvald traveled with three other men from Eiken; two had been in America before. He knew no English. They took a coastal steamer from Kristiansand to Oslo and then boarded the Stavangerfjord. The trip over

was fine and lasted seven days. His companion was seasick, but not Sigvald.

ARRIVAL AND SETTLING IN AMERICA: Sigvald decided on the New York area because a cousin (who met Sigvald) lived in Brooklyn. This cousin was a good carpenter, but out of work and living on his savings. No work was available except a job as a deck boy on a French tramp steamer. Sigvald was willing to accept the job, but his cousin advised him not to. A Norwegian steamer would have been all right, but not a French tramp steamer. Sigvald corresponded with one of his two aunts in Spokane; she wrote that something should be possible. So Sigvald borrowed the trainfare to Spokane from his cousin. By the time he reached Spokane in May 1930, the Depression had spread from the East Coast to the West.

IN SPOKANE: The two aunts were Soeren's sisters: (Soerine) Irene Johnson and Anne Morland. Anne was older, a housewife and mother with a big family, and married to a Swede who was a bartender. Soerine had one child when Sigvald arrived. Her husband, a Norwegian, was a lumber piler like his dad. The Scandinavians in Spokane really weren't a community as such, just spread around here and there. He didn't work in town, so didn't hear much Norwegian spoken.

SETTLING IN: A neighbor of his aunt put Sigvald in contact with a Norwegian farmer about 40 miles from Spokane. Within a month he began work during harvest time (about mid-summer) for Albert Owes who had been born near Fredrikstad, Norway, and who was probably the richest farmer in Spokane County.

ALBERT OWES: Sigvald believed this man was rich because he lost \$5000 in the Depression due to bank closure and failure, and still survived very nicely. He drove the first Cadillac in the area, a luxury car that cost \$5000. At the time Sigvald arrived in 1930, Albert Owes was 70 years old and already owned the Cadillac. But, he was not a well-liked man. Sigvald heard many stories how Owes had gobbled up all the small farmers in trouble during the Depression. He also felt Owes exploited the Norwegians coming from the old country as cheap labor. Sigvald received \$30 a month, and cynically commented, 'I was digging gold'.

FARM WORK: One of Sigvald's jobs was to milk the cows; this was a new skill for him to learn because the women had always done the milking back in Norway. These three-four cows were wild. He had to round them up with a saddle horse and milk them in a shed without benefit of milking stalls or a clean barn.

Another job was to pick up wheat sacks with Owes' nephew who was big and mean. Sigvald was 18 and weighed 130 pounds, but he spent days in the fields picking up and throwing 150 pound sacks into the wagon. Sigvald often came in at night with a back so painful, 'that if somebody jabbed a knife in my back, it wouldn't have hurt any more'. But, he lived through it.

The farm was basically in wheat fields, but there were also 200 head of horses and an equal number of beef cattle. There was always work to be done, and Owes saw to it that the hired help was continually busy.

Sigvald's saddest day on the farm was his first Christmas in America; he spent the day hauling manure. There was no time off except for a few hours on an occasional Sunday. He spent two years on this farm earning enough money to pay back his loans. When another hired hand got disgusted and suggested they leave, they did. During these two

years Sigvald had lived in an old farmhouse shared by the other workers; two nephews, the other hired man, and a cook. The languages were part Norwegian, part bad English. The cook (a woman) helped Sigvald a lot with his English.

He knew of only one small Scandinavian farmer (a widow lady) who survived the Depression. Farming in America was pretty different than in Norway, and Sigvald was pretty sour on the farm.

THE DEPRESSION, JOBS AND THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS (CCC): When Sigvald left the farm in the spring of 1933, he hoped to get a job picking cherries around Lewiston, Idaho; however, there were no jobs available. The three C's had just begun, and he and the other man lied about their residency and got in. It was the best thing that ever happened to Sigvald; he learned skills, was promoted, and received better wages. It was a real good morale builder, and he enjoyed his 21 months in CCC.

When he quit the farm he was still earning \$30 a month, and the farmer offered to pay \$40 if they would stay. In Sigvald's opinion, 'No, thank you. That was a poor time to give a raise'.

In the CCC he received \$30 a month, clothes, room and board, and only worked a 40 hour week, so there was lots of free time. This group was kind of like a civilian army - but no guns. They had army clothes, lived in barracks, had roll call, stood inspection, *etc.* He enjoyed himself and the work. CCC was building roads in southern ID, and Sigvald became a powder man (responsible for blasting) and a crew leader with seven - eight guys to a crew. When they first started working in the woods, a whole train load of men, mostly Polish, arrived from Toledo and Cincinnati. Several of those boys had had it real tough; they used to lay in bed to conserve energy because there was no food. One 21-year-old fellow didn't speak any American. Coming out to the Idaho wilderness was quite an experience for those fellows. And, of course, 'we filled them full of bear stories'.

