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Cecilia Kuitanen
11/16/74

Adrian Niemi

| <u>Topic</u> | <u>Page</u> | <u>Comment</u> |
|--|-------------|----------------|
| Parents Work in Prussia | 1 | |
| Goes to Ely - Worked in Mine | 1-2 | |
| Moved to Whitton - Worked in Lumber Mill | 3 | |
| Builds Own House - Takes in Boarders | 4 | |
| Finns Build Hall | 4-5 | |
| Finnish Plays | 6 | |
| Bands and Chorus | 7 | |
| Borrowing Money | 7-8 | |

I This is a conversation between Mrs. Cecilia Kuitanen of Ely Minnesota and Adrian Niemi which I recorded on November 16, 1974 in the Ely Bloomenson Nursing Home.

I Okay Mrs. Kuitunen I'd like you to tell us first where you were born and when?

R I was born in St. Petersburg _____ and now it's called Leningrad or Stalingrad in 1895. I came to America in 1901 with my mother, my father came in 1900 in June and we came in March of 1901

I Okay, how did it happen that you were born in St. Petersburg?

R My father and mother didn't like agriculture and at that time Finland was practically all agriculture, rather than any kind of factory work. And Prussia was more in the factory and industry, industrial work so he apprenticed as a steel worker and that's why he went there. And my mother had some friends that had gone over to Russia who worked for different families and they were apprenticed for whatever they wanted to do. My mother apprenticed for cook and she took her apprentice and worked as a cook for different military men. My father went there in his early twenties and she went there in her late twenties. My mother was older than my father. My father worked at one of the largest metal factories in Prussia. He was apprenticed as a steel welder as I think they would call them on ships. He did that for several years and then there was a shortage of work. There was one Belgium steel company that needed workers and he told his men that if they wanted to go there they could go there to work. He wasn't paying their fares or anything but if they wanted to go he would hire all the men that went because they already knew the work. So they went there but he didn't stay there a little more than a year when they decided to move. My father decided that if he's going to make a move he's not going to move to Belgium or any other European country. He's going to go to America. His uncle his mother's brother had gone to Russia many many years ago before my father had gone there. He knew a man in America in the New York Mills whose name was Kumpa.

I Kumpa?

R Yes, Kumpa. so my father thought it would be all right to talk to him because he'd been in America for so many years. Well my father never liked farming and in New York Mills and that area, it was all farming. So Kumpa said he knew a man by the name of Hoponen who lived in Ely and maybe he could get him a job in the mines. Well that was just the end of the Great Depression when he came here but he came here anyway. This man said you're here at a very bad time, they're not hiring. I'll fix your meals and fix your pail everyday and take you down and you never know, they might take you down. So he did with alot of other men He said when you're able to pay you can pay for your board. So that's what my father did then. He went down there every single day and for a long long time he wasn't hired nor were the other men hired either. The pay wasn't much only fifty cents a day and my father not liking agriculture or timbering didn't mind that at all.

I Excuse me, speaking of the period of the 1930's, the depression?

R 1890.

I Okay, that period.

R That great Depression then. Then they were cutting lagging, you know was lagging is, the supports for the mines.

I Yes

R So he had never done that before and didn't know exactly what to do and wasn't fast enough. But anyway he got fifty cents a day for cutting that and they were paid by the cord. Well the men that had been working all these years and were used to woodworking they knew just exactly what to do about it. They were able to cut faster and were able to cut and stack the pile into a cord pile that looked a cord pile and measured a cord pile. So when my father did it he made it so all the boards fitted. He didn't have any big cracks so it took him a lot longer than the other men. But anyway he got fifty cents a day for that and he thought that was better than nothing. Well he never wrote my mother that there was a depression. After a while he thought there must be something better and he had talked to all these men and they said if you go down to the mine maybe you'll like it down there and the pay isn't as bad now as it was then. That you'll be getting much better pay if you so. So he said he'd try it.

I Is that a mine in Ely?

R In Ely right.

I Okay.

