

Norwegian-American Historical Association Oral History Program

P0584 Audio 2A

Rølvaag, Jennie Marie Berdahl

Jennie Marie Berdahl was born on June 1, 1879 in Minnehaha County, South Dakota to Andrew James and Karen Oline (Otterness) Berdahl. Jennie was born in a sod hut before South Dakota received statehood. She attended Augustana Academy in Canton, S.D. and was a county school teacher. Jennie Berdahl married Ole Rølvaag in 1908 and lived in Northfield, MN. Together they had four children: Olaf Arnljot (1909-1915), Ella Valborg Tweet (1910-2003), Karl Fritjof (1913-1990), and Paul Gunnar (1915-1920).

Interviewed: Jennie Marie Berdahl Rølvaag

Interviewer: Lucile M. Kane

Index by: Marisa Campanaro

Length: 00:31:18

Abstract

In this interview, Jennie Rølvaag discusses the cabin at Big Island Lake, Minnesota, St. Olaf College, Giants in the Earth, and Ole Rølvaag's passion for creating the Norwegian-American Historical Association Archives.

Keywords

Big Island Lake; Writing cabin; St. Olaf College; Giants in the Earth; Norwegian-American Historical Association Archives

LK – Lucile M Kane

JBR – Jennie Marie Berdahl Rølvaag

Interview Session, 1969

Time

Keywords

00:00:01	I understand that you were born and raised here.
00:00:41	LK: I'm interested in knowing Mrs. Rølvaag, how you got interested in Big Island country? JBR: Well, that's rather a strange story. I've forgotten the beginning of it, but there was some interesting land up there. They wanted somebody, they were interested in buying this track.
00:03:37	LK: Did you build the cabin yourself? JBR: Yes, that's what I was saying. He liked the space on Big Island, but we would have been all alone by ourselves, while the other place there would be neighbors. On Big Island there was a bay and we faced the setting sun, which is beautiful. The sunsets up there were just gorgeous. And the Big Ole was a big lake that he had seen this other place, which was on a point, sticking out into the lake. And he liked that so much, so it was up to me to decide.
00:04:53	LK: Did you build the cabin yourselves? JBR: And then we built our cabin. Mr. Oakland, who was a very handyman, built it from logs. They started a sawmill up there and did quite a bit of lumber. So, he cut

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the logs, the pine logs. And they built the cabin themselves, two men. The second brother was the two, so three men who built the cabin.

00:05:40 **LK:** Did Mr. Rølvaag enjoy that?

JBR: Oh, yes! And my little girl carried coffee over to those men every afternoon from our cabin.

00:06:15 **LK:** You went back there every summer then?

JBR: Yeah, after that we were there every summer. Until, well we weren't there in the summer of '24. The later years we were there for just short periods.

Otherwise, we were there every summer. The first years we were there the minute that school closed until it was time to begin.

00:06:53 **LK:** Wonderful for the children?

JBR: Oh, they enjoyed it! They enjoyed it so much.

00:07:05 **LK:** And you had quite a number of guests up there?

JBR: Oh, we had a lot of guests! Good thing we were so far or else we would have been swamped. Plus, my husband wanted it quite so he could work. But we just had guests often. Not so much house guests. We had people who dropped in a lot.

00:07:33 **LK:** And you remembered some of the visitors you enjoyed especially? You told me about Sir Karl.

JBR: Well I don't know that. We had our fair share of distinguished visitors. Carl Sandburg, the few times that he was here.

00:08:38 **LK:** Tell me about Carl Sandburg. Did you enjoy him?

JBR: Oh, he was an unusually interesting person. I don't remember, we sat and visited of course. When Karl was here we would have a large gathering out in the backyard.

00:09:20 **LK:** The St. Olaf faculty seems to have been very closely knit.

JBR: Oh, they did! Their first years, well until the faculty got so large, they used to have a faculty picnic. And the first years who lived here, we were just the two houses on this street. So, we were very open and very free. And we would have faculty suppers in our backyard.

00:10:40 **LK:** And of course they had so much in common at that time.

JBR: Well, the faculty was so much smaller, they became separate in their various departments. And would get farther apart.

00:10:52 **LK:** We mentioned in one of our talks about Mr. Rølvaag working his teachers very hard. He believed that they should stay busy, didn't he?

JBR: He used to have department meetings just about every week, with coffee of course and refreshments. And we'd meet around at other teacher's homes too. But, more often here. And he would insist upon one of the teachers, he would assign to the teacher that they had to prepare a prepared paper. It couldn't be talked off hand, he wanted it prepared.

00:11:49 **LK:** What subjects did they write on?

JBR: Well, I suppose in the department meetings, so I wouldn't say for sure, but would mostly write along the line of the courses. Might be a book review or it

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might be a discussion over some of the courses they were giving or something entirely outside because he wanted them to also know what was going on outside of their own department.

00:12:15 **LK:** Did he read papers too?

JBR: Oh, yes. He read papers and discussed and talked.

00:12:23 **LK:** With all of this going on, how did he have time for the children?

JBR: Well, that of course, they were cheated out of much of what they should have had. And yet we had all these vacations. During the school year, of course they would be busy with their school and he would be busy, so we didn't see much of him. Because in the evenings he worked, and we would normally have to have dinner at noon. Supper in the evening and then we would linger, that time was always lingering at the table. My daughter does it now, we just sit and talk and talk at the table afterwards. And we would linger in case he didn't have an appointment.

00:13:19 **LK:** And then he would talk with the children?

JBR: Yes, they talked. And as they grew older they'd talk about their work. We'd read, we read books while sitting at the table.

