

Dr. Lydia Jacobsen Fohn-Hansen
2 hours of interview
University of Alaska
Home Extension Service Director

496-1624
Interview by Neville Jacobs
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Fohn-Hansen home, Fairbanks

Dr. Fohn-Hansen gives her autobiography in summary in this tape and also discusses the development of the University, and its home extension service programs; and work with the Matanuska Valley Colony.

She came from Iowa originally. She taught at the University of Iowa, having received a B.S. in 1919 and M.A. in 1922 at Ames, Iowa, in Home Economics.

Dr. Bunnell wrote to the University of Iowa looking for Home Ec teachers. Dr. Fohn Hansen then discusses the origins of the University as a land grant college in 1919.

Dr. Bunnell appointed Dr. Fohn-Hansen head of the Home Ec Department, and she came in 1925.

In 1927 she married, her husband was a prospector and a miner. She and some colleagues made a trip down the Yukon on a faft with him one summer; he was a Norwegian, several years her senior. In 1929, "Dr. Lydia" returned to the states to visit with family. At that time she did not intend to continue teaching, but in 1930, the Extension Service was started. Dr. Bunnell asked Dr. Lydia to take it over.

Thus in July, 1930, the Extension Program was commenced, with Lydia Fohn-Hansen in charge of women and a Professor ^{Gasher} Gasher head of the agricultural division.

In 1935 Lydia resigned to join her husband who was mining on Deadwood Creek near Central. They had a brief period together but he contracted siticosis and died in 1938.

Following her husband's death when she had returned to

the states, Lydia remained there until 1940. Then, the head of the U of A Extension Service wanted to leave, Bunnell asked her to return, and she did...until her retirement in 1959.

Lydia explains:

Extension work was based on the Morrill Congressional Act, which was to provide funds to states for rural development. World War I intensified interest in rural development because of a need for agriculture - food - and rural skills--homemaking--food preservation, sewing, etc.

Funds for this did not become available in Alaska until 1930 because the land was not developed sufficiently--limited farming and the small population had not previously permitted extension work to develop although the usual land grant college had three divisions: academic, research, and extension work.

In the late 1920's and '30's, Fairbanks underwent a period of stabilization. Permanency was in the air, the boom and bust atmosphere had subsided, leading to the development of the extension program as an adjunct to the permanent rural population.

Many Alaskan residents came directly to Alaska from Europe and had never seen the main United States...many Slavic families in the Interior...university extension was a channel to mainstream American thought.

Well into Tape 1: Description of Lydia's trip north to Alaska by boat, the "teacher's boat," the fall ship that brought teachers from the states to school throughout Alaska. They stopped along the way, visited interesting ports.

Matanuska Valley: Lydia worked with the colonists when they arrived in 1934-5. She taught and organized extension service

programs among the colonists. She discusses problems that arose among the settlers, poor planning, misrepresentations, successes and failures, and describes how they worked out their problems and finally successfully settled the valley.

Dr. Fohn-Hansen describes a few visits she made to Cook Inlet and Katchemak Bay where she went to conduct Extension Programs as settlement in that area increased. She describes the mail boat on which she traveled and communities that were scattered along Cook Inlet--at that time there were no roads in the area (Kenai Peninsula) and all travel was by boat along the coast in the summer.

Tape 2

Dr. Fohn Hansen describes a trip she made with a group down the Tanana River to the Yukon and on to Holy Cross. She was surprised to find that this lower Yukon community resembled her home state of Iowa, with silos, meadows and grazing animals around the school.

Husband: Lydia tells how her husband came from Norway in 1905--he pulled a handsled over the Valdez trail to the Interior.

Married life: She talk about a period when she and her husband lived in Fairbanks in 1927 to 29, and then again in 1935-38, when they were at Deadwood Creek mining near Central, lived in a cabin, and were far removed from the University.

Back to Extension Work: conversation turns back to the Extension Service programs, 4-H work, pioneering in weaving musk ox wool, and general conversation about life and work to the present time.

Series: Tanana Yukon Historical Tapes