Gordon: [0:41] This is an interview with Inga Bolang. We are in Bellevue, Washington, and this is part of the Nordic American Voices Oral History project with the Nordic Heritage Museum. Today is June 7th, 2011. Dr. Inga, thank you very much. It is nice to be in your lovely home. Would you start by stating your full name, and tell us where and when you were born?

Inga Bolang: [1:29] My name is Inga Lisa Bolang. My maiden name is Wilborg. I was born in Äby, Sweden. That is in Southern part of Sweden in Skåne. That was 1925 in February, so I am 86 years old. I was born on a small farm with my father and mother and I had six siblings. They were all older than me. I was the last one. [2:14] I had three brothers that was still living at home when I was little. My sisters were older so they were all off working, which was common in those days. That when you were 15 you went off to work. When I was born my mom was already sickly because she had the rheumatoid arthritis. I don't remember my mom healthy.

[2:38] She got worse as I grew older. By the time I was seven she wasn't able to do very much so I helped her dress and bath and comb her hair. Helped her because she couldn't be alone.

[3:15] When I was 10 years old, she passed away. We had the farm maybe a year after that, and then we moved closer to my oldest sister, who was married. My dad was a builder, a construction builder. He built a home for us.

[4:05] There we lived next to my sister, until I was about 17. Then I went back to school. I went to Folkhågskola [ed. note: school] and wanted to become a nurse, which I did. I applied to different places and came to Linköping, to begin the nurses' school which took four years, and then worked at the hospital in Linköping and I met my husband, Per.
We were married and had two children, Karin and Anders. While we were there, we decided to apply for work in America. They were looking for engineers and so we went, my husband Per got the job in San Diego and that's where we moved to, 1958.

We had two children, Anders was two years old and Karin was four and a half. It was a wonderful place in San Diego with lots of Swedes that took good care of us.

But after two years, we got a job at Boeing. We moved up to Seattle, and we settled in Bellevue. We had one relative in Seattle. That was my mother's cousin who was from Smöländ. She thought we were real snobs for not moving to Ballard. We had thought out about the school system.

We had found out the Bellevue school system was the best. Karin was just starting first grade, so we moved there.

Gordon: [6:41] Inga, would you please talk a little bit about the Second World War years in Sweden, which was neutral?

Inga: [7:42] My oldest brother was in the military. Of course, we were very aware of the war. Everything was rationed. We really did not suffer like they did in Norway. There was a lot of people coming in from all over the world, especially from Denmark and Norway. They were the first ones to come. Of course everything was dark, but we didn't feel that much of the war. We were worried about it all the time, especially with my brother. But we never suffered anything.

Mari-Ann: [8:02] Did you or anybody in your family ever take care of a Finnish child?

Inga: [8:48] No, we didn't. In fact, in my area we didn't have many of the Finnish children. I don't know why, but it just didn't happen that way. There were not many Finnish kids. My brother wanted to go to Finland to fight with them. He could not leave because he was an officer in the Army. He wasn't allowed to leave.

Mari-Ann: [8:53] He wanted to go fight for Finland?

Inga: [9:31] Yes. So many people did. Of course, everyone was in the military. My brother in law, and everyone was called in to the military. We had it very, very good. Especially in the hospitals, we never felt that we never had enough food and things. There was always everything.
Mari-Ann: [9:36] Why did you want to become a nurse?

Inga: [9:50] Because my mom was sick. I wanted to become a nurse from the mom. From the very beginning I decided that.

Gordon: [9:56] How did you meet Per?

Inga: [10:10] We met at a surprise party. Kind of a blind date.

Mari-Ann: [10:12] A blind date?


Inga: [10:38] He looked like my oldest brother. So he was fine. I had always decided not to marry, but that was cast out directly back then.


Inga: [10:44] I don't know. I hadn't seen too much happiness in my life. I've been happy since.

Mari-Ann: [10:54] I was going to say.

Inga: [11:45] Then we came to Seattle. The first years here we were very busy because the children were little. We bought a house and were very active in church. We became Presbyterians. We became very active with the church. Not active in the Scandinavian community at all because there were no Scandinavians around. Then I got to know more and more people and went to some Swedish cultural society meetings and became involved with that. I heard that they had started a new museum and the Finns were starting their own room at the Nordic Museum. I took Ingrid Karston, who was president for the club and we went to see Marianne Forsblad. She was enthused and showed us a room we could have.

