

National Nordic Museum  
Oral History interview of Sandra Andersen Eira  
ID: 2021.075.001

October 6, 2021  
Seattle, Washington, via Zoom

Interviewer: Alison DeRiemer

---

**Alison DeRiemer:** This is an oral history interview for the National Nordic Museum. Today is October 6, 2021. My name is Alison DeRiemer, and I am at the National Nordic Museum in Seattle, Washington today. I will be interviewing Sandra Andersen Eira. Did I say that right?

**Sandra Andersen Eira:** Almost. Very close. Andersen Eira. (Ay-ra).

**Alison:** Eira. Okay. She is a member of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament, and she recently visited Seattle. Today she is joining me from Columbus, Georgia. Sandra, thank you so much for joining me today for this interview. Could we please start by getting your full name, your date of birth, and your place of birth?

**Sandra:** Yeah. Thank you for having me, first of all. My full name is Sandra Andersen Eira. I was born in the Arctic region of Northern Norway, in a small village called Russenes, in Porsangen. So, it's an hour south of North Cape. You literally can't go anywhere that's more northern, except the North Pole. I was born on June 21, 1986.

**Alison:** Okay, great. Thank you. Talk a little bit about your family, if you would—your grandparents, if you knew them, and your parents, and what kinds of things they were involved in.

**Sandra:** The Sámi community is very much into family history. We are a big family. We consider the extended family also as the immediate family. So, we have first cousins, second cousins, etcetera. We all know our ancestors, a whole lot of hundred years back in time. My family—we are three siblings. I am the middle child. I have an older brother living in Tromsø. He is a computer engineer for a company in Colorado.

My younger sister—she is one year younger than me. She is located with her family in the south of Norway. She is a pilot for an Icelandic company. She is a cargo pilot. She is based in Saudi Arabia, but she flies the world over, every three weeks. My mother is still in my village with her entire side of the family. My father is in the south of Norway, where most of his family lives. He is also from my village, but they have all moved away.

My grandparents—three of them were from my village. One came with my grandfather after the forced evacuation during World War II to the middle of Norway, where he met her. She is from Trondheim. But all the other ones are from my village. My grandfather on my mother's side was a reindeer herder, but he chose to settle at the coast, and become a fisherman instead. I have a long line of fishermen, sailors, dating all the way back to Ragnar Lothbrok, in the year 800-something. So,

we have done that for as long as I know.

**Alison:** That's an amazing story, and also interesting, too, that you and your siblings are international people now, after that long history in that area.

**Sandra:** Yeah. We all chose to have a little bit bigger world than most people in our village. But also, our cousin is a polar explorer, an expedition leader. He is at the North Pole and the South Pole. That's our kind of normal. That is just a small portion of our family. All the other ones stayed in or around our hometown.

**Alison:** Talk a little bit about growing up, and your connection to the land, and what kinds of activities you did as a child.

**Sandra:** Well, we grew up in what people call the wilderness. We, of course, did not know that. It was just our backyard. It was the way we were used to it being. So, we had the mountains behind us, and the ocean in front of us. The fjord I grew up on, where my village is, is one of the biggest fjords in Norway. So, we had a lot of freedom. We were used to the wilderness, the mountains, the rivers, the ocean, the fjords. And it's the Arctic, so it's a lot of rough weather.

We have nine months of winter. We have a lot of storms and closed roads, rough flying on the ocean. We have moose, orcas, wolves, bears, wolverines, lynx, and we were used to them being around, so we did not consider them dangerous animals. We of course knew to be aware of them and stay away from them, but that's just our normal. We had horses growing up. Me and my sister got used to responsibility and hard work at a young age.

