

Finding Aid to the Eva Nelson Memoirs

Nelson. Eva, 1914-1998

Eva Nelson Memoirs, 1914-1998

.4 linear ft.

Collection number: Mss 218

[Biography](#)

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OVERVIEW

Links: Finding Aid to the [Eva Nelson Photograph Collection](#)
Finding Aid to the [Eva Nelson Papers](#)

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Citation: [Identification of item]. Eva Nelson Memoirs, MS 218, Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo.

BIOGRAPHY

Eva Gunderson was born in Noonan, North Dakota on May 12, 1914, to Ole S. and Signe (Johnson) Gunderson. Her parents were originally from the Christine, North Dakota area, and in 1918 they moved back to Christine.

Eva grew up in rural North Dakota, graduated from Christine high school at sixteen, and worked as a maid in her home area and in Fargo for several years before she received her teaching certificate from

Moorhead Teachers College. She began teaching school in the mid-1930s in small, one-room schoolhouses in rural North Dakota. She taught in Golden Valley, LaMars Township (Richland County, and in Christine. In 1941 she married Rudolph Nelson and briefly quit teaching, but she returned to the classroom in 1942. She taught school for thirty years. After retiring, Eva began her second career as a writer and historian. She wrote her memoirs, completed family trees, and helped to organize reunions.

Eva and Rudy had two children, Rodney and Barbara, and divorced in 1956. Eva (Gunderson) Nelson lived until she was eighty-four years old. She died on October 23, 1998.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

[Eva Nelson's memoirs](#) were written as a personal narrative divided into ten chapters. The narratives start with her earliest recollections and continue in great detail until 1940. From 1940 to the late 1950s, she provides highlights of her activities rather than the detailed description of everyday life found in the first narratives. In the last three chapters of her narrative, Eva gives a synopsis of her life from the mid-1950s to the early 1990s.

Eva used her diaries, surviving letters, and her memory to create the narrative. These diaries and other supporting papers were later donated in 2006 and processed as Manuscript collection 293. She compiled the narrative in the 1980s and supplemented each chapter with original letters, cards, drawings, and pictures. In preparing the collection for the institute, every effort was made to preserve the author's original order.

Eva Nelson's memoirs are organized by chapter. According to her original organization, some of the chapters have been divided into subchapters. The following provides a brief summary of the contents of each chapter:

Chapter 1: "The Noonan Story, 1914–1918" (3 leaves)

Eva recounts her earliest memories of life in Noonan, North Dakota, with her parents and her younger brother Orville. She supplements the chapter with pictures of her family and postcards.

Chapter 2: "Added Thoughts: Interim, 1915–1920" (8 leaves)

The author writes about her move from Noonan to the Christine area, her daily activities as a young child, and the Swedish custom of having "coffee on the bed" for her sixth birthday. She also gives prices of groceries and describes some of the work done on the farm. The file also contains photographs.

Chapter 3A: "At Grandma's Place, 1920–1926" (19 leaves)

Grandma and Grandpa Johnson (maternal grandparents) lived close to the author throughout her childhood. When Eva started school, she moved in with her grandparents, aunt, and uncles for several years because the rural school was too far from her parent's home. Her grandparents, especially her grandmother Sabina, had an important influence in her life. She gives descriptions of daily rural life, especially the enormous amounts of work involved in keeping a farm running: washing, ironing, cooking, shocking grain, picking potatoes, and threshing. In this chapter she also recounts her first impressions of going to the "big city," Fargo, North Dakota, for a dental visit. The author's love of music first becomes apparent in this chapter, and she provides handwritten transcriptions of a song remembered from her childhood. Eva also includes photographs as a supplement to the chapter.

Chapter 3B: "At Cooper's Place, 1920–1923" (9 leaves)

Throughout her childhood, Eva's family moved several times in and around the Christine area. In 1920–1923 they lived at "Cooper's Place," probably a reference to the first people who lived on the land. This

home was approximately two miles from her grandparent's home. In 1923 the family moved two more times, always in the Christine area. In this chapter, Eva writes about childhood games, activities, and daily life on the farm. She includes a transcribed lullaby that her mother sang to Eva's younger siblings and also a list of her mother's grocery expenses. The supplemental materials include photographs and a picture cut out of a magazine of the "redicut" house she and her mother wanted to buy.

Chapter 3C: "At the Old Country School, 1920–1926" (18 leaves)

Eva attended a rural country school that was located near her grandparents' farm. She writes about walking to school, her classmates, daily school activities, special holidays, school events, and her favorite songs and books. She includes photographs, a hand-drawn map of the Christine area (which explains the family's many moves), her original school art and stories, and a list of books she read.

Chapter 3D: "At Hannah's Place, 1923–1926" (17 leaves)

"Hannah's Place" refers to the Gunderson's home in 1923–1926. In this chapter Eva writes about school, daily rural activities, her passion for reading, silent movies, and childhood games. She includes transcribed songs and an original song that she composed. She also includes photographs and letters from the children in the family to their father.

