FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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R: My name is Amanda Wiltinen Larson. My parents are John and Selma Wiltinen. My dad was born in 1883, Essoyapie, Finland, and came to the United States in 1899 at the age of sixteen and died when he was 36 years of age. My mother, Selma Kooigala Wiltinen was born in Soomi, Finland in 1888, and is still living. She celebrated her 86th birthday on September 7th, 1974. My father first came to Cooks, Michigan, a lumbering area near Alger County near Manistique where the Finnish people pronounced Manistikoia. His father was already here but went back to Finland shortly afterwards. My mother came to Dorsey, Michigan, or as it is presently known, Sundell, Michigan, in Alger County in 1909 to work in her cousin's boarding house. In the meantime, my father following the lumber moves, had located Dorsey where he met my mother. They were married in October of 1909. Three daughters were born in rapid succession. Children in those days were born at home with the aid of a midwife. Mrs. Rosendall whom for years I have thought on as abomumm, helped to usher me into the world. Very soon after her daughters were born, mother became a midwife herself and helped to deliver many many babies, among them, two sets of twins. Among the last ones she helped to deliver was a baby girl who was born with several defective internal organs. Mother insisted that a doctor be called. He did come and said that nothing was wrong with the delivery, but the child was born with a defective heart and so on. He wrote out a certificate of death and said the infant would die momentarily; but the baby hung onto life for several days. Mother went each day to care for the mother and the baby. On this particular day she was so tired out that she stretched out on the floor when she got home and she lay there half asleep and half awake. The infant came to her and said, "I can't die because no one has given me salt." Mother immediately arose and hurried back. She told the mother...the parents were unchurched...what the baby had come to tell her and then went to the infant and made the sign of the cross and blessed her in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Immediately the infant let out a long sigh and went to her maker. Shortly after that, we moved to Negume and mother refused to be a midwife when there were doctors available right in town.

Mother believed that cleanliness was next to Godliness and kept a clean, comfortable and happy home for her husband and children. My father was an avid reader and often read aloud in evenings while Mother did handwork. This is the way I learned to read in the
Finnish language at an early age sitting in Father's lap or peering over his shoulder as he read. My father subscribed to a number of Finnish newspapers and Temperance periodicals.

There was no church in that short-lived community and so the visiting pastors, the Rev. J. H. Haaninen, Rev. (???) and Rev. (???) would visit and hold services in our home.

Education: I started my education in a little one room school in Vale Township in Alger County in a lumbering community then called Midway. This place no longer exists but it was only a few short miles from the present Forest Lake. I remember that first school very well. It wasn't red in color but had all the qualities of the little red school house...the big wood stove in the middle of the room. I don't remember having an individual desk, in fact, they were double and anchored solidly to the floor. I sat with an eighth grade girl, a neighbor, who was supposed to look after me. Her name was Hilda (???). They were all-day sessions, not half a day like the modern kindergartens are; so often in the afternoons I fell asleep with my head in Hilda's lap. In those days, two small buildings sat discretely apart from each other and from the school building. There were no names on them but the older pupils helped the younger ones know which was which. The teacher sat in front on a slightly raised platform. There was a long bench on which we sat facing her when we were called to recite our lessons. There was a place to hang our raps and to store our lunches. A common water pail sat in the back of the room with a dipper. Many of us had a tin collapsable cup in our lunch boxes; but I don't remember any epidemics resulting from the common usage of the dipper. It isn't too terribly long ago that the common cup was used for Holy Communion in many churches and it is still in use today. Most of the pupils in that school were from Finnish homes. There were a few, very few, Austrian and Polish children but they were in the minority. Finnish was spoken freely at recess time. I, myself, did not speak English when I entered school. Being the eldest child, my two younger sisters learned the English language from me before they entered school.

