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Oral History Transcription with Ellen Peterson

Ellen Peterson

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THE HEDMAN FAMILY

First generation:

In 1740 Olof Hedman moved from Hidemora to Undersaker, Jmtland and became head smelter for the copperworks in 1749. Since they came from Hede, they were called Hedeman and so adopted the surname Hedman.

Second generation:

The second generation was Jonas Hedman pa Gillerasen, a farmer.

Third generation:

The third generation was Olof Jonas Hedman Gillerasen, born Dec. 8, 1796. He had eight children, Martha being the 7th. She heard a Baptist preacher from Stockholm and got a real religion of the heart. She and eight others were baptized in the Pista River the morning of July 29, 1867 and organized a Baptist church that afternoon in a farmhouse. That Baptist church is now in Jarpen, 102 years old.

Martha married Johan Hedman and they and the two brothers Per and Eric Hedman, with their families took steerage to Halifax (a rough trip) to enter the Promised Land and traveled on the St. John River to New Sweden, July 1877. They were housed that first winter near the capital and had a chance to learn a bit of English in a school run by Rev. Wiren. Next summer they moved to farms (free Homestead) in Jmtland and built homes (log cabins.) Johan died in three years, leaving Martha a widow with four children. She remained a widow over three years, marrying Anders Gustaf Peterson in the early November, 1877. Their first child was Emma, born July 29, 1878. Then came Joseph, Ellen, Oscar and Lydia who died in 8 days. Anders went to Portland to earn some cash, froze his thumbs and blood poisoning set in. He did not go to a doctor until too late and died in a week. He was brought home for burial in mid-March 1897. So Martha was left a widow a second time. But she ran the farm and sent us to ungraded school to learn English - we spoke and read Swedish in the home, attended Swedish church and Sunday School. It should be mentioned that when the Hedmans came to New Sweden they added 37 to the membership of the Swedish church organized by Nils Olson in March 1870.

Mother was needed to care for her oldest daughter, Ingie, married to August Weeden and living in Quincy, Mass. At the same time Emma went to keep house for Ingie and Ellen went to get into a better school as Ingie wished. Ingie died June 29, 1896 of T. B. That fall Emma took another job and August Weeden got a new house-keeper. Ingie's only child, William Weeden was only five when his mother died. After finishing high school he went to Colby College for two years. He joined the U. S. Service and was a corporal when he died of pneumonia, leaving a wife and a small daughter.

My half-brother John Hedman struggled to finish Caribou High School and wanted to go to Colby but his health failed and in April 1897 I went home to Jmtland to help Mother with two sick in bed. John Hedman died of T. B. May 28, 1897, a very earnest Christian. In March 1899, Olive died after a throat operation in Portland and we buried her in mid-March. Eric C. and Hilda and Emma had gone to Sweden in June before and did not return until mid-April and their son, John Hedman was born April 16 in Quincy, Mass. where Eric worked at building and carpentering.

Mother helped Oscar and me to start High School in Caribou in January of our Freshman year, moving down and renting a place where we could keep house. She did that every year until we graduated. She encouraged us to go on to college and
Professor John Hedman, the first to enter Colby from New Sweden, helped us get free tuition and a job to earn our board and room. He was brilliant and an excellent teacher and it was a great loss to Colby when he died of pneumonia in January 1911.

Oscar and I were about to graduate from Colby in 1907 when tragedy struck. Oscar had just found out he had made Phi Beta Kappa and was very happy about it. He knew I would make it. He and a friend took two girls on a row-boat trip on the Messalonskee River and Oscar was drowned. So we had a funeral instead of commencement and I had to meet Mother, Emma and Joe with that news. They were already on the way to commencement.

That fall I began teaching French and German at Coburn Classical Institute in Waterville. I taught there five years, then felt I could fill a bigger need in China in girls' school so took a year of Bible study at Gordon Bible School, then part of Newton Theological Institution. I was appointed by the Women's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society in the spring and sailed for China in August, 1913, a most interesting life in various schools, finally going into Women's Evangelistic work to make room for a Chinese principal in the school.

My mother went with me in August, 1926 and was happy there. She lived there nearly three years, fell and broke her hip, lived just a month and she is buried in Hangchow, China.
After graduating from Colby College in 1907, I taught French and German for five years at Coburn Classical Institute, Waterville, Maine. There the call came for educational missionaries in China and I felt my life would count for more there.

After taking a year of Bible study at Gordon Bible School in Boston (then under Newton Theological Seminary) I was appointed by the Women's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society in the spring of 1913 and sailed for East China in August, 1913.

My first year I spent at the language School in Nanking, my second year in Kinhwa studying the language.

After a vacation in Peking and Chefoo, I came back to Nokanshan where our Mission was having the annual meeting. They found a principal for our Shaoshing Girls' school was delayed in getting to China due to so many ships being used to transport Chinese coolies to Europe in the summer 1915 so they asked me to run that school till she could get there. I did. While there the call came for me to become principal of the Union Girls' School in Hangchow (North and South Presbyterian and North Baptist). I accepted that and took over April 8, 1916. I was there two terms till 1926, then to make room for a Chinese principal, I changed to Women's Evangelistic Work. He held the job one year.