[13:15] That must have been '83 or '84, something like that. I really don't remember what year. It became the Sweden Room. We had a meeting, put an ad in the paper, and there was a whole bunch of Swedes that came to our house and we a working group.
Mari-Ann: [13:20] Who came? Who were some of the people that came to the meeting?

Inga: [14:15] I wish I had those papers left, but I gave them to, I think, Ingrid. There were Jan and Boel von Haartman, of course, and there were Berta Issacson. What's that name?


Inga: [14:24] von Haartman. Gordon Tracy called and said, "You can't call it the Swedish Room. That's not right, Swedish. It has to be Sweden Room."

Inga: [14:44] I had no idea who he was and he was very rude. He was right, of course.

Mari-Ann: [14:53] What did the museum look like that first trip you made?

Inga: [15:45] It was terrible. That first room, I'll never forget when we showed up. It was packed with junk. We took out truckloads to the dump. There were holes in the wall and there were blackboards, layers of blackboards. It was amazing what they had saved. The floor, of course, was just in waves because it had been wet there, a leak. [16:27] We worked very hard. We were about 20 people that worked two or three times a week at night and cleaned up the whole thing. We bought these big, big buckets of plaster. Then we decided that we had one big room, and we had to decide what to do with it and we had to do that ourselves. It was fun.

My youngest daughter, she was a decorator at Bon Marche, and she helped us dress the doors, the cafeteria, and all of the doors we had in there.

Mari-Ann: [16:49] How did you decide what to put in there?

Inga: [17:31] Well, we got a little idea from Marianne, but, otherwise, we wanted a cafe and we wanted the different stores and we wanted a hospital. We had to divide up the room. It was a small room that we had to get as much information as possible into. We were proud. [17:59] We had a fantastic helper. Beth Lund, had a carpenter that he lent us. He was fantastic. He was so good. He helped us with so many things. Happy and nice and they helped us.

Gordon: [18:02] Jerry was a gem.

Mari-Ann: [18:04] I didn't know him.
Gordon:  [18:08] You didn't know him? Oh he was just wonderful.

Inga:  [18:12] I seldom see Marianne cry. But she did then.

Mari-Ann:  [18:21] When he died yes. Were they working on the rooms at the same time?

Inga:  [19:03] Yes, it all started at the same time so it was really fun. We were going to have an open house, and kind of celebrate the opening of it in '89; the 6th of June. And Lisa's marriage was the 10 of June. We were so busy at home, and we were so busy there, but we had a good time.

Gordon:  [19:10] So did all the Nordic rooms open in 1989?

Inga:  [19:16] Yes, but we had worked on it for years.

Mari-Ann:  [19:22] So how long 5 or 6 years did you work on it?

Inga:  [19:27] We worked on it for many years, but only at night.

Gordon:  [19:38] I think the Sweden room is absolutely beautiful. You did a great job.

Inga:  [20:08] We have one little area where we have citizens you know. That's where we put the Gordon Tracie stuff when he passes away. We even had his medal the first year, but then of course that has to go back.

Mari-Ann:  [20:11] Where did you get things, objects for the room?

Inga:  [21:06] Every one of us gathered as much as we could. Every one. And we advertised. Eckland she was wonderful with history she was great. There were so many, they're all gone. She had so much history.

Mari-Ann:  [21:14] She knew the history?

Inga:  [21:15] Yes. She was great.


Inga:  [21:35] That first time we went there. But of course, many of the other girls knew her at that time being. I was too busy with all.
Gordon:  [21:47] Well you certainly have been involved after that? Haven't you?

Inga:  [22:25] We really got involved. For example, we cooked all the meals for the Nordic music series. We cooked them ourselves. To get money to the Sweden room for example. We had to have our dinners and we had film evenings. [23:03] We had all kinds of things going to get money. We earned every cent. Every cent we earned. We had our own account. We had some money left over and I wonder what happened to it. That's interesting. In fact some of the girls have asked, "Did you find out where the money went?" It all went into the bank account.

Gordon:  [23:04] It was kept separate.

