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Finlandia University
601 Quincy St.
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Early Pelkie History, Clearing the Land and Making a Living
Source: Urho Errikainen

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SUBJECT: Early Pelkie History, Clearing the Land and Making a Living

SOURCE: Urho Erikainen is Pelkie's historian. He attempted to wire together a history of Pelkie, but the task was never completed.

COMMENTS: He is a folk historian with a genuine love of history. He is remembered as a man who used to go around from house to house telling interesting stories until late in the night.

I: What was life like there?...when they first came in there?

R: Well, I remember that quite good. When the early Finns come, my Pa was one of the early ones too...well, my folks..I should have said. They had to start up agriculture. They figure that agriculture is the only thing a person can depend on and live on...and raise vegetables and so on that are eatable (edible). My Pa, he became known as the not a vegetable farmer, but a truck farmer.

I: When was this now when your folks moved into this area?

R: That was in 1907.

I: That was right in that Pine Creek place where.

R: Yeah, on the outskirts of Pine Creek.

I: Did they have to clear the land?

R: Yes, they had to clear the land. The giant pine stumps that were there my Pa ordered government dynamite...that was which they called pyratole (sp?) dynamite. He ordered 200 pounds or several boxes of it. I don't know how heavy boxes that the dynamite come, but they were less than 50 pound boxes, I know that.

I: And they used dynamite to get those stumps out?

R: Yes, and then they, like my Pa, sized up the stump to see how much dynamite it would take and he would put in sometimes 35 sticks of dynamite...you know what that means. Them stumps were so very big that those roots were...alone so big and then when they come together well, Pa walked around the stump and he knew then by walking 'round the stump that it's going to take a lot of effort to get land from there. Once upon a time the heavy has yielded a heavy stand of pine.

I: So, could they get it all out with dynamite?

R: Yes, they got it all out with dynamite. That's what my Pa used pyratole dynamite...that was government dynamite.

I: Did your Dad ever borrow a neighbor's horse to help pull them out?

R: No, he didn't. We had a couple horses of our own. My brother...my oldest...helped pulling out them roots and pegs the roots that got left sticking in the ground. But it all became cleared anyway. I've seen more than once that the horses had really effort to pull out some of those stubs of roots showing from the ground.

I: Were those roots as big as a man sometime..around?

R: Yeah, about that. I'd say that they were about this big and then they run around the ground about 30 feet anyway.

- I: And you said the roots were about a foot and a half in diameter?
- R: About that, yeah. That's true...I'm not telling you no lies. And why should I be telling you...
- I: There aren't any pine around there like that now. Was that whole area covered with pine...all of the Pelkie area?
- R: Just about the whole area. *(not into the Froberg area.)*
- I: You mean all those early farms...they had to get those big pine stumps out?
- R: Many of them...almost^{all} of them worked on those big pine stumps. I remember some of those farmers; they really worked on those farms so they could own a farm they could make their living on. So,...
- I: Did the French Canadians living there...did they pull any of those stumps out of there?
- R: No
- I: How did they making a living then?
- R: They worked out in the woods. As long as there was woods and contract work and so forth. I believe...I'm not sure what kind of contracts they made. They took the pine stumps out. The one thing remember... I was about 2 years old...but I still remember, it's a long time ago.. when I used to myself. A man by the name of Fisher was a neighbor, and he had a big ox and he would hitchup the ox and then he would go skidding logs. My dad was skidding the same size of logs with a team of horses...that wasn't our team...we didn't have no horses then. So, I remember little bit of it anyway...I was perhaps 2½ or 3 years old but I can remember what the real beginning was anyway.
- I: So the Finns had to get those big pine stumps out of the ground before they could start farming?
- R: That's right...that's very true as I'm here.
- I: That whole area was covered with pine from Pine Creek, Hamar, Sturgeon Valley like Froberg...was it covered with pine over there too?
- R: It must have all been covered with pine because it all becoming the same area. Remember there was a Frenchman...don't know if he was a Frenchman, but his name was Andy Fisher. I'd watch him driving a nice big ox and the horns were wide on him. My dad said that this Andy Fisher told him that if the horses can't budge a log loose, let him know that he'll pull it with the ox. My dad said that it was really some sight to see the ox pulling them big pine logs. The ox was just about doubled up or humped up and then it would try a few times slowly and when he could feel that there was something very heavy to be pulled off...well, that ox knew what was the trick, so he would back up ~~on~~ certain number of feet and he would just about double up or make hump on his back and he made a very hard leap forward.
- I: To get those stumps out?
- R: Yeah, by jerking to get it started. I'm talking to like my pa told

us. Pa told a lot things that my younger brother never took notice of it. No use asking him for a history...where he can tell some history, but I'm crazy myself for that history business. This what I am telling you the very beginning in Pelkie. That's in the Pine Creek where the big pine grew. There were French people living there that time. One time at least what I remember. They moved away to Witmore, Mi. I always...