From this lumbering community we moved to a forty-acre farm in Lawson, Michigan. In those days Lawson was a busy railroad center. Three trains met morning and night in the depot. Because this was a new settlement, Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company had just logged the land and sold it to small-time farmers, there was no school. For the first year we rode the train to Dukes, three miles away. The school board paid our fare, ten cents a day, to us directly, so we often walked home in the spring to save the dime. There too most of the pupils were from Finnish homes. We had a very young teacher from Ishpeming, she was Finnish also. The bigger students, there were many teenage boys, gave her a very bad time and she was replaced after the second month by a very large, mature, matronly-type person who held a tight reign on the boys. Then we got our own school in Lawson. It was converted from a boarding house...tar-paper covered, drafty. The teacher again was Finnish, from Gwinn, her name was Alma Aho. A proper school house was built, but by that time we had moved to Negaunee. I was in the seventh grade. I remember the principal,
Nellie McCaleb. She was an educator of the old school. We marched from class to class single file with no sound and no deviation from the line or from the routine. But she really cared about the children and their progress. She would visit classrooms constantly, walking around the desks; and if a pupil was having any difficulty, she asked him or her to come to her office after school and then you really were well instructed. Her sister, Julia McCaleb, was the math teacher. She was a very good math teacher, but she could be quite sarcastic at times. I remember her more for the music she taught us and from her I learned to love Irish songs. Catherine Sullivan, my literature teacher, I remember very warmly. She is still living at the age of ninety-six. I remember several of my high school teachers, but the outstanding one was my ninth grade English teacher. She was Miss Lena Smedman. The Smedman family was important in many ways in the Finnish community of Negaunee. Lena Smedman taught hundreds of freshman boys and girls the rudiments of good manners. We sat at a table properly set and we learned how to eat as ladies and gentlemen, how to introduce people, how to behave at school dances. We even had rehearsals in this field. Yes, we learned how to write letters, thank you notes, essays, to appreciate good poetry and good literature; but I'm sure, Lena Smedman's course in etiquette and good manners has saved the day many many time over for many Negaunee students of the twenties and thirties.

After graduation in 1928, I attended Northern Michigan College for a year and a summer and started my first teaching assignment in September, 1929. I was nineteen for a few weeks that fall. This was a two-room school where I taught the primary grades. The school was different from the first school I attended because some progress had been made in that we had indoor plumbing and furnace heat, and there were individual and movable desks. During my second year of teaching, I moved to a one-room school in Negaunee Township. This too had a furnace in the basement and indoor toilets and separate cloakrooms for raps and lunches. I spent three years there and I loved every bit of it. I then went back to Northern Michigan University for my degree, but I might describe those early schools in just a little more detail.

When I started school, the teacher had to keep the school room clean and heated. She had two rooms attached to the back of the school where she lived because the school was situated all by itself midway between two lumbering villages. Some of the bigger girls took turns staying after school on Friday night, sweeping and cleaning. I remember as young as I was and because the older girl who was my guardian was staying this particular week, I was allowed to help. I guess the only thing I did was to hold the dustpan. Anyway, when we were finishing, a man with a horse and wagon was passing the school house. We lived a couple of miles from school so we were going to hitch a ride home but the teacher came from her quarters and looked so forlorn and she said that she had made a big pot of cocoa for us and wouldn't know what to do with it, so we stayed. That was my introduction to cocoa and sad to say, the excitement of being able to help the older girls in this task, I had to make a detour to the back of the building and give up all that lucious drink. Nowadays,
I have to give up cocoa for a different reason...for weight reasons. I sometimes wonder how that young woman must have been lonely all by herself out there in the boondocks.

Wherever I taught, I always had good custodial help; in fact during my tenure in the Negaunee Township School, the custodian was a lady who lived within hailing distance from the school. She told me I was to send a child running across the field to get her when there was an accident; but I often took care of that myself. Sometimes when just before lunch hour I had cleaned a small child's breakfast, it was hard to keep the sandwich down. Today a child goes running for the custodian and disinfectant soon erases the odor of those other smells.

