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**FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT
LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978**

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Gust A. Gustafson
12/4/74

Adrian A. Niemi

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This is an interview with Mr. Gust A. Gustafson of 1504 Vermillion Road Duluth, Minnesota conducted by Adrian Niemi on December 4, 1974.

Okay Mr. Gustafson could you start by telling me where and when you were born?

I was born in ^{Ely} ~~Honey~~ Minnesota ^{May 4,} ~~in~~ 1898. I don't remember Ely at all and then we moved to Virginia and I don't remember Virginia. So then my family moved to ^{Chisholm} ~~Chism~~ and that's where most of my younger life was spent.

Where were your parents from?

My father was from _____ Finland and my mother was from _____ Our name wasn't really Gustafson, he changed it when he came here. His first name was Gust and his father's first name was Gust.

Do you know what their name was before they came here?

We went through a town and looked through the phone book and our name was Huhta before and there were a lot of them in the book.

Do you still keep in contact with them?

R We don't keep track of my relatives, just my wife's relatives. We never corresponded with them.

I Do you recall hearing why they came here?

R No, I don't, it was during the Russian regime there and like most of the Finns there, they wanted to get away from them. They just were poor farmers with a small farm.

I Do you know why they came to Minnesota?

R No, I have no idea, they went straight to Ely when they came. It might be because there were a lot of Finns up there.

I What kind of work did your father do?

R I really don't know, but I would suspect it would be an underground miner. What he did in Virginia I don't know but in ^{hol} Chism he had various jobs. When I was young he had a dairy farm across the lake from the town. After the dairy farm he had a job for the village and ended up as a street foreman. He held this before he died. He died in 1926.

I When did you move to ^{hol} Chism?

R I really don't know when we moved there, but it must have been 1905.

I You must have been pretty young then.

R I can say 1905 because the ^{Chisholm} ~~Chism~~ fire was in 1908 and we saw the whole fire. We were across the lake and saw the people come across the bridge and the lake in boats but the waves were very high. We had twenty-six people living at our house that night.

What were you doing during the fire?

What do you mean?

you go to watch it, did you're mother let you go?

No, we didn't go out at all. We had too much excitement. My father went out and he saw that the bridge was burning on the other end. So he went out there and tried to saw a portion of the bridge off but that was too big of a job and he gave up.

So you grew up in ~~Chisholm~~ ^{Chisholm}?

Yes.

Were there many Finnish organizations in ~~Chisholm~~ ^{Chisholm}?

Well the only ones that I remember were the Luthern Church and of course the Kaleva people. ~~Missing content~~

How about Temperence Societies, Finnish choirs or bands.

we didn't belong to any of those groups.

Did you speak Finnish at home?

Yes, my father and mother both only spoke Finnish so I have a pretty good base of Finnish. I use the correct words, I don't like to use those words that are Finiska, I never use them. If I can't express myself in Finnish I express myself in English.

Did you have any schooling in Finnish, like in the public school?

R No. There were no Finnish school. I did go to the Methodist Church Confirmation school classes. So I was confirmed in the Methodist Church and these services were always in Finnish. That's the only school that I went to that was in Finnish. I graduated out of the ~~Chisholm~~ ^{Chisholm} highschool in 1919. After that we worked in the mines. We were called the kindergarten class and I believe we were the first ones to get a coffee break. Fifteen minutes in the morning and fifteen minutes in the afternoon.

I Did you work in the mines because you wanted to or as a matter of means of supporting your family?

R No, I was on my own and wages for the mines then was pretty good. This was just before the war and wages for the mines well I think I was making \$60 a month. Then after the war the mining company raised the wages and what I worked for was \$5.33 a day. So for about 20 days that would be about \$110 or \$115 a month.

I Do you remember anything about labor organizations?

Well I don't remember too much but I know we did have a strike there, an IWW strike there in ~~Chism~~^{Chism} and on the whole range there as a matter of fact. I remember the people working in the mines and they would be having alot of trouble. They would be shot at and everything. Those that did work boarded at the company boarding houses, they didn't even go home.