I: How come they moved out of the area?

R: Because they knew that they can't continue with the farm and the farming was pushing up already. Early ^{French} farmers, after the French and Swedes moved out of there, they knew that only thing to make a good living or fair living was to put your efforts on the farm.

I: How come the French didn't want to do that?

R: I don't know. There was one of the French families that moved out of there had 5 or 6 boys and he could have worked to make a good farm for them to make a good living.

I: Did they have a job in Witmore, Mi.?

R: That I never asked, but I believe they did because in Witmore, I went to see one of the girls once in awhile and I've been kind of making my mind up about going to see her again...and talk about some of the old things. The mother of the boys in the family...and usually contests could be won by nobody knows who.

I: What kind of logging did they do after the pines?

R: That was mixed logging. There was hemlock and hardwood. That was the main thing...the hemlock and hardwood. I myself was growing already and I went to look for a job in the woods. I was cutting the mixed timber then. There was only a few of the big pine left, but I was always working for Harding from Racine, Wis. The contractor's full name was Phillip...can't remember the whole name. They come...they had a contract to come take some patch of timber out of Michigan so they come all the way from Wisconsin. They would go home every week-end. I had a chance to come home sometimes in the middle of week. Then I had a chance to travel from home, too, if there wasn't too much snow. Snow was the hardest thing to walk into.

I: A lot of the early Finns worked in the woods, they farmed and worked in the woods. When did they work in the woods...what time of year?

R: Mostly in the winter. Wintertime they worked in the woods.

I: And the summertime they would stay on the farm?

R: Just about all summer some of the farmers and there was...some of them were commonly called good farmers. They were big guys...one of them was he was about 5'11"...he said that he really liked to clear land and pull up those big pine roots that weren't tied up badly. You could pull up some of the roots by hand. That was his work and he really loved that work. He was a powerful man. That was Herman Niemisto. The roots that weren't covered too deep in the ground or weren't rooted too deep...he said he loved to clear land...that was his main thing to clear up a farm so he could make a living some day from there. I worked in the woods with Herman Niemisto at

least one winter what I remember. There was a Matt Turunen from Pelkie.

I: Where was the camp at that time?

R: There might have been a camp, but we was traveling from home. I had a car then, a car I could depend on for short trips at least. With my car I was traveling to work with Mr. Niemisto. The relative of this Niemisto is at this building right now and I see him many times a day. He can tell you that I'm not B.S.'ing. My parents taught me that if we told a lie, down went our pants and we got a darn good licking across our back. Not in the woodshed, but right in the house. Even mother would do that too. Mother wasn't quite so rough with the boys as pa was. Pa was rough with his boys. He wanted us to be under his thumb or under the law. I remember one time Pa was good for running...good from his legs...he didn't ail yet...he never ailed in his life except at last. I figured myself afterward that old age was catching up with him too. He was running after my brother Otto. My brother Otto had run really fast to keep...so he didn't get gotten by the shirt collar or by the collar. I remember that...he didn't catch him. Some of things I recall by myself it makes me smile that what kind of kids did he have. I wasn't a bad and I'm not accusing my brother Otto either, but...when the kids grew up they thought they were going to square up with the old man but the old man died...my father died suddenly. He died when he came from the toilet...he died suddenly on his way coming to the house. He ate a heavy breakfast and I remember what he was eating that morning. Pigs feet was his loved food...he really liked it. I had just come from the Co-op store in Pelkie and brought a jar of pickled pigs feet and it took quite a bit strength to open that cap off that jar. He still had strength to open that jar up and he had his food from there. So he enjoyed those pigs feet I had bought for him. I was doing the buying them days and I had to figure out myself what my dad would want for his diet that day or days to come. So I went and bought the pigs feet for him. I was the one who was taking care of him so that nothing would happen to him, but when that does come; well, it comes and he fell from a heart attack I believe he fell as soon as he come out of the outside toilet and we carried him to the bed and there was little life in him yet left when we carried him into the bed and we called up Dr. Winkler and he was the last one that come there but he didn't really see him in life anymore. So he pronounced him dead. Only thing I'm telling is the old memories on the old farm.