In the olden days, children walked miles to school. There were no buses, car pools or such. In fact, during my first year of teaching at Negaunee Township, I had to walk three miles to school and three miles back. I've always been an early riser and always had to be on the job early. I can still visualize those early morning walks and actually smell the air with the frosty tang of October. I bought a Model A Ford with my mother's help in the spring and the car salesman taught me how to drive it; but for the fall months I walked. It got dark early in November, so I would sometimes ask one of the older girls who lived closer to town to wait for me while I got ready for the next day's classes and walk a part way home with me. Our school days were much longer then than they are today. Some mornings the cows were already outdoors and I remember a pesky little cat who became entranced with my blue lunchbucket. If the cows had become friendly, I don't know what I would have done as I was afraid of cows in those days. Thank God, the bulls were penned. Cows weren't the only problem, however, for example one morning a car with four young men stopped and offered me a ride. They were, of course, inebriated and just coming home from an all night binge. I declined and took off on a shortcut over the hill; but when I got to the bottom on the other side there was the car parked and waiting for me. I again refused a ride. They followed me for some time. My heart was in my mouth, but my guardian angel was watching over me and they finally tired of their game and drove off.

The teacher's status in those days was different than it is presently. Whatever she might have lacked, adequate salary, teaching aids, approved teaching load, etc., she did possess standing in the community. In the early days she made her own decisions and backed them with her own authority. She had no superintendent, no principal, no social worker, no nurse to help her make decisions concerning the welfare of her charges. There were no guidance counselors to advise her over the correct relations of her pupils with the group and no psychologists or psychiatrist to scare the living day lights out of the parents in case those relations went awry; but she had to comply with certain rules set by that community. She had to watch her dress, right down to the color...browns, blacks, grays. Red brought the taint of Communism. I remember that as a growing girl, we were never allowed to wear red to church. We didn't have red clothes period. How different today. While I was still working as an elementary school
principal, student teachers would come dressed in the shortest of short skirts and even staff members would come to work in weird getups. Shoes were oxfords, practical and servicable. I did have a daintier pair for Sundays and social events. Today, pantsuits are in and teachers who one day have on a scanty skirt come the next day dressed in a long mumu and don clogs and sandals one day and the next high lace shoes. In the early days, the teacher's behavior had to be above taint. No deviations were allowed. A married woman could not teach in those days. As I said my first teaching assignment and I did make an error, I said I was nineteen for the first few weeks when I began teaching...I was eighteen. The other teacher had been secretly married during the previous summer. I was the only one who knew and, of course, was sworn to secrecy. The husband was downstate so that made it easier for her to fool the community; but it put me in a rather awkward position. The young men of the rural community were anxious to date the teachers. Two young men who were brothers and good family friends came to take us to the movies in Marquette. Later when it was discovered that my partner was married, I was really put on a hot seat. This same situation developed at a box social where the teachers were quite an attraction. Today the single woman is very much in the minority. Married women teachers are the rule. And also, teachers have much more freedom socially and can live their lives in privacy. They cannot be fired as easily as in the days of yore. Maybe the fact that single teachers had to board in homes and not live in private apartments and homes of their own brought their lives under closer scrutiny. While teaching in Negaunee Township during the months of December, January and February, I stayed at a home near the school on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday nights. It was a Finnish home. I walked home on Wednesday and Friday nights. I had cooking privileges. The parents slept downstairs, but the three young men...two a little older than I was and one younger and I slept upstairs. My bed was in a separate room at the end of the upstairs and the men slept in the unpartitioned remainder. I had to walk through their quarters to get to my room. The sad part was that the wood stove was in their part, so I was instructed by my landlady to leave my door open to keep from freezing. I sometimes had some heart fluttering when I went to bed; but I usually had to don my coat or my flannel pajamas and even put a wool cap on my head as the stove died down and the frost glittered on the walls. Of course if one of those boys had got any ideas, by the time he would have reached the real me among all those wrappings, I could have screamed long enough to wake the household. I still shiver thinking of dressing in the mornings. I had no problems the following year when I drove my car except on some winter days when the road wasn't plowed after the night's snowstorm. When I came to an impassible snowdrift, I jacked up the car and put on the chains and went my merry way, all ninety-five pounds of me. Now, I wouldn't know how to change a tire. I did have a set-to with the oldest son who thought the teacher was his property. He used to bring me a pint of milk every morning so I didn't have to carry it from home. One day in the spring when I was back to walking home everyday, he waylaid me on the road. He had a camera and wanted me to pose for him. I didn't like the man and I was slightfally fearful of him and maybe just felt tired a mean that night, so I said, "If you can get a picture, go ahead but I'm not going to pose for one". Well, the next morning when he delivered my milk, the sparks flew as he lit into me. His language was not very clean. I was really scared and didn't know what to do or say, so I walked into the girls cloakroom and stayed
until the children began to arrive. Needless to say, I carried my own milk after that. But there is a point to this caper. By the time I had received my degree and was teaching in Owosso, this young man ran afoul of a conservation officer who had caught him illegally hunting. So, my erstwhile boyfriend lay in wait for this officer and killed him and dynamited his body. He in turn was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment at Jackson. From there he had written me a letter which my sister never forwarded to me. In fact she burned it so I never even saw it. He cleverly interspersed a message in Finnish in the letter which read, "Send me a saw". My guardian angel was watching over me again.

