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**DATE** : January 29, 1998

**SUBJECT** : Interview with Naomi Silfversten, Ruth Silfversten Coppins,  
and Betty Hamsten, Duluth, Minnesota

**INTERVIEWER** : Ed Nelson

**PROGRAM** : Swedish Immigrant Oral History Project  
City of Duluth Sister Cities Commission

**My name is Ed Nelson and we're at the office of the Senior Reporter in Duluth, Minnesota. This is an interview with Naomi Silfversten, and Ruth Silfversten Coppins, Betty Hamspen. Ruth and Naomi are sisters and they grew up in the West End of Duluth and your father's name was Carl J. Silfversten.**

**Can you give me a background on where your father and mother were born and how they came to this country?**

My father was born in the Swedish section or part of Finland and the town was Narpes, Finland. Mother was born in Sweden, Skane. (with an umlaut, I think.)

**Mother's name?**

Ellen Benson.

**When were they born?**

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Mother was born in 1883. I remember that. Because she was 95 just about 96 when she died and that was in 1979.

**Was your father older than your mother?**

Yes, about 4 years or so – so 1879.

**They immigrated – stories?**

Well, Dad was 19 years old when he came here and he wanted to go into the ministry eventually so he had to go to school and I believe he probably came from Rock Island or that area and I don't know much about the – after 19 I suppose he had to get – he had an education in Finland and they came here because he did get to Gustavus Adolphus College and from there he went to Theological Seminary; that was in Rockford. This is where he met Mother as she was a member of the church and the choir and they were married.

**Did he tell you about life in Finland?**

No but – well I'm quite sure he was a poor child and like so many immigrants because they wanted to get a better – have a better life so he was interested in becoming a minister and this was his goal to come to this country to study.

**Was his father a minister?**

No, his father was a captain of the high seas or a fisherman – a commercial fisherman on the gulf of O? so Dad was sort of raised to be a fisherman when he was a child so Dad has written several books but he has that one that is a safe channel that he writes stories regarding the – of the days with his dad fishing.

I am pretty sure I have that at home.

I have that one too. And I don't have much on my mother's background. Apparently she was just a baby when she came here to this country.

**So your father was a Swede-Finn?**

Dad always said Finland Swede and – Swedes are born in Finland and which is – I had made a trip there- it would be ten years this year and I visited the area where Dad was from and it's on the west coast – the Gulf of B.? -and I don't know how many towns or cities are included in all of the west coast but it does go up quite a ways and I don't have that map with me. It's Finland and all outside on the west coast of Finland.

**It was settled by Swedish people?**

Yes.

**Finnish government?**

I suppose they had to be. Part of the time they were under the Russian – in 1917 then Finland declared its independence.

**Were they amongst Swedish speaking people?**

Oh yes the whole area is. Jim was on that trip too.

**When your father came here did he come by himself?**

I understand that.

**Any relatives?**

Not that I'm aware of. Not that we know.

We had relatives way up in ?..... He didn't come over the same time she did and whether she was born over there or in this country – I don't know. That is the only known relative I can think of.

**When did he come here?**

1819.

**What did he do when he first came here?**

I suppose he had to go on in school. I don't know if he completed high school in Finland so called- he probably did but then he went to Gustavus College in the summer he used to – in fact he came to Duluth. I remember him telling us in 1905 and he worked on the coal docks in order to get some money for school and at that time he also – he didn't join but he would go to the Bethany Lutheran church in West End and I think he taught Saturday Bible School - something like that and – but and then from then he of course

**When did he meet your mother?**

When they probably came to S.? in that area. I don't know much about them landing here. I know that she was – well he was at this church in Chicago because she was from Chicago and he met her at church naturally because he was interested in becoming a minister and she – mother was in the choir and so apparently the romance started that way and so they were married and then – married in Chicago.

**So he graduated from Gustavus and went on to Augustana Seminary in Rock Island, IL.**

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**Graduated?**

It must have been 1909 because it seemed to me they were married in 1909.... Church? The first church he was assigned to was in Worchester, Massachusetts, and then from there they moved to Gladstone, MI. He was a Swedish/Finland minister. He had these churches that were Swede/Finn origin and then went to Gladstone, MI., went to Ironwood, Michigan, then to Rhinelander, WI and then of course in 1920 he was called here to Bethel.