Also, we had outdoor school. Every fall and every winter, the entire school went to the mountains in tents or cabins. We went out to sea in boats, and learned how to survive—how to make shelter in the snow if there was a blizzard. How to go fishing, how to make a fire, how to make a camp, how to help each other in case we got hurt on the mountains. It has all been a very natural part of how we grew up. We also learned a whole lot about history—World War II. We were very fortunate that our school did that, because none of the other schools, I'm aware of, around my village, had the same curriculum. So, we were very fortunate.

Also, from the age of seven, my uncles and cousins went out fishing alone at sea on the fjord. It was natural. Me and my sister could go out alone up in the mountains with our horses, or to a friend's cabin, for days, before the time of cell phones and Internet. And we survived, because that's what we were taught to do—both at home, and at school, without thinking we couldn't. So, we grew up in a very different way than people growing up in cities, people growing up in bigger towns or areas. But I am very happy we did that, because we did not have to worry about being scared of people, or crime. We didn't even know what that was. So, we have been very fortunate.

**Alison:** That's a really remarkable education. That's great. Did you grow up speaking Norwegian in your home?

**Sandra:** We grew up speaking Norwegian. Everybody in my village used to strictly be Sámi-speaking. But because of the whole political situation, where they tried to erase all Sámi language, the coastal areas were the ones affected most by that whole situation. My mother and her siblings grew

up with their parents and all of the elders speaking Sámi, but they were not allowed to listen to it, or speak it. So, they grew up losing the language. When we grew up, we did not learn it from home; we had to learn it strictly at school.

**Alison:** And did you become fluent in it through school, then?

**Sandra:** As a second language. So, it's not fluent.

**Alison:** Okay. Talk a little bit more about—you mentioned the language suppression—other ways that your family and people from your area may have been discriminated against in other parts of Norway, or even just where you were living.

**Sandra:** That has been a long, long ordeal. It started in the 1600s. Back then, it was bad, bad. The Sámi people were forced to become Christians. They burned religious drums, and other things. They were forced to take on Norwegian names in order to be allowed to own land. The children were taken from their families at a very young age, and were put into boarding schools, where they were only allowed to learn Norwegian. So, that was a bad situation. People were executed if they resisted. They slaughtered the reindeer herds if they resisted.

Then, it became shameful, because they also had this scientific project, where they had the measuring of the skulls, because the scientists wanted to prove that we were a different race—that we were a less intelligent and less worthy race. So, in the national newspaper in Oslo, fifty or sixty years ago, there was a big article about that research. They stated very nicely that the Sámi people had less worth as workers, and no worth or value as human beings. So, that is what the scientists and the government told the Norwegian people, with proof from the scientists, because they had measured us.

Not very intelligent, but that is what the people learned back then. Then, of course, because of that, my parents' generation grew up having to be ashamed of it. You were not to say that you were Sámi. You were not to speak the Sámi language, or have a Sámi last name, because then people would give you a very hard time. You would get bullied. You would get harassed. You would lose your rights, etcetera. That, of course, led to a lot of discrimination and racism. You can see the comment sections on Facebook today. It's just splattered with it.

There was a form of segregation going on back in the eighties, when my mom was young, for the Sámi people. If you were Sámi, you had to stand in the back of the line in the grocery store, or going to the bus. So, it was bad. The other kids used to throw rocks and my mom and her siblings, because they were Sámi kids. So, it has been a process. It's very fresh, because this has been going on through generations.

Now, we are in the process where the government, after a whole lot of pressure and years of being forced, agreed. They agreed to do this research project where everything is coming to light, where it is being publicized. When the research is done, [the project will show] exactly what has been done to the Sámi people, in order to give people the knowledge and the opportunity to understand—and in that way it will help, when it comes to judgements, or not understanding, or ignorance, discrimination. Then, the people will be able to see this happened. This is what the Norwegian people did. This is why the things today is what it is, because of what happened back then. But also

because then it will be easier to help the Sámi community heal from it.

All the elders who lost all their education—they didn't understand the language. They weren't able to go to school. They got no education. They can't read or write. That, of course, is not easy, having a life, if you can't have any education. But also, the mental trauma—the harassment, the executions, the bullying, the boarding schools—everything. It will be easier, then, to help this situation be healed.