Inga:  [23:06] It was kept separate. Yes, I know.

Gordon:  [23:07] So, it most likely has been used for maintenance.

Inga:  [23:20] I know. Everything and all the big pictures we had. They cost 2, or 3 hundred dollars a piece; they were big, big blow ups.


Inga:  [24:19] We started at the same time at the museums. I started working at the Swedish Club and I started to volunteer in both places. Then it came to the point where I went only to the museum.


Inga:  [24:55] Very much so. He was. He didn't do anything himself, but he was very involved. He was the president of it. He was very active when he was president. And the same thing when he was president of the Swedish club he was very, very active. And did a lot of good.

Gordon:  [25:04] He has been a pillar of support for the museum.

Inga:  [25:09] Yes, you can say that. Yes, he was very much.

Mari-Ann:  [25:24] In your family, in your home, how did you keep your traditions alive with your children?
Inga: [25:57] We have kept all the traditions all the time and many people visiting from Sweden say that they have never had such a Swedish Christmas. The children are very, very active in holding up the traditions. They wanted exacted the same thing.

Mari-Ann: [26:04] What was your Swedish Christmas like that they grew up with?

Inga: [26:48] On Christmas Eve, we gather in the afternoon usually and just be together. And then we have smorgasbord. And after the tomte calls with all the presents. As long as the children was small we went to church after the smorgasbord. [27:53] And in the church we belonged to, there was a service on Christmas Eve. And then we had our Christmas presents. And then in the morning we have the stockings. And then we go to the Lutheran church in Seattle, which is an early service. And then we come home and have a big breakfast all together. And right now everyone gathers in their pajamas.

Mari-Ann: [28:04] What kind of food do you serve and what are your specialties?

Inga: [28:58] We have ham of course. Small potato, and herring, all kinds of herring, two or three kinds. And we have ham and liver pate, and red beans and different kinds of salads. And then we have a, Johnson's temptation, and homemade sausage that we make ourselves. [29:11] And then we have cookies for desert. We usually don't have rice porridge, because it's too much food. We have that the next day or something.


Inga: [30:25] I always buy casings in Seattle, and good ground pork [ed. note: narrator originally said ‘Whole Foods’] or in. And I add just a little bit of potatoes, and spices, and milk and that's it. Mix it up, and I have an old fashioned meat grinder. Put the skin up. And all the kids know what to do they make it themselves. [30:41] And liver pate the same thing. We do that all together with pork liver and anchovies. That's good.


Gordon: [30:50] Do your children speak Swedish?

Inga: [30:52] Yes, they do. All of them.
Gordon: [30:55] How about the grandchildren?

Inga: [31:21] No, they don't. The two big ones have gone one semester at University in Sweden, but they still don't. They fake it a little bit, but not too much. They're interested in it. They loved Sweden. They just don't know very much.

Gordon: [31:23] Do you have any property in Sweden?

Inga: [31:30] No, we don't. I was just thinking about...No, we don't.

Mari-Ann: [31:38] How often did you go home or go back to Sweden?

Inga: [31:42] We used to go every year, but I cannot travel anymore.

Mari-Ann: [31:46] Are any of your sisters or brothers alive?

Inga: [32:04] No. I'm the last one. My next to oldest sister passed away last summer. She was 100. Per, has siblings still.

Mari-Ann: [32:10] Did they visit you here?

Inga: [32:11] Yes.

Mari-Ann: [32:12] Your brothers and sisters?

Inga: [32:13] They have all been here, yes.

Gordon: [32:37] Anything that you feel we should touch on?

Inga: [32:42] I'm not good at this.


Gordon: [32:45] This is a beautiful interview.

Mari-Ann: [32:49] I'm very much enjoying it.

Gordon: [32:57] It's good. I like your humor and when you laugh. You're so alive. That is really beautiful.
Mari-Ann:  [33:00] What would you like to see in the new museum?

Gordon:  [33:04] Can we talk about that? The new museum.

Inga:  [33:07] You ask questions.

Gordon:  [33:12] Shall we start?


Gordon:  [33:33] We are in the process of a capital campaign to build a new museum. Tell us some of your thoughts and dreams for our new building.