**Did he stay in Duluth?**

Yes until he passed away. He was the pastor of this church for 26 years.

**Where were you guys born?**

I was born in Ironwood.

I was born in Rhinelander and our brother was born in Gladstone.

**What is your brother's name?**

Hilden?? And of course she was a twin and the other brother passed away when he was 19 months old.

**Then the family moved to Duluth and that is where all –**

There was – this church had a parsonage down the block here and – so that is where we were for a period of time. I don't remember how long because at that time Dad decided he wanted to build his own home so he got some property up on Central Avenue so – but at that time mother took ill and she was an invalid from the time she was 40 years old until she died in 1995. But nevertheless we managed to get along. They sold the parsonage and then we moved down to 53<sup>rd</sup> this way temporarily until our house became livable or we could move in. So that is where we spent most of our time.

**What do you remember about your ethnic group?**

I don't recall what we singled out – we chummed around with anyone and everybody. We had different nationalities. I can't say that we singled out the Swedes or Finns. A great part of our time was spent here at church. When we went to school or out to play it was all nationalities. But I think that we had a normal growing up as anybody else. Except that we were the minister's kids and you felt you had to be so good because your father was a minister.

It is a lot different now. Even the ministers are different. It's kind of nice because – you're something a little special. I don't know if they felt that way or not. We lived a normal life.

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**How about a minister's life in those days?**

Visit sick people, that is part of their ministers in the homes or in the hospital and he had to attend a lot of different meetings with other ministers and they had to go out of town and the conference meetings and things like that. Dad was not interested in sports or anything but he loved to fish so any time that he could get up to Boulder Lake or Fish Lake or sometime I remember being with him a couple of times and he was very patient and we just sat all day in the boat.

I remember going on part of his vacation with him oncé because he went up to Eagles' Nest Lake and he had fixed the car the back seat – the back part of the seat so they would go down and you could sleep in the car and I remember being up there with him for several days with him and I don't remember how old I was but I remember –

**He loved to fish.**

I remember also one time he fished at Island Lake and the blinding snow storm on the first fishing day of the season May 15 so here we are in January thinking of what we might have to look forward to.

**How would you describe a typical week for a minister?**

Church, church. Oh well yes and his daughters and son spent all of our time here. We used to have three services on Sunday: a Swedish, and English, and a Swedish at night and we three kids so called we all had to take our turns at being the organist -we all had training - we all had lessons of course piano and organ so brother first because he was older and then I went on to nurses' training and my sister, Ruth. So we all had to spend lots of time here and lots of time then we would have prayer meetings on Wednesday we had to be here. Friday was choir practice because then we had to take care of the choir and then the three services on Sunday. Of course Saturday was confirmation and for whatever. We had willing workers and I remember we had it in that second room especially when it was real cold and Dad would put fire in that little stove so we huddled around that.

**Is this the organ?**

That's the organ -that's the one we played.

**So you were the center of attention?**

Well , we didn't have a choice; put it that way.

**Any stories?**

I can't remember but like I say it's a little different now with pastors' families. Kids speak up more than - I belong to Pilgrim Lutheran church in Superior and I have been there ever since I've been married and so I've been going as members and I know the family life is a little bit different than they were when Naomi and my brother and I grew up here. But that was the times; everything has changed. And one thing I have to say that I am proud to say that I was brought up in the minister's home. I am very happy that that time -

Even if they were so strict. Mother wasn't but Dad of course -he ruled the roost, I can tell you.

**Was he a strict minister?**

Well, it wasn't fire and brimstone, I don't think. He had some good sermons. You know -

**Was the church a place where somebody was coming from Sweden - did they come to the church in those early days?**

We did have quite a few people that came over from Finland and find our church. I think it was mostly the men who came and some of them went back and some didn't go back to Finland.

Often we had visitors to come to the church; guess where they stayed overnight. We would be routed out of our cribs or beds to take care of some other minister that is coming to visit. But it didn't hurt us.

**Did you get late night phone calls of death in someone's family?**

I don't recall much of that. Dad had a study and –

One thing about him that – he quite often he was up in the middle of the night and then he would go down to the kitchen and cook and drink his coffee and study and write sermons and of course he did write some books too but that is when he did his thinking because he said it was always more quiet in the house during the night than it was during the day when we were around. Quiet, quiet down there.