To get in the CCC one needed to show residency and have relatives in need; the men were allowed to keep \$5, and the rest was sent to relatives. Sigvald had his money sent to his aunt in Spokane. Although he only had been in Idaho two weeks, he'd actually been born there; so he felt he hadn't told a complete lie.

On the job training taught him about compressors, blasting, reading grade stakes on road construction - skills which came in handy. When he finished with the CCC, the head ranger of the Forest Service (which oversaw the project) offered Sigvald a job, promising that in three-four years, he'd be made head powderman over three states. Sigvald felt he needed to earn more money after so many years of minimal income. The ranger assured him he'd have no trouble finding a construction job.

CONSTRUCTION WORK: Work still was hard to get and Sigvald had no references, but he went out to the Oak River Dam construction site and asked for a job. The workmanship on the concrete and steel dam wasn't very good, but Sigvald enumerated his job skills and said if he couldn't do the job better, he'd quit. So the boss gave him a chance. Sigvald was one of four original men still on the job when the work was done. He received top wages in those days - 75 cents an hour - for drilling in cement.

He continued to work in construction on many different projects and jobs and to run labor crews until he retired in

1974. All the jobs were around the Spokane area; he spent four years on the Sacred Heart Hospital and worked on all the tall buildings in Spokane. He also worked down around Moss Point and Pullman - the dorms at WSU. He worked long periods, six - seven years, for one contractor; didn't change much.

Sigvald had little contact with Norwegian groups, community, or church the first years when he lived in rural areas.

MEETING SPOUSE AND FAMILY: His wife came from California to Spokane in the late 1930's to attend the LBI branch. She was working in the boarding house where Sigvald lived. (He also attended LBI one winter when not employed.) They were married in 1940, and she did not work outside the home after marriage.

CHILDREN: They have three children: Norma, Stanley, and David. Norma is married to George Larson, a Lutheran pastor, and they have a mission church in Puyallup. They have four children, two natural born and two adopted. Stanley lives in Seattle and works for the government as an editor of statistical reviews, *etc.* He is married and has two girls. David is a schoolteacher, married, and has two children. All three kids are college graduates. Norma graduated from Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, South Dakota, after the children were quite well grown. Stanley graduated from PLU, and David from Portland State University.

NORWEGIAN HERITAGE AND TRADITIONS: His wife is Swedish-Dane, but they have kept up with lefse and lutefisk. (Wife joins the discussion.) She has learned to make kumle and Norwegian Christmas cookies, and they celebrate a traditional Christmas Eve. Some of the customs are from her home, but not the foods so much. At home they had some Danish pastries and fruktsuppe, but mainly American foods. In fact, there are more Scandinavian foods in their home now, because when her family arrived in the 1890's, immigrants Americanized as quickly as possible. Her father came to New York and her mother to Rhode Island. After marriage they moved to California.

There was no 17th of May celebration in Spokane except in the Sons of Norway lodge.

NORWEGIAN LANGUAGE: In the early 1930's there was still a Norwegian service in the church to which they belonged. There were two pastors, one preached in English and the other in Norwegian. This continued until about 1940. The children know little Norwegian, only 'mange takk'.

RETURN TRIPS TO NORWAY: Sigvald has returned five times. The first trip was in 1961, 31 years after he left. His mother, father, and youngest sister had traveled 300 miles from home to the Stavanger airport to meet him. The biggest difference in those 30 years was the vast improvement in working and living conditions throughout the community. When he left, there were lots of poor people - but none when he returned. The second trip was in 1967, and he was accompanied by his wife and son, David. They have returned every five years, the last trip being in 1983 to celebrate his mother's 90th birthday.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NORWEGIAN PEOPLE: His wife would say 'being stubborn', but he doesn't know. Perhaps - hard-working and real honest.

Snakker litt norsk til aa hoere dialekten. Om jul - juletre fra skogen, julenissen, god mat (risengryn and skinke paa juledag), kirke paa juledag, og fest etter fest den hele uken.

OTHER MEMORIES: Sigvald remembers an incident on the wheat farm the first summer. They were in the midst of harvest, cutting grain and shocking. At lunch the farmer said it was too hot to take the horses out, but sent the guys out to continue shocking all afternoon on the hill.

(Sigvald's wife reminds him of that first Christmas, so he adds more to the story.) He was accustomed to a two-week celebration in Norway, which became nothing on the farm. He said, 'If I could have cried, I would have cried that Christmas'. Yes, he thought about quitting and returning to Norway as his mother had suggested in letters, but his pride kept him in America.

Because he was an American citizen when he emigrated, he always felt a certain pride. In high school they had pro/con debates on emigration, and he had led the pro side, getting pretty hot about it. However, he had no idea that the Depression was coming to America when he left Norway.