I: How did they make a living on the farm then? Where did they get the money in those days?

R: They went...like now myself...I had to hunt for work so I wasn't using up the farm money.

I: How old were you when you starting hunting for work?

R: I might have been 14 or 15 years old and well, that's about all I was in age. I always liked farming, I thought that was going to be the last resort anyway.

I: How did they make farm money in those days?

R: The money some made wasn't made from the farm. They was making money from outside work, woods and road work and things like that.

I: What road work was there then?

R: There was sometimes..at least once.. they were opening a dead end road was to made true and I met them others there with a gang of boys or men so I wasn't alone there.

I: What road was this do you remember?

R: Pine Creek Road. That's where my ~~mother~~ mail comes

I: The other money would be made in the woods...?

R: Yeah, that's right.

I: They didn't make any money right off the farm?

R: Well, not right aways. They made money alright, but those people that made money from the farm, I always figured that's their money and they can do what they please with that money.

I: You mean your folks?

R: No...yeah, my pa..I could donate if I wanted to but it was still free for us boys to give what we wanted. And I always gave pa \$100 at one time, but he doesn't know yet. I worked too hard for my money so he wasn't going to ^{take} nothing from me. That's the way it was.

I: Did they sell any milk in those days?

R: Oh, yes...then the farming start.

I: Where would they sell the milk?

R: The farmers got together and put up their own cheese factory in Pelkie. That was supported by the farmers who signed up to hold up that cheese factory...to support that cheese factory.

I: When did this start?

R: I can't tell you the exact year, but exact year you could find from John Pekela, the manager of the Co-op Store in Pelkie. I'm sure he will be glad to mention and maybe he got sometime to add onto the history.

I: When did the Co-op start?

R: I remember the Co-op start in 1917. My brother John was a member of the Board of Directors which he continued for 25 years. A record that no other man had held it that long.

I: Who was responsible for starting and organizing it?

R: Who organized it was my pa.....David Erikainen.

I: Who else started the Co-op there?

R: It had been started by somebody already...earlier...couldn't really tell you, but there was a group of men. I remember one time when there was one of the old neighbors who came to our place and mentioned

something that we got to have a Co-op store in Pelkie that we need one there. So then they put up the first meeting. John was the secretary for that for 25 years.

I: Did you have good neighbors in those days?

R: Oh, yes...they were all good neighbors...a good neighborhood.

I: How would they help one another?

R: I couldn't really explain that very good, but when they needed help one would go who had time and help his neighbor. I would be one of them. My pa bought the first binder and reaper...they were John Deere and he bought them from (Exley) from Hancock or Houghton. The binder...the reaper would cut the grain and the binder would bind it together and tie it into knots. That was big help and then my pa was helping the other neighbors with the grains.

I: What would they do with this grain? Would they have it ground?

R: They had it ground up into...especially the wheat they had that ground up at the Gristmill.

I: Who ran the Gristmill in those days?

R: That was the Walitalo brothers. One of those brothers lost his life when a Model T Ford turned on a sandy road and rolled over. One of the men who was on his ride was...his ear come off...it was hanging a little bit. Nobody was really badly hurt then actually, so Walitalo has died already many years ago.

I: They had a mill over there...?

R: That operated by a dam across a little creek...build across...I think they had a waterwheel...the waterwheel has been pushed aside. I been always thinking that was the wrong thing they ever done. The early farmers had to depend on a living on the Gristmill.

I: Did farmers from all around the Pelkie area go there and have their wheat ground?

R: Wheat ground...and what ever they had to be ground to be used by human beings.

I: Like what...what else did they have ground?

R: Rye was one of the main things they had to grind. Sometimes there was lots of that grain used for cattle...for cattle they didn't have to grind it so much...they could leave it coarse and mix it up with this finer flour the mill had ground up. I been still thinking sometimes if there is any of those boys living yet and what has happened to that gristmill. There is a sign on M-35 that the Gristmill...

I: When the farmer would take his grain there how would they pay the people at the Gristmill? Would they take part of his grain or would they charge money for that?

R: That I couldn't explain really because the Gristmill became known way down to Ontonagon County. Some of the old timers living by the road-

side which now is M-38 or was M-38...they said that this person's name was Andrew Arvidson...he was a fine guy. I know because when I was going to start writing a history of Pelkie, I had to go and see Arvidson. Arvidson has died a year ago and his wife, I believe, she is still alive.