**Was he a prolific writer?**

Yes he was. He had outlines because I think I have some still at home- some outlines and – he would preach from them.

**He wrote a book?**

Yes I happened to – I haven't had time to – I have all these and I have to get this all together – the Finland Swedes in America; this is it. It was published in 1931 and it is all here translated to the English language but how I received these was through the Swede -Finn Historical Society and there referred to the Finland Swedes had a lodge and they are still active out west- Bruneberg Lodge and the Bruneberg Lodge of Seattle is then there – they had publications called the Leading Star or in Swedish ? but – so the editor of that paper, Doug Hansen, we were in touch or contact and he said that we will see that you get the publication and this is of course I would take it out like this and so there is 26 chapters. It was a big book; just by looking at all of this you can see what our father was doing in the middle of the night beside writing for sermons and this wasn't the only book.

**Did he ever tell you why?**

Oh, he was so proud of his people and he felt it and then of course he traveled to get some information for the book. He went out west and there are quite a few Finland Swedes in that area, and California and out in Michigan and Mass. And also Australia; there are a lot of Finns and Swedes. So this is what I say; he really did quite a bit of –

**He knew of the other people who were working the church; is that where he got the information?**

I presume he got that through many people and I think toward the end here the several people that men that were influenced him and that is where he got information from.

**He wrote that in Swedish?**

Yes, in Swedish.

**Was he in the lodge?**

We – I think we were members for a while. We weren't lodge people; we never had been. There wasn't any reason to. It was a sick benefit.

**Was there a chapter here in Duluth?**

They had many years ago but they had it – there were two up on the range also.

**What other books did he write?**

I have sent a couple of ours out there. Well we know "Safe Channels" and then "My Home..." and I don't remember the translation of the rest of it. I don't have the list with me that I sent to the Historical Society.

**Did he perform a lot of weddings?**

I imagine he did at one time; it was a very busy church and congregation. And so he it was a lot of activity in this church.

**How many members?**

200 or so. Maybe when they were at the peak time might have been.

**Was this church built when he arrived?**

Yes, it was. Yes, because there were other ministers here before Dad came. Pastor Oberg was here. Kastlin? was here at that time.

**You said there were 200 or 300 people and you had church services and choir practices; were there other social things and choir practices?**

We had dinners and church suppers – oh yes, and we even had lutefisk suppers and trout suppers – must say something right at this point, too, that dad organized a church out in French river – a church out there – he felt the need – being Dad was so interested in fishing and all he felt the need along the shore out there and then found out they were Finland-Swedes and that there was quite a number of them – maybe, it was kind of a mission church at the time out there so he did organize that too. They built after a while but the first so-called services were held in the homes – and then after that they did build a church up on the Ryan road and that was there until they decided – I'm trying to think of the date – 51 or 2 – 52 and then they had ground-breaking for the new church on Ryan road that's there now – so it's an active church.

**Another pastor?**

No, he was the pastor there for several years, taking over that so he had this church and then French River. In between when he must have had a little time – back in the '30's – he was a pastor up in Eveleth, at that church, so he spent some of his time – I say a third of his time – see, he had three churches – and so he was busy.

**Eveleth in the '30's-**

Well, I know because I used to accompany him. I used to play that organ there – kind of a reed organ- they had somebody blowing it or pumping it from behind or whatever – so – I – that was a long trek.

**Can you imagine some of the dinners-lutefisk?**

Oh, that was important part of – in those days – and as I say, lake trout – you see the connection we had was French river – then – I remember going up with dad one morning and waiting for the – Mr. Sundstrom - Mr. Gunderson- they write out –having pulled up their nets and fish and so forth –really fresh fish- I remember getting it and putting it on the back seat and off we went to betherl – fresh – so we had lake trout suppers. That was very good. Of course I do like lutefisk, so that was – still do! You could have it everyday and twice on Sundays.

**What about special times like holidays – Christmas, Easter – were those a lot of**

A lot of activity in the church – you know, Sunday school program here, and we all had to take part in that and – special church events – Christmas morning you'd always have morning services at 6 o'clock in the morning./ it was called – surprising how many people came out for that – frost on the windows –candles next to the windows, you know – it was very very

**Did you open presents before or after?**

Don't say presents – present – we were lucky then. That was a special service – course we had Easter service also. Good Friday - Good Friday services we had in combination with other churches – we had Elim, . . . and other churches. Isn't that funny, I can't remember too much on that. Don't know. Can't remember . . .