**Alison:** Yeah. Thanks for sharing that. For you, personally, after you finished your schooling where you grew up, what did you do after that?

**Sandra:** After primary school?

**Alison:** Yes.

**Sandra:** I stayed all ten years of primary school in my village. Back then, it was a relatively big village for us. It was about 300 people living there, so it's small, but now it's just 50 [people]. After primary school, I went to high school in Trondheim, at the Trondheim Cathedral School. That is in the middle of Norway. But because of the rights we have now in the educational system, I was able to go home during the fall season.

We have reindeer-herding work, as we call it. You mark the reindeer. You collect them from the mountains, to move from the summer area to the winter area. They are sent to the butcher house, etcetera. I got to go home during those seasons, because of the Sámi rights. I also got to have Sámi language, almost like a Zoom meeting. Back then it was not—it was Skype. My Sámi teacher was in Karasjok, and I was in the middle of Norway. So, a lot of things have improved, thanks to Sámi politicians, making sure that the government maintains our rights.

After living in Trondheim for a couple of years, I went back to Finnmark, and I stayed in Finnmark ever since. But because I became a fisherman, I have had to go all the way around the coast in the north of Norway—Finnmark, Troms, Nordland, for four months straight. Then, I also became a Sámi politician for four years. I had to travel for meetings and work at the parliament events. Even if I have had my base in my home village most of the time, I have not been able to be at home more than five days a year the last five years.

**Alison:** Wow. Talk about your career, fishing. That sounds really interesting. Also, what has that been like for you as a woman in what I assume is a male-dominated industry?

**Sandra:** Yeah. Me and my siblings have never been aware, or cared about what other people might think. We just did what we wanted to do. I got the offer of joining my cousin at sea one day. It was supposedly the worst time of year to go, at the worst place, with the worst [audio cuts out]. I didn't know that. Fishing and the sea and all of that came naturally to me, because that's how I grew up, with all of my uncles and cousins being at sea.

So, I tried it during the winter storms outside of North Cape, with nets. And I loved it. They say there are two kinds of people—you either love the ocean, and fishing, or you hate it. There is no in between. So, I loved it, and I stayed there for a decade. I worked on three different boats before I

got my own boat.

I found it somewhat annoying that everybody... when I went to the docks, everybody assumed I was there to clean the boats. It was even more annoying when I was in the process of buying my own boat. The insurance company thought I had called the wrong number, because they only did boat insurance. When I tried calling for ads, I had to get my male crew to call with my notes, telling him what to ask for, because he did not know; I knew. But if I asked, I would not get any answers. They assumed since I'm a woman, I wouldn't understand the technical parts of the boat, or the mechanical parts of the boat, or anything at all.

Then, I wrote a little Facebook notice, and that became a big deal. The media picked it up, and it became a national thing, and a movement. It was on the national news. The Parliament, the mayors, the Sámi President—everybody spoke out about it, and gave me and the female fishermen their support. Then, they wanted me to join the political world, and wanted me to run for election at the Sámi Parliament, which I did, and I got in, and started working with politics, when it comes to fishing.

But also, because of this whole movement, two big things happened. One was in the national movement, where the Norwegian government, and all of the organizations and companies within the fishing industry got together, and for the first time in history, in 2018, got the rights in order for the female fishermen to give birth, have children, and not have to lose their income and boats. So, that was a big step in the right direction. And at the Sámi Parliament in 2018, that was the first time we got a case that had to do with fishing or fishing communities approved, in the plenary meeting. It's now an annual thing in the plenary, where you keep up with the Norwegian fishing policies.