R So he went into the Pioneer and my father was deaf and they didn't have very many safety things at all at that time. One man was given to him as a partner and he knew the work and he said to be very careful and if he hears a crack somewhere to run. Well my father didn't hear and he said it was a terrible time to be down there so he kept watching the other men and when they ran he did too. Although no serious accidents did happen while he was there, every day great tons of steel and rock would come down.

I That was an underground mine?

R Yes, they were all underground mines. Hibbing is the first open pit mine. He decided there must be something better in America that to go into the earth to work. He decided that he wasn't going to work there after that day, that was his last. It was very hot and humid and smelly there so he asked people to take him up to the surface that he didn't want to work there anymore. The man said that'll be the day when I go up the skip with one Finlander on it. You stay down here until the rest of the men go up. Well my father had quite a temper and he decided well I can climb out of here, there's ladders.

R So he started climbing and he climbed and climbed and he was all in. Well he thought I've climbed this far, I'm certainly not going to climb back. Finally he saw some light and he knew he was near the surface. When he got to the surface he laid on the ground for a little while and he never went down again. Although he kidded about it quite a bit. Mr. Buckner told him I don't know what we're going to do about this, there just isn't anything else. Well in April of the next year, see my father came in 1900 and this was April of 1901, it was still winter and my father thought there must be something here, not just wood cutting. So we moved to Whitton and Whitton was quite a little place. It had 7 saloons and only 5 little homes on the other side which belonged to the Village. On the Lake side where the mills were there were several homes which were built for the private companies. My father never had any formal education but he had learned figures enough that he could figure out measures and stuff like that. They put him into the planing mill and gave him time to study it and see what it's all about. When the boards came from the mill they were planed and you measured with your eye to see what kind of a piece of lumber you could make out of it. Then it went through the planing mill and then up to the piles to be treated. They didn't have any place to dry the wood so they dried it all outside.

I Weathering.

R Yes, weathering, that's what you call it. He got to like it quite well. His first paycheck that he got from there was \$1.35 a day. When he took that paycheck he stood there and said I wish everybody in _____ could see me getting a \$1.35 a day. My mother cooked at Hendersons, that was the first big boarding house the Finns had. Both companies, Knox and St. Crois or the mills had built great big boarding houses. The men could stay there for very cheap board. Of course in the wintertime the men slept in their clothes because there was no heat. So he decided he would see what he could do there and he decided he was going to build a home. At that time these Finns were holding these building bees and a lot of men came over and helped each other. My mother was cooking for the Treeses. The Knox owned the mill but the Treeses were the ones who were running it. She took care of the cooking and washed the laundry. She worked there until we were able to get our own home.

I Excuse me, can we go back a little bit. You mentioned that your father came over a year ahead of your mother.

R My father came over in June of 1900

I Was there any reason for you and your mother coming over later?

R Well we didn't have the money and my mother and father didn't know exactly what it was going to be like here. Then when my father decided that we could all be here he didn't tell my mother that there had been a terrible depression. He told my mother to sell the house because we had built a new house and we didn't have to borrow the money. Of course we came in the hole of the ship.

I Was it hard for your father to get the money to come over?

R No he had his own money to come over. At that time it didn't cost like it does now. He came the cheapest way on the ship, as far down as you could get. He sent for us then and felt that he would find something. He rented the tools to build the house and it's still standing now. I often thought that I would like to go in it to see if I remember anything from then. I was small then, I was only four then. I was three when my father left Finland and four in August so I was going on five when we came over here. When we built the house we decided to take boarders just like everybody else. I always kidded that they built the houses right close to the sidewalks so they could catch the men as they went by. Everybody had boarders, some poeple really had boarding houses that they really made a business out of. Well we didn't have that many men. Fourteen was the most we everhad. We didn't have the room to house all those men either. We felt that we were doing quite well. The boarders paid \$10.00 a month and you'd get their laundry and everything else. When you had that many men you had tohave a worker and we had a girl working for us. She got paid \$10.00 a month. My mother saved and cooked and canned and picked berries and put everything together. We had cows; wenever had too many, four was the most we ever had.

I Did you own your own land for pasture for the cows?

R Well the cows could go anywhere.