Chapter 4A: "Christine High School Days, 1926-1930" (18 leaves)

After attending rural country school, Eva went to high school in Christine. She was two years younger than her classmates, so she writes about how awkward the transition was for her. In this chapter she integrates excerpts from her diary within the prose of her narrative. She writes about school activities, piano lessons, friends, movies, and family. She also writes about her confirmation day, which was an important milestone in her life. The narrative includes Eva's original poetry and pictures, and a 1974 article that she wrote for the Wahpeton, North Dakota, newspaper.

Chapter 4B: "Maid-of-All-Work, 1930-1932" (10 leaves)

After graduating from high school, Eva went to work as a maid. She writes about the incredible amount of work expected from her, a sixteen-year-old girl, for a salary of four dollars a week. The file includes two letters from Eva to her family.

Chapter 4C: "The Westby Story—A Happy Interlude, 1932-1933" (18 leaves)

In 1932 Eva traveled to Westby, Montana, with her aunt and uncle, Esther and Anton Ditmarson, for a one- to two-month stay. Her brief visit turned into an eight-month "happy interlude" in her life. In this chapter she gives detailed descriptions of her reactions to the changing landscape as she traveled across North Dakota. She writes about the towns, scenery, daily activities, and her relationship with her aunt and uncle. Eva included recipes, pictures, cards, postcards, and letters from Esther to Eva's family in the file.

Chapter 4D: "Depressing Years in the Red River Valley, 1933–1935" (9 leaves)

After returning from Westby, Eva once again worked as a maid in and around the Christine area. During this time period, she moved to Fargo and found employment as a maid. She writes about the kinds of work, the long hours, and the low pay she received. She developed a friendship with another maid, Helen Kohlhoff, and she describes their activities on their days off. Integrated into the narrative are excerpts from letters Eva wrote home to her family. At the end of this period, Eva convinced her mother and siblings to take a trip to Montana to visit relatives. Instead of returning to Fargo, Eva stayed with her father's relatives, Inger and Martin Miller, who lived near Minot. She ends the chapter with a brief synopsis of what happened to each of her siblings. Eva included pictures of the trip, the road map of North Dakota that they used, and letters she wrote to her family in this file.

Chapter 5A: "Turn in the Road, 1935–1936" (12 leaves)

During this time, Eva lived in and near the Minot area. She worked for awhile as a maid at Nels Aune's farm near Raub, but then decided to go to the state teachers college in Minot. While attending school, she boarded with a family and helped with childcare and household tasks. Included in the file is a handwritten "owe" list, report cards, bills from school, and pictures.

Chapter 5B: "Another Turn in the Road, 1936–1937" (8 leaves)

In the fall of 1936, Eva transferred from Minot to Moorhead Teachers College. She writes about school and living in the Fargo-Moorhead area. In this part of the narrative, she remembers what it was like to be a student teacher in a small rural school under the supervision of someone who did not like her. She included drawings, pictures, report cards, her commencement program, and letters from Eva to her family.

Chapter 6: "The Golden Valley Story, 1938" (18 leaves)

In this chapter Eva writes about her first teaching job in a small rural school in North Dakota. She supplements the narrative with excerpts from her diary and letters she wrote to her family. Eva writes about the sometimes awkward position of boarding with a family and also being the children's teacher. She included a lesson plan, sheet music, her teaching certificate, and pictures in this file.

Chapter 7: "1938-1940" (7 leaves)

Eva recounts her second teaching experience when she filled in for someone who was having a baby. She remembers the episode with less than fond memories. After substituting, her first full-year teaching position was in LaMars Township. She gives a detailed account of the many duties of a country school teacher. Again, she brings in excerpts from her diaries to supplement the account. At this time, she decided to marry Rudolph Nelson the following year. The file also includes pictures and documents of Leonard Anderson's grave.

Chapter 7A: "Once Upon a Time In the Treasure State, 1939–1940" (4 leaves)

During the summers of 1939 and 1940, Eva worked at Flathead Ranch near Big Fork, Montana. This chapter recounts those experiences. There are pictures included in the file.

Chapter 8: "Dreary Years" (10 leaves)

This chapter gives a synopsis of highlights in Eva's life over many years. She gives general information about the first few years of her marriage in this chapter, and in retrospect acknowledges that her marriage was a mistake. The chapter also includes two moves to the West Coast, which did not last long, the birth of Eva's daughter, Barbara, and the Nelsons' divorce in 1956. In this file, Eva includes a short narrative, "No Gulls Over Dwight," in which she recounts deciding whether or not to take a job near Dwight, North Dakota.

Chapter 9: "The Long Road to Serenity" (4 leaves)

In Chapter 9, Eva reflects on her relationships with her children and grandchildren. This chapter includes an epilogue in which she writes about Leonard Anderson. Also included in the file are photographs.

Chapter 10: "The End" (4 pages)

The last chapter is handwritten and includes Eva's reflections on her children and grandchildren.

BOX AND FOLDER LIST

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