So, there have been a lot of steps in the right direction, which I am happy about, because being a fisherman alone is hard enough. It's physically hard. It's mentally hard. It's the most dangerous job in the world. It's the Arctic. It's cold. There are a lot of storms and weather. You're gone from your family, all of that. So, you don't need the extra noise. You don't need the unnecessary pollution with the politics, trying to kill the small coastal fleet, but also just bad judgment and ignorance among the people. You don't need that. I am all for everybody doing what they want to do, as long as they are able to do it. That's that.

**Alison:** Yeah. That's great. Can you tell me a little bit more about the history of the Sámi Parliament? How it formed, and what its role is?

**Sandra:** Well, I am not an expert in how it was formed. I know it was opened 30 years ago, I believe the same year I was born. I may be mistaken. Sometime between 1986-1989, I think. Norway has its own Sámi Parliament, and so does Sweden and Finland. Russia does not. It's almost the same as the Norwegian Parliament. We have a President, and we have a plenary leader. We have representatives, administration. It's a four-year term with election. The entire process is the same.

But we are under the Norwegian government. We are still under the Norwegian government, the Norwegian Parliament, the King and Queen, the Prime Minister. Every year, we get a certain amount of money, which we then get to disperse and share to the Sámi community organizations, etcetera, as we find best. The Norwegian government just said, "you deal with the Sámi community, and everything that has to do with the Sámi community—the culture. Just you." But we're more of a

hearing instance. So, everything still has to go through the Norwegian Parliament.

**Alison:** Thank you. You are in the United States right now, and you said you've been here for a few months. You were recently in Seattle, where you met with Leslie Anderson here at the National Nordic Museum. Can you talk a little about your visit to Seattle? I understand you met with a descendant of Chief Seattle here. Is there anything that you'd like to comment on about the relationship, or any similarities between the two indigenous cultures, here in the United States, as well as the Sámi people? Any parallels?

**Sandra:** Yes. First of all, I was very fortunate to be able to have the opportunity to come to Seattle and visit both the Museum, the University, and also the Lodge. That was a great experience. I was very pleasantly surprised by the amount of art and culture and history that has been preserved in Washington, U.S.A. That was a fun experience. The Native Americans and the Native Scandinavians, if you can call them that—the Sámi people—there are a lot of similarities.

We are very, very, very distant relatives. There are a lot of similarities when it comes to the culture, the religion. Both are nature people. We lived with the nature, respect the nature, got everything we needed from nature. We had the same kind of tents, and almost the same kind of music. Almost the same kind of religion, almost the same kind of clothes. So many similarities. But also, when it comes to the mistreatment—the Native Americans and the Sámi children were taken away and put into boarding schools, and suffered major, terrible consequences. There has been discrimination. There has been racism. There has been loss of land, and what we called a lifestyle and job. And it's a struggle trying to keep it alive in today's society. It takes effort. It takes work.

But the Sámi people have been very fortunate when it came to the political aspect, because the government has recognized us as a people, and our rights. They are obligated by law to maintain our rights. Whereas the Native Americans have been put into sections of the country. "This is yours, and that's it. Sorry. Do your thing, but the rest is ours." They don't have the rights in place. They don't have the benefits as we do. So, I acknowledge that. I am very aware of that.

Yes, we at some point were in the same situation back in the 1600s, 1700s, 1800s, too—but since then, now in the modern-day society, the Sámi people in Scandinavia are very much blessed. So, I absolutely feel for the Native Americans. I do not want to disrespect them by saying we are in the same situation now. We can understand their situation, because we have been through it, but not today. We are not in the same situation today.

**Alison:** Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. On your visit, is there anything that stood out to you here in the United States? Any interesting or fun experiences that you'd like to share while you were here, or anything that surprised you?

**Sandra:** I have been in the States for three months, mainly in Georgia. The first two weeks, I visited California—San Diego and Los Angeles, and Yosemite, of course. And Oregon, Nevada, Colorado, Washington. I've been to North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama. I have to say, I love the Southern states. It's very much like home in Finnmark. It's very calm, relaxed, peaceful, quiet. The hospitality. And I like being warm, because I'm from the Arctic.