00:13:36 **LK:** And did you read Norwegian and English like you would at the cabin? They must have looked forward to those times.

JBR: Oh, I supposed I realized then how much it meant and of course they know it now.

00:13:49 **LK:** I was pleased to see the long letters he wrote to the children too. He seemed to take so much care with the letters.

JBR: When I was with them, of course I did most of the letter writing. But he did write occasionally.

00:14:04 **LK:** Did he have much time for his students? Did the students come over often?

JBR: He took all kinds of time for the students. He was never too busy to meet a student. And they would come to him, it's surprising when I think about it, how many students came to him for advice and help. Not necessarily students that he had of his own, but others. And he would seek out students that he felt needed some guidance or some help and encouragement.

00:14:46 **LK:** Did many people who wanted to write come to him for advice?

JBR: Of course, he had too many of that kind. He was harder on those students because he felt they could apply themselves more.

00:15:14 **LK:** Was that particularly after *Giants in the Earth*?

JBR: Yes, before that he wasn't well-known, except to our own people. But after *Giants* came out he became regularly known. And people wanted to send manuscripts to him for him to correct and look through.

00:15:43 **LK:** How did he manage that?

JBR: Of course he just didn't know. For those things he couldn't.

00:15:54 **LK:** In some ways, *Giants in the Earth* must have changed your way of living, when he became nationally known.

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- JBR:** It did. It destroyed much, because I was jealous of him. It took away some features we enjoyed and the privacy that we had. He became much more in demand. Home life was more or less the same except it was more destructed.
- 00:17:28 **LK:** How did the children feel about it?
- JBR:** I don't know. I suppose they'd take it as a matter of course. I don't think they, well they never said. Plus, those things didn't come all of a sudden, it was gradual.
- 00:17:55 **LK:** When did he become interested in the Norwegian American Historical Association?
- JBR:** Well of course he was always, that was one of his main thoughts for ideas. He was waiting for the preservation of what he called the Norwegian Heritage, the Norwegian culture. He felt that we should hang on to what we had in the old country. That wouldn't necessarily make us poorer American citizens for knowing our background. And he taught immigration history courses for a number of years.
- 00:20:29 **LK:** He must have worked very hard on it
- JBR:** Yes, he did. He spent too much time with that. He got so interested in collecting Norwegian Americana, he called it, books and papers and pamphlets, things that the Norwegians produced. Of course, they had no archive. He had it here and had it collected in an empty basement room at the college in the new building. And then he worked late nights to sort this material and get it organized. But out of that grew the archives.
- 00:21:27 **LK:** Must have been really devoted to it because that was one of the most busy times in his life.
- JBR:** Oh, he really was. There were great discussions at that time as you will find, he wanted the archives, of course, established here at St. Olaf. And the question was, the museum in Decorah and then some faculty being connected to the University [of Minnesota] in Minneapolis. Well his idea was that St. Olaf is the center of Norwegian American culture.
- 00:22:37 **LK:** Well he certainly worked hard in other organizations.
- JBR:** He worked too hard in all of these organizations. There were so many different organizations started amongst the Norwegians.
- 00:23:04 **LK:** Some of them I imagine wanted to hold too much.
- JBR:** That's just it, he felt that he could be of help. And he knew that he had enough influence.
- 00:24:20 **LK:** What did he do for relaxation in the middle of all of this?
- JBR:** Oh, I don't know. He took up golf. But the doctor told him to stop before he told himself. He couldn't stop when he got tired, he wasn't of that nature.
- 00:25:40 **LK:** You mentioned that he was a great letter writer
- JBR:** He loved it and he felt that it was his duty. I don't think he didn't receive as many letters that he did not answer. And, of course, he wrote long letters that he enjoyed writing to. And that was part of his recreation really. Just wrote, just for the fun of writing. He would chuckle while he was writing it.
- 00:26:28 **LK:** Too bad he didn't keep carbon copies of those letters.

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JBR: There are some letters that I wish that I had. We have the other parts of his letters but we haven't his. So, if people were sending the letters that they have I'm sure we could add to ours. We've advertised several times. Some have to do with his work and some had to do with these organizations and some controversial letters that would be interesting.

00:27:30 **LK:** What were the big controversies in his life?

JBR: Well I can't say now. Various things within these organizations that came up. He was never afraid to take a stand. He was quite a debater while here at college.

00:28:03 **LK:** Did they debate quite a bit together?

JBR: Well he was young at the time, so of course they didn't.

00:28:15 **LK:** He kept in touch with his people in Norway, didn't he?

JBR: Yes, he kept in close touch with his family, all the time. They corresponded. But he kept in close touch with his brothers and as long as his father lived, wrote to his father regularly.

00:28:48 **LK:** His father lived for a long time, didn't he?

JBR: His father died the same year that he did, 1931. His father died in June, I think it was.

00:29:07 **LK:** How about his brothers? Did he correspond with his brothers?

JBR: Oh, yes! He had two brothers. He had three brothers when he left Norway, but the older brother died many years ago. You should have seen the letters that man wrote, long long letters and he never had any education, except for the common school over there. He would write long letters, and discuss literature. He had two other brothers in Norway, one died just after the war. And one sister left. Very close knit family.

00:30:15 **LK:** Amazing that over all those years and distance that they all remained so close.

JBR: The first time he went back was 1906 and spent the summer at home and was the last time he saw his mother. And then was back in 1916, the summer when he went home to visit. Winter of 1924 there as well, when he was working on Giants in the Earth.

00:31:18 End Interview

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