It would have been dangerous to go home?

Yes. Then I remember one time when the IWW had a march or parade and they marched around the lake. I don't know exactly where they went but our family had no sympathy with the IWW.

Are there often very strong feelings among groups like that?

Yes. But that's what brought on the higher wages, they did get the higher wages

You mentioned the strike, do you remember what year that was?

I really don't remember, but it was about 13 or 14. I do think it was before the war though. In 1914 that would make me 16 years old. I'm pretty sure I started working when I was 15 or 16 years old. Later on when I graduated I worked in one of the company offices as time keeper and then worked myself up to chief clerk. I was eventually chief clerk

What sort of things did young people do in those days in Chism for a good time? When they had time to spare?

I don't know but myself I was not an athlete although my brother was a football player and a long distance runner. I mixed up in intramural athletics like basketball and running.

Were there dances and parties?

R Oh yes, there were dances. I went to a regular Junior Prom every year at the highschools. Then there were alot of dances out in the country everywhere. They used to have them out at the lakes. People had cabins at the lakes and there were places where people had dances.

I Did you go to school after highschool?

R Yes, I went to Illinois Tech in Chicago. I graduated from there in 1929. It was a real bad time to graduate because it took me 7 years to get out of school. I worked nights at the power plant and went to school in the daytime. I ended up with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Engineering. Something I didn't know anything about when I went in. I should have been a civil engineer afterward I found out because that was my interest.

I It was hard getting a job then after you graduated?

R Oh yes, it was tough getting a job. I was working for the power company before I graduated and then I got a job with sales firm selling electric meters. Then the depression came along and there were no jobs.

R There were no jobs anywhere. So I came home and I had some money to live on so it wasn't so bad. My father had already passed away. Then I got a job with the Minnesota Power Company and I went down and went through all their power plants. I eventually ended up in Duluth in their steam plant where I was their efficiency engineer. I finally went downtown and was in charge of making schedules for efficient operation of the steam electric plants. See every generator and boiler is different. They all have their efficiency points or efficiency curves. If you have a dozen steam or electric generators well it's pretty complicated to find their best operating point. It's an engineering process and you do that by a certain method. Now they do that all on computer. It was too much paperwork and it took too long to figure it out so before I left the company we put all that on a computer. Everything on a computer. All the characteristics of the equipment so now all power companies in the United States all operate by computer. The computer knows instantly where to load each generator.

Are you still working?

No I've been retired for 11 years.

When did you move to Duluth?

Well I was working for the Minnesota Light and Power in the hydraplants and then drifted into the main office and got into the efficiency department. I've been in Duluth since 1934. I haven't been with the Finnish people all that time though. When I was in Chicago and with the Minnesota Power and Light Company until I got married to my wife Saimi Ellie from Ellie's corner and originally a Kohoniemi originally from Finland. Then after I met her she became Treasurer in 1957 of the Minnesota Finnish Historical Society and she's been Treasurer since then and is still Treasurer. I became vice-president of the society about 3 years ago. We are just about on our way out of that organization because the bylaws say you can only hold an office 3 years. If we want to go back but I don't think we want to because we are getting up there where we think we've done our share. And also we belong to the Finlandia foundation and I was Secretary-treasurer of the foundation for 11 years beginning in 63. Saimi has been a Trustee of our chapter. Saimi also belongs to the Kaleva and we go to the Messiah Luthern Church here in Duluth.

I Do you subscribe to any Finnish newspapers?

R Yes. We get the American Uutiset It's getting better all the time.

I Really

R Oh yes, it's getting very interesting. We used to get the newspaper from Finland but there's something bad about the Finnish newspapers, when you're subscription runs out they cut you off. They don't say anything to try to get you're subscription back, that's up to you.

I Is that true everywhere for overseas subscriptions?

I don't know but it is true for some of the magazines because the same thing has happened for the magazines.

Do you have any Finnish books?