- I: All the farmers in the Pelkie area would take their grain in the Fall to the Gristmill?
- R: When the snow was already on the ground because that was the most time they had to delay their other farm purposes and have their grain ground.
- I: What kinds of other things would you plant on your farm?
- R: Barley...and not only wheat...and rye. My ma would use the barley flour for rjeska...I can still remember they were flat white cakes. You could ^{make} more of it at one time and hang it up on supports or nails.
- I: How would you preserve the flour when the snow came on the ground?
- R: Into sacks and keep it in the grainery. My dad had a grainery build in 1917 for that purpose of storing grain and flour and so forth.
- I: Did you have a garden?
- R: Oh, yes. Every year my pa would plant a garden and my pa was very good at it. Because he had already in Finland taken a course on farm raisables. They is another name for it...
- I: What kinds of things would you grow then in the garden?
- R: There was cabbage and rutabagas and so forth. Carrots. Potatoes were in bigger fields. A new piece of ground just for the potatoes.
- I: How come you would use the new ground for potatoes?
- R: I don't know...that was my pa's secret...that was the way he was taught in Finland.
- I: So when you would clean out a new area you would plant it right away with potatoes?
- R: Yes. One thing was sure that you couldn't plant potatoes with...in that had horse manure...very much in it or else horse manure and... otherwise your potatoes would come big and scabby. Big, but look nice, but you hated like dickens to take them to market.
- I: Where did you market your potatoes?
- R: My dad used to take them to market and I would go too. In Baraga, in L'Anse and Pequaming sometimes. He bought a rolled over car that had only 2000 miles on it. He had it brought to Charley Koskinen in Baraga. He was just a average repairman...if repairs come along. From plywood he made a nice closed cab...it was a Chrysler truck I used to drive it. A guy on a windy day had been driving along and a tree had flattened across the road and thought he could fit in under there and he didn't fit so it scraped the roof off that car. I suppose that car had insurance or something because after that the chassis and the body was for sale for \$200. So I went with dad and we

bought that Chrysler chassis and he had Mr. Koskinen make a truck out of it...rebuild it into a truck and he did.

I: Where would he take the potatoes...where in Baraga?

R: It wasn't in Baraga only. The potato sale was by Cohodas in Hancock. Bring some other places too. I think at one time he did sell a carload of potatoes went out from Pelkie. I'm not sure...some people didn't really get paid for the carload of potatoes so I'm not sure if pa got paid for the potatoes or not. I never heard no grumble about those potatoes and they were big ones...3 pounds a piece and like that. The ground was heavy black loam and you could raise almost anything there. I suppose that maybe my pa wanted a farm like that and he had looked around and then he chose the farm...he bought the farm from Samuel Hill from Baraga. He has a daughter living yet. The last I heard, I asked my last cousin living if Stella, that's the maiden's name, this Raymond Kangas...that's my ma's relation. He said that she takes a walk every day across the country to visit their place.

I: How much did people pay for land in those days? What did it go for by the forty, or acre or whatever they sold it for?

R: That's kind of hard for me to determine because the price remained on the farm. If it was well situated next to the main road it was higher prices. If it was a good farm what come out of it then the farm went way up in price. I just tell one story which my brother didn't approve of it, but myself I was asked how much our farm would be worth at that time it was liked to be sold. I said that it would be according to myself it would be worth \$16,000. This was more than 10 years ago.

I: Were the early Finns poor?

R: There was poor ones. That's when I had to get out and help the poor ones. They had coming from the mining district from Coper Country.

I: During that strike? *(1913-14 Copper Mining Strike)*

R: Yeah, some of the relations got killed there in the Italian Hall disaster. After that they all moved to Pelkie. There was the Haka family and Oscar Hill family and they all remembered that disaster. There had been, as I was told but I never seen the place of the disaster, a hallway that steps from downwards. A guy had appeared there to, I don't know for what purpose but what purpose I've been thinking he must have come there just for devilment. He had cried out, "Fire! Fire! Fire!" The crowd got excited and they run down the steps and the kids got left in the feet of the grownups and so they piled up on each other and that was a great disaster.

I: A lot of the Finns got disgusted then with the whole copper mining area and came out to Pelkie then.

R: That's right. There's nothing different about that.

I: They didn't have much money either in those days?

R: No, they had to borrow money and they had a hard time to fac# up to payments.

- I: Where did they borrow the money from in those days?
- R: Only what I heard in Finnish. One of the guys telling that his boy was hueing railroad ties....(Side 1 of tape ends)
- I: In Finnish, how they got these loans...
- R: The story starts then that from my parents coming on the farm, my pa bought the farm where I been living on from Samuel Hill which was always my home...watch our sausage always and I got always taught that's right that you can't trust anything that they'll start munching on from some place...helping themselves. I'm not blaming my my brother, but I'm blaming myself because I got laid up in St. Joseph's Hospital last Fall. That ways 2 days of November left...so I'm not sure for what date it is...I know when I landed there was deer season left yet. I took off from home on my own accord, nobody brought me to St. Joseph's Hospital...I mean Winkler's Hospital in L'Anse.
- I: These poor Finns paid for this land. ?
- R: Well, they just...when they had to pay for they just had to give them time because everybody didn't have cash.
- I: There wasn't much cash around?
- R: Of course, there would have been cash too, but they were paying ... it out for Archie Ryan Corporation what I heard that borrowed the money and the farmer had to pay back. But my father never had to borrow money from Ryan. That was some kind of corporation, I believe, that borrowed money for the early starter on the farm. That the conclusion I been figuring out on myself.
- I: Where was this corporation located that loaned the money to those early farmers?
- R: It could have been in Calumet. I can't be too sure...you can't bank on this here what I'm telling you...
- I: Did the Finns have any trouble paying back...?
- R: No, they always paid back their debts.
- I: It was tough, wasn't it?
- R: It was tough, but they made it all right.
- I: How did they make it? How did they get by on so little?
- R: They just had to get along and they just borrowed^{what} they needed and they figured how much they could pay back. They borrowed the money from Ryan office...it could have been in Hancock.
- I: How would they get money then?
- R: Most of it was coming from the woods. When the farmers would work in the woods that was a big help for the farmers.
- I: Is that how they paid for their farms?

- R: That's how most of them paid for their farms, yes.
- I: They didn't make much money off the cows did they?
- R: Oh no, because the cows and agriculture went down so low that everybody was selling their cows or their herd. They weren't trusting the dairy herding business no longer. That just about ended farming in Pelkie.
- I: That was before they started the cheese co-op?
- R: Yeah, that was before they started the cheese co-op.
- I: What happened...
- R: Although the cheese co-op was supported right up to the end, but then there was non-supporters and then competition come there too. There come...I think they could have been Italian nationality... but neither one couldn't be blamed too much for it.
- I: Were the farmers getting a bad deal in dairy business just before they started the cheese business?
- R: No, not exactly, you can't count that a bad deal. I can't say it was a bad deal because I don't know too much about it. Pa wasn't in none of those deals. I always liked Stella Cheese Factory which was operated by Italian people. Some liked it but I can't say anything because we never supported that cheese factory. We supported the Co-op cheese factory which was put up by my pa and by my oldest brother. So that's the way they killed off that Italian cheese factory.
- I: Was there a communist movement in Pelkie way back?
- R: Not that I could say. There could have been, but they weren't the dangerous type...they couldn't have started no uprising. They were good people as I remember and they were ours neighbors. I used to visit them once...maybe once a week at the end of the week and I used to have a sauna there. They were very nice people to get along with and I helped them along with their farm work and their farm. So I have got nothing to say about the communist. I read in the Finnish newspapers that Communist is certain ways in the world is causing trouble. But not these people. These people who I worked for they caused no trouble for anyone. They would rather come and help a neighbor than start destroying something.
- I: Were they involved in forming the Co-op?
- R: Yes, they were involved in the Co-op and farming.....I asked where a girl or old maid or whatever she is...it don't consider me at all her business so I got her from L'Anse to type for me my history. She said she would be glad to type my history. She has typed, but I don't know what my younger brother has been trying to push or whether he knows all the history I know. I just hope good luck for him if he ever did start a history that he would know as much as I would know. I was four years old when I was back on the farm. My brother is a little younger than I am...maybe two years younger. Only thing that he should have waited and relied on my history work before he start on any of his...I can't tell you what has happened...whether he made the grade or not. I know one thing. I heard

Dr. Lanczy say that he had checked over his history and he had a book made out of it already.

I: I don't think so...I don't think there is yet a history of Pelkie.

R: I don't think so myself

I: When did you get interested in history?

R: Many years ago...many years ago. I got to try and remember now... sometimes I think it was in the 1930's, or could have been a little after.

I: Why were you interested in Pelkie's history?

R: Because the people didn't rely on nobody else but me. They say that you're the only one that could write it. If my father would have been living he would have been just the man for remembering the best parts of the history, but he died already many years ago. So, nobody can help that he's gone.