**Confirmation and . . . . .**

And then after confirmation the group that we called our Junior league or Luther League – pretty active

**How would you describe the Luther league . . . ?**

Have a program and – I don't know if we had speakers or anything like that but –I don't recall. It was an active – very active time.

**Where you had officers and had a meeting?**

We might have had a president –

**Dances or parties?**

Oh, heavens, are you kidding? You must be. We weren't even allowed to go dancing or to a movie –or- times have changed. It was strict.

**It must have been difficult for you going to the public school and**

I always think back going to prom night –I think it was at the Spaulding – we got dressed up – and nobody asked me to dance because the kids all knew I was the minister's daughter, so I was there for a wallflower.

**Well, you were lucky – I don't think anybody ever asked me to go.**

Well, I mean I went – a bunch of – you know- As I say I didn't get to dance.

**He was pastor here for a long- a relatively long-**

26 years.

**Did – from the time you came to the time – did that change quite a bit?**

Til the time he retired?

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**Were church people more liberal and the Swedish services?**

Oh, no, he cut out the Swedish services – Well, I don't recall too much. You see, I went in nurses' training in 193 and I don't know – I came back here to Duluth in 37 – but well, yes, I s'pose I came back to live at home because I started to work – I don't remember – isn't it sad – I'm getting aged it's hard to remember – you were home, too

**Special memories of the Depression years in Duluth?**

They certainly weren't very good but everybody was in the same predicament. Cause, things weren't as costly as they are now so we managed. I think from what I remember – was his salary \$125 a month – he when he passed away in 1953 – from '46 on, when he retired, his pension was \$35 a month.

**Who was – when you say he had a boss he reported to?**

They were called bishops – or it'd be like the head of the synod – Augustana Synod – and I think it was probably – they had branches – the ministers from this area maybe had to report to someone down in the cities. But their main synod was in Rock Island, I think – the Augustana, so – oh, yeh

**There was a hierarchy?**

Oh, yes, oh, sure they had to. They had all these obligations and things when the church – the main church now what it is called is Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

**Um, women's role in the church – how would you describe that?**

Very active I would say.

**Ladies' aid society?**

Very active, um-hmm, Dorcas society, they were the mainstay of the church, you know, in those days, very active. I think in most churches they are still the mainstay. The groups and the things that they do. It was a very active church. Good choir, and there's a picture on the wall now. Alberta directed the choir. It's so little. He was quite a musician.

**And you said some of the services were in Swedish?**

Most people could understand Swedish. I could understand Swedish quite a bit. I did way back. Come to church and hear Dad preach in Swedish, I couldn't quite get it all. At home, if he and my mother wanted to talk about something and they didn't want us to know what they were talking about, they'd speak Swedish and we knew what they were talking about. We could translate that. It was a little bit different.

**Speak in Swedish?**

I suppose most of them. He did a lot of periodicals too for the church. And then he wrote for the?. But... periodicals for the church itself and so

**Any other humorous stories?**

How many people are going to listen? Statute of limitation run out?

**We can delete some of it. Other things that might shed some light on**

Oh, other thing he did for a hobby, he built boats. Like rowboats. I don't know. He had special – Weide, and long at the bow Garage and our basement. I don't know how many he had built. How many years – maybe you don't recall the Knudsen Shipyard – of course, it was in Superior- and in fact I know the granddaughter of the Knudsens, and anyway he came one time to look at my dad's boat and he complimented him on it, he said it was a very well

done. So that's what he did as a hobby, in his spare time. After writing and preaching and all these other things. A winder man.

**Parades and carpentry and wood-working. . . Character, do with your families . . .**

I know one thing that I do all these years I always any place that I go, I always go about half an hour before I have to be there because I don't want to be late because I remember dad saying I'd rather be anyplace a half hour early than a half a minute late. And I carry that tradition. I think people have – I'm a believer in being early. That carried over here with me too of course.

**Strong work ethic, I s'pose?**

Well, not \_ I can't say that.

**Your father and now your brother . . .**

Well, I've stayed single and been in the nursing profession most of my life except for 20 years now I've been retired from it. I kept pretty busy. I spent most of my nursing time at the Duluth Clinic. 39 years – surgery section – surgeons, orthopedics, and for 10 years supervisor of nurses and aides, and so that was very interesting work.