Inga:  [35:09] I had a lot of dreams. It's very hard to explain. I hope there will be classrooms where there can be lessons. Where young people can learn the old art. I think that is so very important that that will stay with us. Because that will disappear. Or, those fantastic art that you have in Scandinavia. From all around, all that, all the countries. There are so many things that should be saved. [35:20] That's why I gave the loom. I want a room where they set up looms, and for spinning, and for carving, and for woodwork. That's what people can come and see. That's going to help sell the museum. I think if we get things like that. I think it's very important. Just not things hanging around. It has to be live.


Inga:  [35:27] Hands on. Yes. I think that is really important.

Mari-Ann:  [35:35] We're losing the people that know how to teach those things. That's the sad part.

Inga:  [36:22] I have a weaver that will be teaching. Hold on to her because she's really valuable. She's so interested. They have her name at the museum. I hate to see that all of the different heritage rooms will disappear completely. I hope that they hold on to a little bit of that.

Gordon:  [36:28] They have to. They would have to have some of those heritage areas.
**Inga:** [37:05] I hope so. I heard someone say that that be just one room. But there'll be just one little corner for each country. That's stupid. They are so different. They're so different, each country. They have so much to give. I think that should be separated.

**Mari-Ann:** [37:07] I think it will be. I haven't been involved recently.

**Inga:** [37:08] I really hope it is.

**Mari-Ann:** [37:16] Did you continue your association with Swedish Cultural Society? [indecipherable 37:15]?

**Inga:** [37:54] That has dissolved. That's gone. We are a little bit involved in Swedish Club. Not much anymore, but we do. That dissolved, and that's too bad because people are too busy. They don't have time. There were no one that could take on the leadership. There were lots of people that wanted to be in, but there was no leaders.

**Mari-Ann:** [37:54] That's true.

**Gordon:** [38:24] We are lucky that there are people like you who are passionate and feel so good and positive about the museum as it has been, and as it is, and how it will become. I hope we'll all stay connected and put our word in for what we want.

**Inga:** [38:43] That's right. People should tell a little more what they want and not just talk among themselves. I think people should speak up a little more. Sometimes I speak up a little too much.

**Mari-Ann:** [38:44] No.

**Gordon:** [38:48] Can't be enough.

**Mari-Ann:** [38:57] I will take this off and you can tell us a little bit about this room. The furniture is beautiful.

**Inga:** [38:59] Thank you.

**Mari-Ann:** [39:17] It must be very special to you. Let me...How am I going to do this? I can't go too far because it's on a...That wasn't too hard was it?
Inga: [39:18] That was fun.


Gordon: [39:40] Thank you very much.

Mari-Ann: [39:46] I would love to have this couch. Just because it looks comfortable, but it's also simple.

Gordon: [39:51] Yes. It's very elegant. The lines are so clean.

Inga: [40:01] It's pretty. You know someone said, it's just look like full of...

Gordon: [40:15] Inga, tell us about some of your beautiful weavings.

Inga: [41:16] 1985, my brother sent me a loom from Glimåkoa. I have taken some classes and woven quite a bit. I don't have much because the kids actually have most of my stuff. I enjoyed it very much. I love to how yarn blends. The color blends different way you do it. I think I have an example that I can really show you how the technique changes the yarn. I think there is a pillow here.

Gordon: [41:21] No, we don't have it there.

Inga: [41:16] That's a pillow. It's probably in the living room. You can check. I could just show you. See? This is one technique. Where you have three different colors weave them at the same time. Then you can see what they look like if they yarn in another way. [42:16] That's exactly the same yarn, and how different it looks. That's what's so fun about weaving. That you can do things like that. It really is...

Mari-Ann: [42:19] This was on the loom that you had?


Mari-Ann: [42:21] That you gave to the museum?

Inga: [42:23] Yes. What you can do.

Inga: [42:26] That's what I mean with art

Mari-Ann: [42:32] Were those original designs?

Inga: [42:33] Very much so.

Mari-Ann: [42:46] There are the pictures you got at your 50th.

Inga: [43:03] We are going to have three more with all the grandchildren and all the children. We haven't put them up yet. The kids.

Mari-Ann: [43:16] What a great present. I love this picture too. That's with your...


Inga: [43:36] Yes.