Boards of Education have changed. I remember that during my first teaching assignment, a Board member who had barely a third grade education, sat in my schoolroom for the better part of a day. I didn't resent that, but I did resent the fact that he came dressed in his workclothes and wreaked of barnyard. He was Finnish and I was very surprised that any Finnish person would go out of his home dressed in that fashion. Today's board members are doctors, lawyers, bankers, etc. They do not hire as such as they did in the early days. The Superintendent and other administrators do the hiring today. In the earlier days it was easier to obtain a position, however. In those days they came looking for you. I was contacted by a board member for both of those early teaching jobs.

Parent involvement in schools was different. In the early days it was unthinkable for parents to come to school except in cases of life and death. They did attend the annual Christmas program and the end-of-the-year picnic. The teacher, however, was invited into the homes for meals that were superb masterpieces of culinary art. Not as varied as today, but oh, how tasty. I often went home with my car trunk filled with potatoes, turnips, carrots, side of beef, large crock of butter which the host had surreptitiously loaded while I was inside enjoying myself. Today the schools are open and the parents come and go as a matter of course. PTA's for this reason I feel are not as important as they were when they were first organized. Then they taught parents that it was their right and privilege to go to school often.

Today, many and varied programs are presented in the schools, but religious connotations are taboo. Those early Christmas programs were planned around the true Christmas story and were memorable events in the life of the community. The board gave me a goodly sum of money to buy each pupil at least three presents. From Thanksgiving on, every Saturday was spent in shopping. My sister gave up her Saturdays to help me. The adults exchanged gifts also and there was always a little something for the teacher. The program was rehearsed for weeks and there was a real live Santa Claus to distribute the gifts...a role that my sister portrayed most realistically and excitingly one year.

Speaking of religion in schools, when I taught in Owosso, we started each day by reading a specified passage from the Bible. We were not
allowed to comment at all, but it seemed to start the day off on the right track. Today the by-laws of the PTA state that the pupils cannot be exploited to give programs. But back in 1938, PTA Meetings were held in the afternoon. I remember my principal after hearing my class do some choral reading, ask that they perform for the PTA. I still thrill in memory to their resitation of the Twenty-Third Psalm which they did in unison. I like to think that in trials and emergencies the memory of that psalm has brought strength and peace to those dear pupils of mine.