Seeing the Scandinavian community in Washington was very fun, because I was not expecting it. I

was not expecting a city in America to have a bigger museum, more art, more statues, more flags, more everything when it came to Norway and the Sámi people than I have at home, in my whole city. So, that was very surprising.

There are a lot of different things in the U.S. In Scandinavia, or in Norway, more specifically, we are not that into... In my view, in America, there is more segregation between cultures, between races, between colors. In Norway, it's more everyone and everything mixed into one. It's just one. We have different cultures, of course. We recognize that. We will say, "Yeah, that's the Sámi people," or "they are from Afghanistan," or "they are from Spain." We will not go and say that someone is black or white or brown or red. I'm not used to that.

And I'm also not used to getting segregated. I've heard people say, "This is an old, white dance club," or, "this is just for the Black kids." I'm not used to that, at all. Like I said, we are just mixed in as one community. Also, when it comes to the politics, we are also more neutral, more calm about it. There are no big differences. It's just neutral, slight differences between the political parties, but it's not like in the U.S. where you have the Democrats and the Republicans, and you will create war between neighbors and friends, based on your political views. I'm not used to that at all.

Also, I came at a very "on fire," time, you might say, with the whole movement—the change from Trump to Biden, and Black Lives Matter, "Me, Too," and all of these movements going on. And also COVID, of course. I might have shown up in a very infected situation, but still, not used to all the big differences between political parties, and colors, and races, and cultures, and all of this. That is unusual for me.

**Alison:** Yeah. And you mentioned COVID. We also have an oral history project dedicated to speaking to people in the Nordic countries about their experiences with COVID as it related to their community. Is there anything you would like to mention about COVID in North Norway?

**Sandra:** In North Norway, we were blessed with the fact that most of our winters, we are closed off from the world anyway, because of the weather. The planes won't be able to land or take off. The roads are closed. The boats are cancelled for most of the winter. This broke in March 2020, and that is the main season for winter storms. So, we were blessed from nature's side that we were isolated anyway. So, we didn't have a lot of COVID going around. And also, we are a small community, spread widely apart.

But Norway and Europe closed everything down in March 2020. I think the U.S. was a little bit behind. We started the process in March 2020, and we had the peak season until August 2020, and the U.S. started this year. It was a little bit behind in the U.S., I think. Now, Norway has opened up again last week. Everything is back to normal. The borders are open. No masks, no distancing. We now can live a normal life. Everybody that is supposed to get a vaccine got a vaccine. So, that is that. Our impression based on the news in Norway, or in Europe, is that everything was chaotic in the U.S. It was all protests and fights because of masks. But when I came to the U.S., it was a lot stricter with the distancing and mask policy than I think it was in Norway.

**Alison:** Just going back—you mentioned learning about World War II when you were in school. Is that something that you can talk a little bit about—what you learned? I know that North Norway suffered greatly World War II. Can you explain a little about how the Sámi people fared during that

experience?

**Sandra:** Yeah. First of all, I love history, especially World War II history. But the Sámi people are also a storytelling people. That's how we have survived for thousands of years, and kept our culture alive. My family were very much into storytelling. So, I grew up thinking that World War II happened a couple of years ago. Really close. We were surrounded by remains from the war. We had the shipwrecks and plane-wrecks, and bullets, and helmets, and barbed wire, fortresses, bunkers—everything around us. It was all just left there.

Our grandparents' generation lived through it. A lot of people who had either been soldiers or prisoners, or refugees, still lived to tell in our village. So, I spent my years at primary school, from... I was probably ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen years old. My school projects were to go around and interview the elder people who had been through the war. My grandfather—before he was forced to evacuate, he did some labor for the Germans, like everyone had to—forced labor. We didn't have railroads, roads, anything, before the Germans came.