I took mother (Martha Peterson) with me to China in 1926 and she lived there happy for nearly three years.

We had been in Hangchow only five and one half months when the American Consul urged all women to move to Shanghai (the Nationalists then being a bit anti-America). We went, stayed with mission friends some five months, then moved into an apartment of our own with another missionary. That fall she went to our University of Shanghai to teach. Mother and I stayed on till February when it was safe to return to Hangchow.

Mother was happy there, could attend an English service on Sunday afternoon. She lived there nearly three years. After we had celebrated her 85th Birthday on March 6 with a big tea-party, some 30 missionaries present, she slipped off a chair and broke her hip and died May 8, 1929 and we laid her to rest in our foreign cemetery in Hangchow.

I came on furlough in June 1939 after teaching a year in our boy's and girls' school in Shaoshing. I returned in 1940 to do relief work in Hangchow. We fed about 2000 a day, children, grown-ups and mothers with babies and refugees from outside villages also teaching some 800 children. We made garments for all who needed them, quilts, etc. We received money from International Red Cross and fine cracked wheat from the United States.

After Pearl Harbor the Japanese made us stop this relief work.

In June 1942 the Japanese sent us home in exchange for Japanese from America, the exchange being made on an island on the East Coast of South America. We landed in New York, August 30, 1942.
After piano speaking in churches that spring and fall, I was asked to run Masseltine House in Newton Centre and took over in November, 1942. I did that for 15 months, then prepared to go to Congo to teach, but it was hard to get passage. At last I got passage in November. The Board called me to New York to tell me I might be able to return to China. While there a call came from a Navy ship which was going to Shanghai to pick up U.S. soldiers and they offered to take two experienced missionaries, even women, so I decided to be one.

My trunks were packed for Congo but I had to return to Quincy to pick up a few things there, at my sister's. That was Saturday. I left Boston Sunday at 4 P.M. I had to have a quick change in passport but one of the Board secretaries hurried to Washington and got that done. I had Monday to get instructions from the Board, Tuesday for a bit of shopping. Wednesday, I got on the ship and off we went via Panama. To avoid storms we took a longer southern route and did not get to Shanghai till after Christmas.

I shared an apartment with Ruth Hughes who had not gone home.

I was acting mission secretary, but had no heat in my office, so had to go out for walks to get warm and a hot lunch.

Later I traveled to all of our mission stations with Dr. Fridell, our Board Secretary, by train, auto, etc.

In March, 1946, Rob Taylor came to be Mission Treasurer, so I was free to go home to Nan-chow in early April. I was there three years. The Communists were winning and we knew we could do no work under them so left in January 1949.

I visited friends in California for awhile and in Chicago, I got home in August and retired after 36 years in China.

A cousin in Sweden asked me to come and keep house for her in her lovely little cottage on a hill, so I did, getting there just a week before Christmas. I had a fine winter there, cold but dry cold - I hadn't a sniffle.

That is where I learned all about my mother's folks, several generations back - Swedes because they came from Rode. I was glad I had learned Swedish, my first language. Relatives in Sweden, Holland, Jutland, were surprised at my perfect Swedish.

I visited friends and a cousin in Stockholm and also went to Varmland to my father's birthplace.

I left Sweden in early July, 1950, visited friends in England, also in Holland.

I accepted a position as a house-mother at Spellman College, Atlanta, Georgia and liked my colored girls.

In early April the Baptist Board Committee of Masseltine House called me by phone and asked me to return to manage Masseltine House as the one who had done it was too ill to carry on. I accepted and after settling some business and a brief vacation I took over there in mid-July and was there over six years, till 1957 when a friend and I moved to Olds Hall,
in Daytona Beach, Florida. I come North every summer.

We joined the Tourist Church interdenomininal but a fine Baptist preacher.

I decided to retire at the Baptist Home of Massachusetts, and entered here October 19, 1964. I have been here over five years. No better home than this! They really take care of you. I am near my sister's children, John Berg and Ellen Verbeck in Weymouth, Mass. who come to see me often and take me home for holidays, and Dorothy MacKinnon at Sugar Hill, N. H. where I have spent some summer vacations. They are as good to me as if they were my own children.

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Plan Testimonial For Miss Peterson Friday Evening

MISS ELLEN J. PETERSON

A testimonial supper, honoring Miss Ellen J. Peterson, returned Baptist missionary to China, will be held at 6:30 p.m. Friday at the First Baptist Church.

Miss Peterson, a native of New Sweden, has completed 35 years of service in China. She spent 10 years as principal of the Union Girls' High School in Changchow and later taught at the Wayland Academy for Boys there. She was at one time a teacher at Coburn Classical Institute here.

Colby College and Coburn friends and others who know Miss Peterson have been invited to the gathering. The Rev. Kenneth Lloyd Garrison, pastor of the First Baptist Church will preside, and speakers will include Dean Ninetta M. Runnals, who was at Colby with Miss Peterson, and who will speak on her early associations with the guest of honor; and Dean Ernest C. Marriner of Colby, who will tell of the early missionary background of the First Baptist Church.

There will be selections by the church choir, under the direction of Mrs. John Manter.

Miss Peterson will spend the weekend as guest of Miss Meroe Park Street, and will later on a speaking tour of the England states.