**You told earlier ...**

1988.

**Story behind that.**

Well, we have this organization or so-called – Finland Swedes; they get together – Margaret Orley started this many years ago- might be over 10 now – she passed away last year – and she said something about – she asked at one of the luncheons if any of us would be interested in taking a trip tpo Finland, so I was interested. Because I didn't know of any relatives at that time – maybe this was a good time to look up somebody if we get up to the Verkas area so she organized this tour and I think there were 22 of us but we weren't all from Duluth . That went of this trip – we spent – 2 ½ days in Verkas, that's all but while the planning was going on had been over in Finland and found a Harry Silfversten that lived in Memphis, and we corresponded and so then there was a reason and I was invited to stay with them which I did and so we got to see the church where Dad grew up – it was built in 1453 – a beautiful church and he had been back in 1927 and preached there so I was – I took some pictures of the pulpit because it was up pretty high and those churches they are and then take in a couple of cemeteries and found some more Sifverstens – only they were below ground at that point, and it was a funny feeling to be way over in Finland and then you see these tombstones – the fellow named – same as ours – of. Course it was correct – in past years trying to find more Silfversten's – this Harry Silfversten – did start a genealogy – of Silfversten – and I was able to fill in a few things about our family and then I have – its in booklet form, cheaper than this, and find out there are several Silfverstens in this country bot they've changed their name to

Silverstone so – you can't – at this point in my life. I'm too old now to go through some more history – I've done enough. But why – it all comes at this time in my life - these things – and yet a ways back, we wouldn't have been interested – we weren't. Now how important is –

**When you're reading these stories of your father's translated, are you making discoveries . .**

I have to admit that I haven't looked through them yet.. I shouldn't say I have no time, but I have to start one of these days and start from the beginning, but just from what I have read, some portions –I'm amazed at what he did, in writing. I can't believe this was all published in 1931 – my goodness. And all the facts, my goodness, he really delved into this history of the Finland-Swedes here in America. I was kind of hoping Mr. Fortner was here ; I was going to ask him how to ? about – I'd like to have this edited but not for anybody's information, just for my sister and me because this can be destroyed – it's worth something I mean to me, I guess.

**Bethany home?**

The children's home. Its called North Woods – Bethany crises center it is on 40<sup>th</sup> avenue west just right above the railroad tracks. It was on 40<sup>th</sup> I remember and not the – the big building was on 40<sup>th</sup> but the other one was down on the avenue because I remember going over there sometimes. It was a big house – on the corner from the supermarket. That was the first then they built and went across the railroad tracks and that big building is still there – it is called Northwoods Crises Center.

**Did your dad have any connection?**

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I suppose I think he went there and may have had a speaker and spoke one time or other but it was a place for orphans and I don't know if they had any programs. I just remember going there once but I can't remember what if we had a bunch of church here to go or - that is a long, long time ago.

By the way this coming year 1988 or 1989 its going to be 100 years old – this is 1998 I know but it would be a 100 years old or 99 years old – because I asked Mr. ? that last year because he mentioned about removing the corner stone when the church was 100 years old and so forth so I think either this year or –

**What year did your father retire?**

1946.

**He turned it over to another pastor?**

Oh yes and from then there were several pastors. Two or three. Matson was the last and who was the other one? Falk after dad.

I don't remember when the church – Mr. Fortner. had this church for about 10 years and it was empty for a while before Mr. F bought it.

**Did you dad continue to write after he retired?**

Oh yes he continued to write, fishing, fishing.

He painted several altar paintings for various churches. He painted French River Lutheran and there is one now that is Holy Cross and that's a big one that is in the Fireside room. There is one in Fellowship Hall in French River. I understand that there are others in Concordia when we belonged to that little white church. He painted that alter painting and I think somebody mentioned the Arnold Church which is now the Family of God church there should be something there. I haven't pursued all of these leads. We do know that he was wonderful artist. And music and whatever he was – practically everything. A farmer. And a newspaper – he wrote and was editor of the Mound Sun Newspaper. He composed music, opera. Now this is our brother not our father.

**Anything else?**

He used to love children and in our home there on Central Avenue, his study of course was off the living room and the windows on the study face the porch because that was years ago when they all had process and the little kids in the neighborhood

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