
Historical Perspective: Dr. Lydia (Jacobson) Fohn-Hansen

Kristy Long, Foods and Home Economics Specialist

Spring of 1925 had arrived in Iowa and restlessness accompanied the greening of the landscape for two young women teaching home economics education at Iowa State University. Lydia Jacobson and her friend Martha Parker wanted an adventure. Who talked whom into applying for two positions listed on a bulletin board for the three-year old Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines (now the University of Alaska Fairbanks) became a minor part of the story once Dr. Bunnell offered the two young women the jobs. Lydia described the interview setting: “It was a hot, muggy June day. Dr. Bunnell just sat and wiped his brow. We looked at each other for a few moments after the interview. I made up my mind; I wanted to go to Alaska. It would be a jaunt into the unknown. I was hired!” Lydia accepted the position of professor and department head of home economics, and Martha became an instructor in the department. Dr. Bunnell decided to hire them both because former teachers kept getting married and leaving. Lydia Jacobson would not know until almost 50 years later what this decision would mean to her life and the lives of many Alaskans.

The “jaunt into the unknown” began for this daughter of a pioneer Iowa farmer with a road trip to Seattle. Lydia sold her car in Seattle because her sources said there were few roads in Fairbanks. Friend, Martha, met Lydia in Seattle where they boarded the ship, S.S. Northwestern, the September “Teachers’ Special” bound for Seward. A long wait for the train in Seward allowed the friends time for their first exploration of the Territory of Alaska; beautiful gardens and a

friendly offer to explore a local strawberry patch were their first and lasting impressions.

Home in Fairbanks began at the Nordale Hotel for \$40 a month. The five miles to work each day was covered by catching the train that left from the depot in Fairbanks and stopped at the foot of the hill at College, Alaska. Lydia’s official arrival was announced with the News-Miner newspaper’s September 10th headline, “Faculty Number Now Doubled.” The newly arrived teachers offered classes to students as well as the community. According to a February 1926 issue of the News-Miner, “. . . the community classes were well attended and generated interest in diets, especially for the F.F.F. (Friendly Fat Fraternity).” But history repeated itself, and Lydia was married by the end of her second year. Married women weren’t generally allowed to keep their positions, but the newspaper reports of the department’s offerings carefully avoided mentioning the name of the still employed Mrs. Fohn-Hansen.

In 1928, Lydia resigned her position. She and her husband, Hans, left for Seattle but returned in 1930. Dr. Bunnell called Lydia when she returned and asked if he could recommend her as the home economist for the newly established Cooperative Extension Service. She would be working with the 4-H and homemakers programs. Lydia’s interview for the position was with Mr. Lloyd, head of the Western Division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The first thing he asked Lydia was, “Have you ever milked a cow?” Lydia knew the basics and didn’t confess that it wasn’t a regular task. Her answer was good enough to be hired.

The first 4-H club (The Golden Heart Garden Club) was organized in Fairbanks with the assistance of Mr. Lloyd. In July, Lydia, Dr. Gasser (the agriculture agent) and Mr. Lloyd left for their first field trip to Matanuska, Eklutna, Anchorage, Seward, Juneau, Sitka, Ketchikan and Wrangell to start 4-H and homemaker clubs and introduce the extension service. Lydia said, “It was an exciting time to be doing extension work. People were just



Lydia Fohn-Hansen weaving at her loom. Her expertise allowed her to initiate projects that provided a source of income for Alaskans.

learning about nutrient values in foods. Vitamins and minerals were just being discovered. The Depression years motivated people to preserve food and live off the land.” People were also looking for sources of income. In 1931, she was given a quantity of musk ox wool. She found the wool fibers were exceptionally warm and soft. Her expertise as a spinner allowed her to initiate projects that encouraged use of this resource as a moneymaking venture for Alaska weavers and knitters.

The Depression had another impact on the Cooperative Extension Service. In 1935, the federal government recruited 200 colonists from the northern parts of Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin to settle and farm the Matanuska Valley near Palmer. The colonists lived in tent communities while homes were built and land was cleared. Lydia became a part of the community with her own tent and a pickup truck. She spent two months traveling to communities in the area teaching colonists how to preserve local berries, how to care for fish and game, how to use powdered milk, and how to keep their homes and families warm—skills needed for making homes in this new land. Lydia remembered that “People got starry-eyed. They wanted to wrest farms from

the wilds...it was a challenge to help them gain skills to make use of natural resources.” Until 1935, Lydia was the only home economist visiting towns and villages. Her trips meant being away from home for weeks and months at a time.

In 1937, Lydia left the territory because her husband was ill. She returned in 1940 as a widow and resumed her position as the state leader for extension home economics. More agents in home economics had been hired for the larger communities so Lydia was able to focus on statewide programs. Publications and a radio show based on “Food and Home Notes” from USDA became priorities for extending the educational resources of the Cooperative Extension Service throughout the state. During her career, she authored over 400 publications and 75 4-H project books. Lydia also realized a dream of bringing Alaska women to the university campus for a week of short courses, which initiated the formation of future Alaskan homemaker clubs. Today, women from the homemaker clubs (now called the Alaska Association for Family and Community Education) still meet annually for educational programs and an organizational meeting.

When Lydia Jacobson Fohn-Hansen retired in 1959, she stated, “I suppose the real challenge was to use the funds available to the best advantage of Alaskans. I did the best I knew how thanks to many helpers.” At her retirement, the University of Alaska conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Humanities on Lydia as a pioneer Alaska home economist and Cooperative Extension Service professional.

Sources: Evolution of the Cooperative Extension Service in Alaska by Arthur S. Buswell, 1960; “An Alaskan Home Economics Pioneer” by Mary Schlick in *Journal of Home Economics*, September 1977; “Dr. Lydia Fohn-Hansen . . . An Adventurous Home Economist” by Marguerite Stetson in *Alaska Woman Magazine*, October 1977.