Oh yes, we have a library of about 500 or 600 books and about a hundred of them are Finnish. I have a couple of interesting books from Professor Hutula from Helsinki. It's a political history of Finland from 1809 on. He gave me the original one in Finnish in 1969 and then I just got the English edition from him just a couple of months ago. It's a very interesting book. *MISSING Content*

Have you ever been involved in politics?

No I haven't been involved in politics. In the Finlandia foundation here we have done alot with the UMD here which is the University of Minnesota Duluth. We've gotten them Finnish books in their library and we've gone up into the 1600's now.

Do you want to know about Saimi?

Okay.

MISSING Content
 R She was born in Kuusamo in 1897. and came here when she was about 14 years old. She settled here and worked for her brother and sister-in-law. Her brother had a Jewellery Store. She finally married Ed Elly and they had a store in Elly on the road to St. Paul here. It's on highway 61. Elly's corner is named after them and their nephew is there now. He runs the place and his name is Ronald Ely. It's been kept in the family.

I Do you remember anything your folks might have said about Finnish folklore? Any unusual expressions or sayings?

R

I Do you know if your mother ever used any wild plants or herbs for medicines?

R No she hadn't.

I Did you have a sauna in your home?

R No, we didn't have a sauna. We have a sauna at our cabin which is about 48 miles from here. We have a room here downstairs that could be a sauna but was never made a sauna.

I Do you think it's important for people to preserve their ethnic heritage?

R Oh yes.

I The language or customs?

Oh absolutely.

What's the value of it?

Well the one thing is there is a value to knowing two languages. It's very valuable, well let's say isolated cases, not generally. If you go to Finland and we have about 5 flights every summer that go to Helsinki, and they are all of that new generation. If they went over there and didn't know the language what would be the sense of going over there. It shows that they do know the language. I know of some isolated cases, for example, if you go to West Point and you know another language you can get an extra seventy-five dollars a month for knowing another language. Regardless of what the language is.

Do you have any children?

No, we haven't any children. We've been married 20 years. We were both past 50 when we got married.

Living in ^{Chisholm} ~~Chisholm~~ there must have been a lot of other ethnic groups there?

Yes, and we associated pretty much with them when we were children. There were the usual feelings between the ethnic groups especially between the Finns and the Swedes. There were some pretty hard feelings there. But the Italians we had no trouble with them. They were nicer people than the others. Of course they kept to themselves a lot.

How do you think your parents would have felt if you would have married an Italian girl or a Greek or Yugoslav or something like that? Would they have minded?

I don't think they would have minded. I've seen that happen many times before. My oldest sister married an Englishman and I think my second sister married a German and the third sister married a Frenchman and my brother married a Swede.

It seems like so many of the first generation Finns had to keep things Finnish.

Oh yes, they do. I had that feeling too. I didn't like the other ethnic groups at all. When I did get married it was a Finn.

I Do you recall hearing any colorful Finnish stories about Finnish characters or personalities? Hermits, lumberjacks, miners, or anyone like that?

R No, I had some contact with them but I don't remember anything specific

I Did you ever hear anything about a certain person who could heal cuts by saying certain words over them?

R No, I never heard of them but I did see or hear of people using those horns. I've heard of this but never have seen this. I have a cousin who weighs about 100 pounds and she was very sickly. She went out and got some herbs and now she's coming around as nicely as can be.

Do you remember when you were young if you ever had warts on your hands?

Not me but I had boyfriends who had one

Have you ever heard of any ways of getting rid of warts?

No.

Well I guess that just about does it unless you have any comments?

Well the only big thing was the fire. It was a really bad and windy day and the wind was probably generated by the fire. They finally had to give up. They couldn't do anything. The buildings were going one after another. They did save the schools and the churches. I don't know if they tried to save them or what but they were left standing.

Do you remember how the fire started?

No, I don't know how it started, but it started out in the woods and it was a forest fire.

Did it start at one of the lumbercamps?

R No, because in that area there were no lumbercamps, just swampy country and we had a very dry fall. Maybe somebody did start a fire out there but I have never heard.