In the south of Norway, there was the resistance going on. But in the north of Norway, there was a war, because we are bordering Russia. So, our people suffered heavily. At the end of the war, there was the forced evacuation. Everybody was forced to go on boats to the southern part of Norway, and then just survive. The ones who didn't want to—they ran away up in the mountains, and lived in caves through a couple of years, winter storms, and everything, and just had to survive by the nature. So, a lot of children had been born in old tunnels and caves during the war.

During this evacuation, the government said that the Sámi people were of course not allowed to go with the "civil" people, the Norwegians. So, we were either left in the mountains with the insane, to die, or we could be evacuated to our own coastal regions. But then, the Russians were getting closer, so the Germans burned down the entire county. Everything. Burned it to the ground. All the houses, the animals, the boats. Everything was burned to the ground.

When the war was over, people came down from the mountains, from their caves, and came back from the southern parts of Norway and Sweden, including my grandfather, who had then met my grandmother. So, they came back up to Finnmark, and built everything up by themselves, because they didn't have any help from the government, but they wanted to go home, and build up their homes again. So, the people of Finnmark did that, and just took whatever they could find. The airports, the landing strips, was made of wood back then. So, they took that, and built houses. They just did what they could, to build up, and lived in sheds for the first year, and just went hunting and fishing to survive.

So, my grandmother came up to nothing—a burned down county with winter storms, and animals, and a language she didn't understand, because people back then spoke Sámi. And she got married in a wedding dress made out of German parachute they found on the coastline. The life back then was different than we are used to today.

**Alison:** Yeah. Absolutely. That's an amazing story. Thank you for sharing that. Is there anything else that you'd like to add? This has been so fascinating.

**Sandra:** Well, you can talk forever about the North. A lot of things have been going on there.

Luckily today we have the Internet, so information is much easier now, to find information to educate yourself. It's just a matter of interest. I'm very happy that the focus today is to get everything on the digital platform, about the North, about Finnmark, about the history, about the culture, about the Sámi people, and everything. I think that is very useful. Ignorance is enemy number one. I am happy whenever people want to learn. And for me, I am doing the same. My life is supposed to be 50% USA and 50% Norway. So, I am trying to balance a life between Georgia and Finnmark in the future. So, it's a different culture for me, too. I talk to the Americans about my ways at home, but I am also here in America, having to learn a whole lot about the American ways.

**Alison:** It's a cultural exchange. We appreciate you coming here so much, too, and teaching us. One last question—not to end on a down note, but climate change is something, of course, that is affecting everyone. How is that affecting that area of Norway, and what do you see happening in the future?

**Sandra:** Throughout times, since forever, since the beginning of time, there have always been changes. There have been heat waves, and there have been the Ice Ages. That is a natural part of our planet. Of course, we do have a whole lot more pollution going on in today's society than we had 100 years ago or 1,000 years ago. So, now the temperature is increasing. We have had some very rough winters, both for the fishermen and the reindeer herders. The reindeer herders had a crisis year a year ago, where a lot of reindeer starved to death, and they had to get emergency funding to feed them manually, because the reindeer couldn't get down to the ground and find their food.

The fishermen in the coastal fleet had difficulties going out, because the storms were longer and heavier than usual. So, it was a disaster for them, too, because without fish, you don't have income. And the icebergs are melting. And we have new species coming, which belong to the south—like foxes, birds, bugs. And now, apparently, the Great White sharks. It impacts everything. In Eastern Europe, they had a tornado. We don't have tornadoes. We are not used to that. Just like Texas wasn't used to suddenly having their house frozen. Winters. And Germany had massive flooding, which was disastrous. So, there are a lot of changes going on, which we are not equipped or educated to deal with right now, which we of course will have to adapt to in the future. So, it has a lot of challenges.

**Alison:** Yeah. Thanks for speaking to that. I appreciate this so much. This has been so fascinating. Thank you so much.

**Sandra:** Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW