Pandemic Preserved Oral History Project
National Nordic Museum

Interview of Stephen Edwin Lundgren
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Interviewer: Alison DeRiemer

AD: Today is October 30, 2020. My name is Alison DeRiemer with the National Nordic Museum. Today we are at the National Nordic Museum, and we are conducting an interview with Stephen Lundgren for the oral history series, "A Pandemic Preserved: The COVID-19 Crisis in the Nordic Countries and Pacific Northwest." Stephen, thank you so much for being here today. We really appreciate it, and we're looking forward to hearing your perspective on this COVID-19 health crisis over these last several months. I'd like to start by getting your full name, your place of birth, and your current city of residence.

SL: Okay. My name is Stephen Edwin Lundgren. I was born in 1951 at Swedish Hospital up on First Hill, because my father was not going to deliver a baby in the Ballard movie theater that he and my mother were in at the time. So, they drove up to First Hill. So, I wasn't born in Ballard, but I was really close. I lived in Ballard with my parents and my older brother for probably about a year, in a very small house, which was located in what is now the back entrance to the building where Bartell's is, on the back side of 15th and Market. The house was demolished for a parking lot for the infamous Denny's Manning restaurant. But I remember seeing it before it was taken out.

I lived there with my parents while my father apprenticed his way through probably every shipyard in Ballard and North Seattle, as a postwar wooden boat builder. Really bad timing, because they weren't building wooden boats much anymore. So, my mother probably supported us on her Pacific Northwest Bell comptometer computer. It was kind of a former computer. She also got a free telephone, which she kept for the rest of her life. We stayed there until my brother started escaping from the house, and walking around the corner to get to the ice cream store, which is also where Bartell's is now.

At that point, my grandfather gave my father property on Bainbridge Island where they returned. My father was from Bainbridge, and my grandfather, and my great-grandfather. I grew up on Bainbridge after we got back there, on New Sweden Road,

initially. Then we built a house across from Winslow, on Eagle Harbor. We lived there until my mother was passing, and we sold it about five years ago, I think. I'm an expatriate now. I call my car "Bainbridge Island," because I inherited my mother's estate, and I bought a car, from Subaru in Ballard, of course.

I came back to Seattle… Bellingham, and then the University of Washington, and I've been in Seattle since 1974—20 years on West Queen Anne, 18 miserably wet months in Magnolia, and then we bought a house on 63rd, on Sunset Hill. And we've been there ever since. That's my residential history. My family is Washington, way back, on my father's side.

On my mother's side, they came from Oregon. So, they're more recent… Boeing, World War II industry arrivals, diaspora. My father passed about ten years ago. He had retired from the State Ferries as the Fleet Commodore, the same career his father had had. I still have a seaman's card, but I only worked summers to get through college. I'm not a ferry captain, but I know how to drive them.

AD: That's great.

SL: That's the residential history.

AD: That's great. Can you give us the names of your mother and father, and also the Swedish grandparents?

SL: Sure. My mother's name was May. The full name was Flora May, to hopefully impress some aunt, who really didn't appreciate it much, so she never used the "Flora." My father called her "Honey May." That was his name for her. May Musso was her maiden name. My father was Robert E. Lundgren. His father was Captain Oscar Lundgren. Oscar had nine siblings on Bainbridge Island. When his parents, Carl Wictor Lundgren and Jennie Lavine Lundgren, started having ten kids, they couldn't live in Seattle anymore. I don't know how they managed to get a really huge piece of property on Bainbridge. I think the Denny family had something to do with it, because they worked for one of the Denny families.

Carl Wictor was a photographer when he came to Seattle. Too late to break into the business, so he built houses, and he also built boats. I would love to have a white hull boat that my great-grandfather built, but all gone. The family estate is still over there. It's a ruin. I didn't inherit it. Carl Wictor and Jennie both emigrated from Sweden. As I mentioned to you earlier, at some point in time, "Lundgren" showed up to replace "Anderson." I never got the details of that, because my uncle who discovered that, never quite got the details of that.

We have research back into the 18th century in Sweden. They were woodworkers, probably, as far as I know. They went to St. Paul—actually, my great grandfather and a brother, and Jennie and her tribe. St. Paul, Minnesota was, in the 1880s, kind of like already… they got there, "You're newcomers, keep moving." So, they just kept moving and ended up in Seattle before statehood. So, they were Washington State pioneers.

Jennie was a housekeeper for the Denny's, and C.W. did odd jobs. They were on the board that founded the Swedish Tabernacle Church on First Hill. It wasn't Lutheran. I think they were a little more fundamentalist than that. They were great churchgoers. I inherited the family bible. It's about that big, in which there is nothing except a postcard-sized picture of my great-grandfather that fell out. So much for keeping track of records.

I've also inherited most of the family archives. So, I have my grandfather's World War I Dough Boy diary from France. He was an artillery man in France—the big guns. I've got all of his seaman's papers and documents from him and my father. I've got probably half a dozen family albums. The only one I'm regretting not having is C.W.'s That went to another side of the family. But he's been posting them on Facebook, so I've been downloading them. Thank you very much.

AD: That's great.

SL: Yeah, because they're turn-of-the-century. C.W. shot with a big format glass negative camera. They're actually pretty good. He was also one of the members of the first Seattle camera club, as were two of the Denny family, too. So, I've got some of his work, secondhand, thanks to Glen Flodine, which was the other side of the family. Our Lundgrens married Flodines. Everybody on Bainbridge. So, I grew up on Bainbridge, which was, and still is, a very interesting place. My family would flip-flop between Bainbridge and Ballard over the generations. My great uncle owned a tannery down the street from the Trader Joe's, which was really horrible, ecologically, but it was a really fun place to work when you were a kid. Mike's Chili and whiskey for lunch.

AD: And that's still there.

SL: What's better than that? I've got other members of my family that have worked in Ballard for various companies. My brother comes in occasionally. He's still working the boats, but that's another segue way. The last ten months. You want to go there?

AD: Yeah, let's go there. So, I understand that you work at Harborview.

SL: Mm-hmm.

AD: Could you describe your job, what you do, and how it's changed and evolved over these last ten months?

SL: I moved to Ballard in 1996. I had just left a career as a federal investigator, doing background investigations, when they contracted us all out, and I found myself with no career. So, I was also a computer trainer, and pretty big on IT stuff. So, I worked around town doing consultancy things, like everybody else. Finally, somebody had a gig at Harborview, designing paper medical record forms. I said, "I'm a web designer." They said, "Do you want the gig?" "Okay, fine, I'll take the gig."

So, I went up there, and found that Harborview was just realizing they had to become an electronic medical record. Forget the paper charts. Forget the paper questionnaires, and carts full of paper. They had to start moving online. So, I designed paper medical records that actually looked like the screen that they should be, and actually did become the screen. I also got sent back to Madison to buy the new medical records software that UW Medicine now uses, that are now standard, and was evolving into.

I did that, and about ten years ago, I moved out of the clinical side of operations support, and moved into patient education. That's actually where I've been for the last 15 years. I work in a place that's a combination of a patient resource center, and we also support family members who are at the hospital, because the patients are taken care of, but everybody else… what are you going to do about them?

So, we're now part of Patient Relations, which is a required function to accept compliments, accept suggestions and recommendations, take complaints, and resolve them, which is what we do—ranging from, "We're sorry we didn't let you in; the line was 200 people waiting to get in to visit, and we've just cut our visiting hours, and, yeah, maybe we need more coverage." Things like that. Suggestions, or people that don't feel their billing was quite correct. I work in healthcare, and I'm also a healthcare consumer, and sometimes you do have to read your bill. It may not be correct.

We take people on the phone, and email, and in person. I'm a team of three people, plus our director. We speak for Administration. We help people navigate the system. Harborview is actually part of a very big system: UW Medicine is now Harborview, UW Montlake, UW Northwest, and I think 24 neighborhood clinics throughout the state. So, we're really big. I know my place really well, and I know the rest of the system pretty well, so we do a lot of navigation stuff.

The problem is, in the last ten months, we got hit like everybody else with a drop in business. We are the University of Washington-operated, state employees, but you still need to make money. So, we did a lot of creative adjustment of working schedules, called furloughs, reductions of force. I've been there and done that before. So, a lot of

us moved to working from home, and you're not seeing the patients in front of you anymore. You're actually on the phone, or on a computer. All of our meetings are now Zoom meetings. Let's talk about race and equity issues. Click, you're on next. Yeah, right. So, if you don't like tech, it's kind of a struggle. But I've got that background, so I can hang with it.

Not being there for six weeks in the summer was kind of an adjustment, because I was on my porch up on Sunset Hill, trying to figure out, "Is this retirement? I need to get my act together." The other side of the coin is… not being at work is one thing, but I'm also a practicing artist. I'm a poet, and I write songs. I'm a photographer. I paint a little bit. I dabble in cinematography. Suddenly, there is nowhere to exhibit. There are no galleries. If you don't have a website skill, you're off the record.

I had poems that were scheduled to be read and performed. I had material that I wanted to get out there. There is no open mic at the Ballard Library. There are no Bainbridge poetry readings this year. So, it's been kind of like, okay, let's just go through the slush pile, and realize we've got probably a thousand poems and short stories and photographs, and maybe we should do something with them. I spent a lot of time curating my own collection.

I got back into art 20 years ago: photography. Not so much music. Don't make me play a banjo. I was just talking with somebody at work who's a banjo player in a band. They were about to release an album. They had studio time. Suddenly, they didn't have a studio, the album wasn't going to be released anywhere, and they had no performing venues. Dead in the water. So, that's really hit Seattle hard. Not everybody wants to go out and paint a panel on Market Street. I photograph them; that's great, but that's not my thing, to paint panels in the street.

Making art has actually gotten edgier, too. I do street photography. I did not work Capitol Hill during the CHOP period. It was clearly signed that I wasn't really welcome as a street photographer up there. "Okay. I'm with you on the revolution, but I won't take your pictures. Take your own pictures." Street photography is a tricky business. You've got to get the scene, but also not trespass boundaries, because there's a fine line there sometimes. As the public, you have a right to do that, but sometimes, it probably isn't what you want to do. So, I shot a lot of sunsets. I live up on Sunset Hill. Got a lot of the sunsets.

I got down to Golden Gardens, but not as much. I photographed a lot of my own yard. As a matter of fact, we had a Sunset Hill community art festival, where everybody put their work out on the front yard. That was the easiest exhibit I've ever set up. I took about a dozen things out, put them up on easels, sat there, and showed them to the neighbors.

AD: That's great.

SL: Of course, underlying the whole thing is, I'm not a young person anymore. I've been wearing [a mask] ever since January, when I told our head of Infectious Disease, "Dr. Lynch, shouldn't we all be wearing masks?" And he said, "Oh, not. Not necessary." I said, "I don't think you're right. I think we should be." Which we eventually got to. I actually feel safe where I'm at, because we're just fanatics on infection control. But I have to get to work and back. I ride the bus. So, it's a challenging world to live in.

The other sideline I've had in Ballard was, I spent a good deal of the first years here doing community activism, like, oh, sure, let's build a new museum instead of the old school up the street, and then we can have a really big museum. That works for me. Let's restore an old rowboat and turn it into a Viking ship. That's cool. Let's take it out and row it. We did that once. That's the *Nordic Spirit* out there.

And a number of us got really organized, and shook down the city, and said, "If you're going to upzone the density of Seattle, we want half a dozen parks, a new library, a new civic center, and oh, yeah, some of the kids want a skate bowl, okay? So, give it up." And we got it. We got a new library that got remodeled. We got a new civic center, which I don't know what we're doing with right now. We got Ballard Commons Park, and we love the skate bowl. And we built other things in Ballard. The uses of the parks have changed in the last ten months. I'll just leave that one right there.

AD: Is there anything else you want to say about that? I walk to work, and it's something that I have noticed, of course.

SL: I put a lot of political muscle into getting that water fountain, so the kids could run through the water fountain in the summer. I wouldn't let my grandchild do that now. It's just not safe. The children's play area that never got built there—I don't think now is the time to talk about it. We did finally get a bathroom in there, a toilet. It took a pandemic to do it. We didn't anticipate 45 tents with residents in the park. The Parks District and the city officials seem to be tone-deaf on dealing with… I'm in public health. People shouldn't be sleeping outside. They should be inside. They shouldn't be in wet tents. They shouldn't be sitting on a wet sidewalk. If they do that by choice, it's still not a really great idea.

We are enabling a lot of people in some very unhealthy behaviors. We have a large community health outreach program at Harborview; always have. Healthcare for the homeless. But there is only so much you can do. As far as the state of Ballard sidewalks, I actually had a nice chat with a lady who had a tent just outside the Nordic earlier this year. She was on a "Save the Whale" campaign. And she's a Ballard native. She just

doesn't have anywhere to live except a tent, and she decided to pitch it there for a while, which is a lot safer than other places here.

I have kind of retired from city politics, to do the art stuff. I used to do a lot of city politics. Hi, Greg Nichols, hi, whatever your name is… Mike Mitchell, or whatever. I have one contact on the Seattle City Council now that I talk to, because Lisa Herbold knows what she's talking about. The rest of the Seattle City Council doesn't talk to a lot of people. They're going to have to work that out.

On the other hand, they are listening to a lot of people who haven't been heard before. I used to be a big proponent of getting citizens to look at the city budget. It's like, if you want something, look at the budget, and see if what you want is in the budget. And people said, "Nah, I don't have time for that." It's like, "There's money on the table. Get there." A lot of the money went to those that were loud, up here, in civic development. And what did the Central District get? They got a remodeled food center in one of their community centers. That's it?

So, we've kind of refocused who gets to look at the budget, and it's long overdue. So, I'm a big proponent of that. There's an education to learning how to examine city money. You can say, "Defund the police." Try reading the budget to see exactly what you're proposing to defund. Do you want the parking meter people gone? Okay. That's going to probably happen. Do you want no one to show up when you make a 9-1-1 call? Well, what are you going to do? I had a North Precinct officer tell me I should maybe buy a shotgun. I don't really want to buy a shotgun. I pay people like him to know how not to use one, but also to respond appropriately when my car is stolen for the third time out of my driveway.

So, it's complicated. We do need to have some new ways of governing and running the city. Unfortunately, did I mention the pandemic has just blown the economy to smithereens? So, there's not a lot of money to play with right now. The next year is going to be really challenging. I won't even speak of the situation on November 3. We'll see. But there's going to be a lot of opportunities coming up really soon.

Of course, I listen to the Infectious Disease people, and I talk to a lot of them, and we're still waist-deep in the big muddy. That's why I'm wearing this. So, I hope to live for a few more years, get some more art published, and contribute a few more things to my community. I hope everyone is willing to do the work necessary to do that in a sharing and respectful way. I don't mind strong words, as long as I can come back with strong responses, and we can have a dialogue. But there are some people who don't dialogue, and they're a little frightening at times.

Ballard has kind of… the whole civic activist network that was in Ballard while I was

doing that—they're all gone. They've retired. I talk to my friend Davidya occasionally. There are a few other people that I check in with. But it's been really hard to… And we knew that at the time. It's been really hard to enlist new residents in becoming active with their city. They're too busy writing code, or trying to find a job to write code, which is another one, too.

The wealth and the expertise and the community support that resulted in the [National Nordic Museum] here—that's got to be sustainable. So, we need to look at that, too. It's important that we respect our history, respect our traditions, look for new people with new traditions that maybe are a little bit different from the Nordic thing. But it's pretty hard to have a community festival if you've had to shutter the doors. Yeah, it's challenging. It's really challenging.

AD: Absolutely. Going back to your job at Harborview for a minute, you mentioned in January that you felt everyone should be wearing a mask. One thing I'm asking people is what their initial reactions were to the first information about the pandemic. What were your thoughts, and how did you think it would progress? And is that kind of what happened?

SL: I have worked in health care in several different ways. I was actually a nurse, way back in the 1970s. I know the difference between washing your hands, and not washing your hands. And it's regrettable what can happen, if you don't wash your hands. It's just basic practices. I've seen patients that do good self-care, and don't do good self-care.

In the 1980s, I was in the federal government. This country was watching people die out of sheer ignorance and lack of support from the CDC, and President Reagan, and others. Here in Seattle, we had to band together to create clinics to keep people alive. I've seen a generation, my own generation, whacked by infectious disease. I worked with public health actually a couple times in my career there.

Public health people are very attuned to shifts in the weather. [Dr. Anthony] Fauci is not the only one. I work with Dr. John Lynch, who is an extremely adept infectious disease expert. I'm on our Health & Safety Committee, so I get to still keep my finger on the health game a little bit. My job there is to help keep our union members. I'm SEIU 9-5. I'm the steward for Harborview. And I want to keep our union members and our patients, and everybody else, safe.

So, my take, in January was, "This is the SARS epidemic, and this is different from SARS. This is unpredictable. We don't know how it's spreading. You don't think droplets are going to be able to be expanded further than six feet away—you don't know that. We don't know that. We don't know anything. Does it mutate? We don't know. We had a totally new situation there. And I just thought, best practice, I work at a front desk. And

I'm very sensitive to people coming up… sometimes they're ill. Or we've got people that work with patients, nurses and doctors.

And we've always been really, really big on personal protective devices—respirators, isolation rooms, flesh-eating bacteria. So, we're all pretty attuned to the risks of it. This risk in January started escalating in ways that were just really frightening, because of their unpredictability. I don't think it took more than a month for us to say, "Okay, if anyone has even got a slight symptom here, get tested and put a mask on.

That finally escalated to the point where we all wear masks, everybody that comes in wears a mask. We wear it correctly: over the nose, over the mouth. And if we're a care provider in a really risky situation, we get the full gear. If you want to eat lunch, you can take the mask off, but I'm careful about how I do that. But then I get on the bus, and I see five people with the "chinstrap," or "oh, my nose is clean," or nothing. There are masks available, people. You don't have to kill yourself.

We moved really fast on that one, and we had to, both because we're caregivers, but we're also a big target. We have people that are coming in that are sick. And I think people were heard. If you didn't feel like you were heard, I'd loan my voice. But if you go to QFC to get your groceries, it's a bit of a gauntlet. From a health point of view, if I were managing the place, I would have considered doing the Harborview model, which is, nobody walks through a door by themselves. They all get checked in through a single entrance in the garage. If that inconveniences you, fine. Do you want to stay alive?

I'm a fan of higher screening. We may get there. I remember when the stores closed; that was one solution—don't expose anybody to risk. That didn't work. That created a lot of side effects. As far as opening businesses up, I've got the same mixed values in that. I'm very picky in where my wife and I go to eat, because we're both older. And if we don't see practices we like, we're not going to go there. If we don't like the infection control at some store we go to, I won't go there. I'll just be a lot more careful. If I see something on the bus that doesn't look safe, I get off the bus. I just don't want to expose myself.

That has been another one, too. I've been living in Seattle now for the last year. I was going to go visit somebody in Bellingham, but I don't know if Bellingham is open yet. And there is family I haven't seen for ten months. Email doesn't quite cut it. But we have to ride it out. I've read the literature on the flu epidemic of 1919—we're there, and worse.

People were having the same arguments back then, but at least they would pull them off of the bus and give them a five-dollar ticket when they didn't wear a mask. We might look at that, not that that's going to solve anything. But whole families were wiped out

back then, and it's not something I want to see repeated. If you haven't had your flu shot, get your flu shot. A little editorializing there.

AD: No, that's great. I think you've answered a lot of my questions. This interview will be in our archives, so people might be watching this 50 years from now, 100 years from now, hopefully. What is something that you would like future generations to know about these last ten months, if there's just a couple things you could tell people in the future?

SL: You could find a copy of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, and watch the guy play chess with Death, because that's what we've been doing for the last ten months. We've been playing chess with death. Death is around us. I'm very attached to the Compline service. I listen to it every year. As a matter of fact, I had a poem that was based on the Compline service, but it's in a drawer right now, "The devil is a roaring lion behind you, seeking to devour you. Be vigilant. Be careful. Watch where you step." That's what we've been living through here, is a time of increased awareness to what is about us. May you live in interesting times.

AD: Do you think that we'll have any permanent changes after this in our society, because of the virus?

SL: I'd like to say yes. Ask me next year. There's a lot of transience in people. I mentioned the 1919 flu virus. People forgot that. They forgot the lessons. They forgot what happened. It kind of just drifted off. AIDS was a lot the same way. People say, "Yeah, there was an HIV virus that killed a bunch of people, but we took care of it. We cured that." We haven't cured it. We just kept people alive, with that. But that changed behavior. That's another one.

And [masks are] now commonplace. That's a big change of behavior. But I'd kind of like to touch base in a year, and see how lasting this awareness has been, and what survived. There will be some institutions in Seattle that won't survive. The entertainment society in Seattle has just been hammered. Are there theaters anymore? I don't think so. Are there any performing music venues anymore? My basement. There you go. Online. The internet platform is another one. That's just a whole black ocean that I don't even want to get into right now. I frankly don't use the Internet when I go home. I have to deal with it at work. Please, spare me.

I remember seeing the Internet when someone had a version of it in 1985. They were a secret agent with the NSA. I said, "This is really cool. Actually, no; this is really dangerous. We shouldn't tell people about this instant messaging system. Let's just keep it hidden." The cat got out of the bag. I had the right instincts at the time. The last thing is hard to say. The next couple weeks and the next year are going to be significant.

AD: Yeah. Absolutely.

SL: I've got my ballot right there.

AD: Yeah. I just put mine in the box the other day.

SL: Good. You didn't mail it?

AD: No. I wanted to see it go in. [Laughs]

SL: Exactly. Big fan of that. I think it's great that the Nordic is collecting these stories. I've talked to a few other museums who are doing similar things. "Do you have artifacts? I have another 50 poems I've written that I can't do anything with. Do you want to read them?" And that's another one, too—the impact on the work. I used to write more sunshine-y poems than I've been writing in the last ten months. I've been writing some pretty grim stuff. It's Bergman territory. I just got a dozen back issues of *Artforum*, which is a major art magazine. I couldn't see them, because the library was closed, so I just got the last year and a half worth. It's amazing they're still publishing it. But the content is really dark. It's really dark. That's interesting. We'll see how the aesthetics go.

AD: Yeah, definitely.

SL: Okay, I think that's about all I can think of.

AD: One last thing I'm asking everyone is what your hopes are. What do you think will come out of this in an ideal world?

SL: I hope that people remember what worked, what was kept alive, but also, I'm a historian—what we've lost. There's a memorial aspect that you've got to honor. I did a 50th high school class reunion last year before this hit the fan. I did the obituaries of people that weren't there. There are some amazing stories that I found. You've got to, I think, recognize people that you've known, recognize people that you maybe didn't know very well, but deserve to be known.

So, I do hope that people remember what happened, remember people that aren't here anymore. I'm one of those people that read the *New York Times* and *Seattle Times* obituaries, see who is no longer here anymore, and who I missed, or who I knew about, or practice up for writing a few others, myself. So, I hope they remember the people that lived through it, and didn't live through it. And try not to hold rancor for people they maybe didn't totally agree with. Get over it. Let the water flow. Whoosh, down to the river. Take all the grime with it. Unload your anger. Just throw it away, 'cause it will kill you. That's health advice. Go with the flow.

AD: That's great.

SL: Yeah, that's my hope. And I hope to have a few more years to do this, myself, too.

AD: Yeah, definitely. Well, thank you so much, Stephen.

SL: Okay.

AD: This has been really, really interesting.

SL: Yeah, thank you.

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