I Even down main street?

R Anywhere. They were just as eligible for walking on the main road as we were. Whitman didn't have anything except those mills and a little later on, I don't remember when the _____ and Hopkins Mill came in. They built their mill on what we call the point and that is in Lake County. So when the Finns got together they had to have some sort of social living so they put on plays and so forth. Then they decided to build a hall. Well the Treeses people decided to give the land to build the hall. They built that right on the border of Lake County and that was very nice of them. Then when everything got bigger and the mills grew and in the summertime there were over 2,000 people living in the mill. Then we decided we wanted to better our situations. We tried to get them to have less hours in a day and a little bit more money. Of course even today if you start to talk about anything like that you're pointed at and they think there's something wrong with you. So we decided to go as a group and ask them. See they didn't charge us for the land for the hall. So we decided to build a hall over the border in St. Louis County and then themen wouldn't be under the command of the mill and have to cater to them. Although they were very nice and there were no arguements at that time. As they grew bigger they kept trying to get the men to unionize.

I In otherwords, the lumber company or mill built the hall?

R Yes.

R The Finns built the hall but the lumber company gave or donated the land. They donated most of the lumber for that too.

I But they did not want the people to participate in labor movements of any kind?

R That's right. They knew what it would turn into because they had been in places where it had happened before. I don't know if it was always the Finns who were trying to do that or other nationalities too but in this area it was the Finns. They felt there could be something better and they weren't asking too much. We were in St. Louis County and moved the hall there we felt there wouldn't be anything to worry about because if we moved the hall on that side they couldn't say anything. They felt we gave you the lumber, we gave you the land, why aren't you satisfied? We didn't know if they would say that.

I Whose hall was this, a particular group?

R Community.

I Community Hall.

R Yes, just as it is the community church and that was built by everybody.

I Was there any particular group that came into control of that hall?

R Not at that time.

I A socialist or religious group or anything?

R Not right then, but then later on young people came there, alot of young people from all parts of the country. They were young and they felt that should have a place where they could have meetings and hold dances. Then when we asked should we have bylaws and people live by these bylaws when they members and they should pay a membership fee. It was very small like fifty cents a month in order to get money. We held the paper sales and basket socials in order to get the money in and get dishes for the hall. Then they wanted to hold dances there and some of these old old people, of course my father was old too, felt we were going right straight down pergatory if we were going to have a dance there. They thought that was terrible. So there was a fight. They hauled the young people into court. Of course some of the people had more sense than others and they said if anything like that should come about we should have bylawsand we should have these laws in minutes everytime we should state exactly how that hall was built and who was in it. So we could prove just how this hall was built and that it was a community hall and not built for just one organization. So they hauled us into court and we went to Duluth and we won. We kept it very very clean and we had a policeman there from Ely and if you smelled of liquor out you went. We also had a very very strong Temperence society. That's the way that went. Finally we had to make it larger because it was just getting too small.

I You mentioned that they moved the hall.

R Yes, across the border.

I How did they do that?

R They had

I It couldn't have been very far then

R No just across the border. They knew we were going to move it and we explained why, that it should be a Finnish organization and should be under no other control. Well you know yourself, you've read enough Finnish history to know that they were battered and killed and so forth. We felt that we shouldn't demand too much but only what is coming to us. Then we put on plays and at first we got real nice returns.

I Were they Finnish language plays?

R Yes, and we had some very ambitious people. Of course they were all amateurs

I Were you ever involved in any of this?

R I was in all of them

I Do you remember the names of any of them?

R Oh yes.

And then there was a historical play but just at this moment I can't remember the name but that was very ambitious and then we also had Leo Tolstoy's Reserection and that was a big thing. Even when we moved the hall, the hall was so small and the stage so small we had to use all of the stage so we'd have to go through one side and come from the outside through a window. But it was lots of fun and everyone did their share and we all enjoyed it. We did this for years and years and then when the mills closed people started to go away.

I When did the mills close?

