

Excerpts from  
ELSIE M. NELSON  
First and Second Interviews

Interviewed by:  
Laura Schrage

Oral History Project  
Latah County Museum Society

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# I. Index

## ELSIE M. NELSON

Moscow; b. 1890

raised on a farm near Moscow; graduate from U of I; worked 27 years as Director  
of Foods at the Hotel Moscow; author of Today is Ours 1.5 hours

minute

## Side A

- 00 8 During the wet years (1893-5), her aunt made candles out of beef tallow for the Christmas tree and the church.
- 05 9 Christmas eve the gala day of the year for Scandinavians. Walking to early church service Christmas Day at 5 a.m.
- 10 9 Food eaten at Christmas dinner. Mother made ten gallons of cookies and fancy candies.
- 16 11 Grandparents brought gifts, candy oranges and two cocoanuts. In 1893 Father had only \$5 for Christmas. Older brother would distribute gifts around the Christman tree.

## Side B

- 02 David's originally owned by Kaufman and Durnam. Well accepted even though Jewish. Everyone played with Mary McCrae, a Negro girl, - it didn't make any difference. Chinese had several laundries.
- 09 Father worked in Leadville, Colo. mines. Homesteaded in Hog Heaven near Pasco, and left his equipment buried in the sand.
- 16 Father and his crew excavated railroad bed from Spokane to Juliaetta using mules and scrapers. He walked from Juliaetta to Moscow to keep a date with her mother.
- 30 Mrs. Chapman's first husband killed by Indians in the very early years. She grabs the lines and drives home.

## Side C

- 03 Frequently saw Indians near home. Brothers steal father's dynamite.
- 08 Dipped grain for seed in Blue Vitriol. Early laundries
- 16 Mixing up clothes starch for the clothes. Washing clothes.
- 22 Father's thrashing operation continued after it snowed. In the early years paid in gold - farmers didn't believe in banks.
- 28 Making gas for carbide lamps.

with Laura Schragger  
March 27, 1974

## II. Transcript

EN: With childhood memories of some of the things the way they did 'em as I remember.

LS: Yeah.

EN: Is that all right?

LS: Oh yeah.

EN: For example, I remember my aunt during the wet years, or hard years, 1885, 1883 to '85, they couldn't afford to buy candles or couldn't get 'em if they could afford 'em. And then they made their candles for the Christmas tree, and she made 'em out of tallow, beef tallow because they had quite a bit of beef tallow stored up. She'd melt that tallow and made an improvised, really, an old oil can, a five gallon oil can with a rod over it, a wooden rod, across the top you know, or two or three, I think she'd sometime over the can. And she put strings, regular grocery strings, maybe she'd make 'em heavier so they'd be four or five ply, or six ply or something like that, that's the way I remember. And she'd lay those across this little rod, and then she'd dip 'em down in the melted tallow, maybe half a dozen at a time, and dip 'em down in the tallow. Then she'd set 'em up so they'd cool and drip, see, and then when they were cooled why then, she'd start all over again. She'd dip 'em, and dip 'em and finally she just kept a dipping 'em and cooling 'em until they were candles. Then when she completed her task, why then she snipped the top, the thread would be double or triple, why she'd snip the top of it and that would be the wick, see. And that's the way she made candles.

She made little ones for our Christmas tree, and then she made some bigger ones for the church, and that just meant she had to have longer thread and make a heavier cord out of it, just make it like a cotton cord. And that's the way she made candles. And I remember going to Sunday School, during those lean years and they had those candles in the windows, about three in each window of the church. And that's what they used for Christmas candles. There were no electric lights, or no electric candles there weren't even any holders, they just made their holders, that was it.

LS: How did your family celebrate Christmas? Did you give Christmas presents?

EN: At home? Well I'll tell ya. In our family, Christmas was the big day of the year and I've described it in the book. They always got their Christmas tree and it was one gala day when the boys, the brothers were small, and dad would go to our place out in the Moscow Mountain, and they'd cut the Christmas tree, and haul it home, and keep it outside until they were ready to decorate it. The day before Christmas Eve they had to have it all done, because Christmas Eve was the big day, not Christmas Day. Christmas Eve was the big day in the Scandinavian fashion and that was a heritage that they had retained from the old country. I remember one nice big doll that I got for Christmas when I was maybe four or five years old. And that was the first bisque doll that I got, the old Porcelain dolls weren't as nice. And I got one when I was, I imagine when I was four or five years old. 'Cause I walked to church that morning to the early services.

They called it in Scandinavian and that was one of the few words that us kids knew was Yule Oota. We walked to church to that Yula Oota, which is in the church and early. Everybody came to church at five o'clock in the morning, had to be there at five for this service. And then after services we walked home. And sometimes if it was snowy, we'd ride in a sleigh. But we often walked. Even some of the younger brothers remember walking to that service, which they done away with years and years ago.

Christmas Eve was the big time. And Christmas Eve, by that time we had our house all cleaned up, as clean as we could get it. If we had to have a room papered, we'd have it papered before Christmas. That was gonna be the day when everything was going to be absolute clean, and in order. They did the chores early on Christmas Eve.

Then we had buchering done and the baking all done. They made homemade sausage and put the sausages in brine, for three weeks I believe, and then also some of the feef they'd put in brine which they later made chipped beef out of. And then they had fresh meat too, because it was cold enough so they could keep the <sup>fresh</sup> meat for over Christmas, usually, and they'd have roasts or

fresh pork chos, or anything like that.

They nearly always had a roast goose for Christmas, a roast goose. We raised geese at home, and so they always planned to have the geese plucked and taken to market at least a week before Christmas so they could sell 'em. And then we always had one roast goose for home for our Christmas dinner. But that didn't mean that we just had roast goose. We'd cook some of these sausages and were they ever good! And had hot sausages, maybe we'd have some cold ham, homecured ham, and then always the roast goose. And the roast goose was stuffed with dressing jult like real good old fashion bread dressing, which we liked, and rost goose gravey. And mother tried to skim some of the fat off it because our geese were real fat.

We didn't make plum pudding very much, but we had all kinds of bake goods, like rolls and rusks, and cookies. Mother made two five gallon oil cans. We got kerosene in those that we used for our lamps, and then we'd scrub 'em clean with ly water, scrub 'em clean so they were absolutely cean, and then use those for cookie containers. And before Christmas my mother would make a vive gallon can of ginger snaps and she made 'em large, not little dainty ones. We like 'em the larger the better, and white sugar cookies.

And of course we never had very many eggs during Christmas, 'eause that was when the hens had their vacation. But she tried to save up some eggs for the cakes and things like that. And most everybody knew short cuts making fruitcake without eggs and things like that.

And my mother made very, very good candy. Made bon bons, and she made r real fondant. She'd learned how to make real fondant, and she used the slab of marble on top of the commode, to mix her fondant on and make the little c chocolate creams and cocoanut creams and all kinds of nice candy. I'd say her fondant was just about as nice as they make it nowadays, in the candy shops. And then she'd dippher chocolates, and she decorated her cocoanut creams and different kinds of candy.

She always made homemade peanut brittle in a great big iron skillet. She'd



take pure cream and let's see, she took pure cream and sugar, brown sugar I believe, she used sugar, either brown sugar or white sugar, and I've forgotten. And then when it got to a certain consistency, she put the cream in it and stir it up and put the raw peanuts in there and stir that in that big skillet until it was the right consistency to pour out on a big platter. And she'd pour that on a great big platter, and then when it cooled why then, she cut it or broke it into peanut brittle, and she'd have a big boxful, a shoe boxful or a big container of peanut butter. We were lucky, we had nice homemade candy. And...

LS: Sounds fantastic, that meal. (laughs)

EN: And oh, was it, we had vegetables, we had to use mostly vegetables. Two kinds of vegetables that they used to use for Christmas and when they had their big dinners during the holidays, why, they'd invite the relatives, or neighbors, or friends to come over for a meal. It was almost similar to this Christmas, but the Christmas dinner was our family dinner. And my grandfather and grandmother and one uncle who wasn't much older than I was, they'd always come out, and bring a stack of gifts and candy and oranges, and always two coconuts in the shell. They'd come out on Christmas, they used to walk out sometimes, but most always, why, grandpa'd hitch up the horses and sleigh bells, and go in and get grandpa and grandma to come out. But it was always just our family like it is today, our family dinner. And other dinners that I'm talking about were anywhere between Christmas and New Year or 10 days later. And...

LS: Was New Year celebrated at all?

EN: Oh yeah, you bet. But not like that. But Christmas is what the kids all remember. Christmas was both sacred and enjoyable. It was the gala day of the year. And then after then men had their chores done, well, mother tried to have the dinner all ready, and that meant that we stretched out our table full length, and had a nice linen tablecloth, pure linen tablecloth that was a gift from my grandmother. And nothing was too good for Christmas. We used that linen

and used those napkins for our Christmas dinner. And then we had our Christmas tree lit, but maybe we wouldn't light it until after we were through with dinner because the candles were at a premium. By the time that there were several children. None of them remember of seeing homemade candles made. That was bygone days when they had such a hard time.

I remember my dad telling about, they had got five dollars for Christmas. I don't remember where they said they got it. Maybe sold geese, and got that five dollars. But they got five dollars apiece, my uncle Andrew got five and my dad got five. They went to town, and they bought a dollar's worth of sugar, they couldn't buy any gifts. All the gifts we had then were homemade. This was really before I remember. See, I was only three years old. But then, each one of the men bought a pair of overalls, blue overalls. They bought them for Christmas, and of course, they had to use them for everyday, and I suppose they had their old wedding suit of something that they were still using for church, for good. And then the rest of their money they bought a can of kerosene for the lamps and I think coffee. That was the Christmas during what they called the hard years, the wet years. And that was 1883-1885. Those two Christmases there just wasn't any money for anybody, not for the farmers.

Well now going back to the gifts and the Christmas presents later. In the later years when I was four or five years old, I got my doll when I was about three or four, four maybe, and then all the children got one gift from dad and mother, one gift, and that usually wasn't clothes. It was usually one gift, one toy or one gift. And one year I got the doll, and next year I got a cradle, a little white cradle. And my mother made two little sheets, she put lace on one for the top sheet. She made two little pillow cases by hand from remnants of pillow ticking and feathers.

She always made her own pillow<sup>s</sup>, and stuffed 'em with the feathers she saved from the goose down and some of the chicken feathers. Some of the boys got chicken feather pillows and for the best pillows she used her goose down. But she always made 'em.

For this cradle she made a little quilt. I remember it was red calico, and it had a lining. And then she had a little blanket, piece of blanket of an old, old wool blanket, and she cut that and crocheted around it for the little blanket that she put in that cradle under the sheet. And we didn't have a bedspread, we just had the quilt, that's the way I remember it.

And I put my doll to bed, to undress that doll, she