What about salaries? The salaries of the early days would either bring smiles of derision or snorts of unbelief from today's educators. I started teaching at $810 a year. In my second year, I received $1,000. In the depression year of 1934, my salary dropped to $600. When I came to Marquette in 1950, my salary was $3,150 and when I retired it was considerably more than $10,000. Today's beginning teacher's salaries are edging up to the $10,000 mark.

What about the pupils? They too have changed. Technology has changed and shaken society. Parent attitudes are changed. In earlier days, the teacher was always right. Today, many parents side with their children regardless of how wrong they may be. Discipline problems are greater today, but human nature being what it is, I'm sure there were problems in the former days also. My first contact with that was in the school where I started my education. Many of the pupils were teenagers and were probably up to mischief. I remember very clearly the young teacher bringing out a strap with nails sticking out of it. She extracted a promise from the big boys to behave if she destroyed the strap without using it. It was rather a dramatic moment when she dropped the strap into the big wood stove. Personally, I had learned a sure-fire method of discipline from my mother...the eyes did it. I remember from those early teaching days visiting a family with five children in school. The mother told me that her youngest boy, a first grader, was the peskiest of her family. She said to him one day that, "I bet the teacher has to give you a licking." "No," said her boy, "she won't touch me, but boy can she look dirty."

What about the curriculum? Today's open classrooms have nothing on the old fashioned one-room setup, although all grades, kindergarten through eighth grade plus 4-H Club work, were taught in one room by one teacher. She was smart enough to recognize that she could not teach all things to all pupils, so she initiated a system of teacher aids. Some of the older girls were sent to the cloakroom or to a corner nook with younger children to give them their spelling words and drill them on their multiplication tables and even listen to them read. I had some very dear seventh and eighth grade pupils. One of the boys who was much larger than I was, actually only three or four years younger, told me that I need not come out during recess, he would oversee the playground. He did a superb job, but one day a little boy hit him with a rock. He had a gash in his head and bled quite profusely. He accepted my nursing ministrations and kept telling me, "It wasn't anything." His mother was dead so I wanted to give him as good a care as I could give him. The bigger girls seldom went outdoors for recess, but kept younger brothers and sisters on their toes with flash
card drills in mathematics and reading. The theory that pupils were to study on their own while other classes were reciting...that was the theory, but actually they often listened in, you might say an earlier version of educational TV because the triumph and successes and failures became a matter of public interest. Watergate Hearings had nothing over on us. This listening in caused some pupils to develop out of their grade level, but isn't that true in modern-day classrooms? Homework as such was relatively unknown and is a comparatively recent development in the educational field. Perhaps those early scholars were less well trained than today's scholars; maybe they were smarter and didn't need to spend the day and half the night getting their lessons; maybe it was the way the country school was run, everyone listening to everyone else. The pupils picked up a sort of learning by osmosis. Then, of course, they could do their homework while the classes were reciting which had no interest for them.

Let's go back a little bit. After I received my AB Degree in 1936 from Northern Michigan University, I went to teach in Owosso for three years, then to Negaunee. I taught a class of mentally retarded children for two years in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, and in 1950 I moved to Marquette where I served as an elementary teacher, and in 1954 as an elementary school principal. I retired in the spring of 1972 at age sixty-two. I did teach night school. It was a class for Finnish-Americans...one lone Italian woman...to learn the English language.

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My next experience was in the fifties in Marquette. These were all Finnish people newly arrived in America. They were a job to teach as they had been schooled in Finland and were familiar with the methods and technics of learning and just a wee bit about politics.

I first voted for President in 1932. Our family has always leaned to the right politically. I have been a Republican all my life. I have been faithful in exercising my right in local, state and federal elections and just a little bit about religion. Both my parents came from stanch Christian homes and they in turn have raised their children in the Lutheran faith. We attended Sunday School, were confirmed and taught Sunday School for many years. We sang in choirs, belonged to youth groups, Luther League, and to women's organizations serving as officers in most of those organizations. I did serve as financial secretary at St. Mark's Church here in Marquette on the Board of Trustees.