R I think the mills closed in 1915. I don't remember the exact date. In the wintertime the group was very small because all the men went to the lumbercamps but in the summertime it was very big. We had all our 4th of July celebrations and the Ely people came there too. The Ely people had a very nice band and the band came over there and we had all kinds of contests and we had a real nice time.

I Were there any Finnish musical organizations or Finnish bands?

R Most of them, or I wouldn't say most of them but alot of them in the Ely band were Finns. Then we had a chorus and we joined with the Ely people because we couldn't get enough people so we joined with the Ely people and we had a very very nice chorus. We even went out of town to put on our shows and that was really something. We met two times a month and everyweek we had something doing. We would have these apron socials and people would donate the cloth for the aprons and then donate their time to sew them. They never got paid for doing that. Then we sold them for whatever we got. Then we had a library with over 600 books which was quite alot. All of the books were from Finland and now from Canada you can get books from Finland. When the mills closed the council that was running the town decided to sell the hall. So the hall is now on the other side of the lake as a tourist lodge.

I Do you know the name of the resort?

R No, I don't know the name of it. Anyway my mother and father and the other older people really felt bad about that because so many many hours of work were put in there. We really felt bad. We couldn't get enough vote to keep it there. First they said let's make it a _____ but you couldn't do that because it was way to big for that and upon the the hill. My mother and father felt terribly bad. They were sitting at the living room window watching and my father's says the hall is rolling down the hill.

I You mentioned your father's _____, is that a diary?

R Kind of like a diary yes.

I Do you still have that?

R I have parts of it and in fact we never knew he kept a diary until he died. He had his own little writing desk and no one was to go in there he was the only one. We didn't know about the things he put in there. He loaned an awful lot of money to people. He bought 32 tickets.

I Let me get this straight your father send money to people in Finland to buy tickets to come over here.

R Yes, he bought 32 tickets. At that time you had to have \$5.00 of American money to buy a ticket for America.

I Then we they got over here they were supposed to repay your father?

R Yes. And they all did but one and my mother was scholding him about this. She said where would I be if they didn't pay me that money. He had a strange habit but it was his habit. If he borrowed money from someone he said he would pay it on that day. My mother would say well gee you don't have to say exactly what day. Maybe you won't have the money that day to pay. He would say I'll borrow the money from someone else because I'm building up my name.

R And he did. He went to the bank to get a loan when we got our house. He took two other people with him when he went to the bank to get the loan to vouch that he was an honest man and Mr. White said your name is as good as gold we don't need anybody here to vouch for that. It wasn't a big loan but it was enough. Nowadays I don't think you could walk into the bank and ask for two or three hundred dollars like that. In a way it showed the old country way of honesty and he just couldn't believe that anybody could be dishonest. I'm glad he isn't living today. Then we built the sauna. Well we wouldn't have built that sauna but _____ owned a small sauna and it was on top of the water. It was on the river and in pretty bad condition and he wasn't even going to buy it because he said I'm not going to buy that, unless you sell the house because you had to go on the land of the house and then the river was there too. He said if somebody lived in that house and owned the land and said you can't go on that land well then you can't I don't know where he got that idea. So they sold the house to him.

I Was that a _____ sauna?

R No, it was heated from inside but it was a big sauna because the mills were going then. Well he was going to take insurance on it then. They said you don't own that water and we can't sell insurance on anything that is on water. He said how come it was built there all these years and he said well no body knew it was there. Nobody contested it but we can't sell any insurance for that. So my father said I can't start building on anything I can't insure so we bought the property across the street about five or six lots from there. So we built a house and a sauna there. And we were able to run that sauna for such a little bit because everything cost such a little bit then. Ten cents for each bath and towels and soap included. And until the mills shut down and it was a good thing that the mills lasted that long because my father was able to pay off everything that he owed that he owed. We were able to live there and then now of course it's torn down because I sold the building after my mother and father died. The man that bought it was going to build on it but he didn't, it was too run down.

I Have you ever left this area?

R Just that time from March until April. From March 1900 to April 1900

I What kind of education did you have?

R My education was only the eighth grade. My mother wasn't a terribly intelligent person but she still had some old fashioned ways and she felt that the girls don't need the education because they get married anyway.