FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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1.

I: Your name is Senja Maki?
R: Yes.
I: And this is Eli Minnesota? What is your ___________name?
R: Maunu.
I: And your national origin is Finland.
R: Suomalainen.
I: And you were born in ________________?
R: ________________
I: What land is ________________
R: ________________
I: Which is way up in the north country.
R: ________________
I: And your vocational occupation is housewife.
R: ________________
I: Did you have any jobs when you were younger?
R: When I was younger I used to work in a hotel as a waitress.
I: I see, when was this and where?
R: The ________________Hotel right here in Ely.
I: I see, most of these places are gone now.
R: That hotel burned down
I: And the occupation of your husband?
R: Merchant.
I: Okay a merchant and he ran a clothing store here in Ely
R: ________________
I: He own's Maki's clothing store.
R: Yes, of course he worked for others before he got his own
I: Ya, I remember Mike Murphy had a store here in Ely.
R: Yes. and he worked for him.
2.

Where did your husband come from?
R Lupua.
I Lupua. Which is in ________________.  
R Yes.
I What was the occupation of your parents?
R Just ordinary people.
I ________________farm?
R
I When did you come to the United States?
R I came when I was four years old and I'm eighty-five now.  
I Eighty-five now. So you came in the late 1800's then?
R Yes.
I Where did you come when you came here?
R Well father had been here before but we came to Franklin
I Franklin Minnesota, which is near where?
R Oh about a 100 miles west of Minneapolis.
I Why did the Finns choose to settle in Franklin Minnesota of all places.
R I don't know but there seems to be quite a few of them.
I Yes, there was quite a large settlement. Many of them were Lustadian
You were a Lustadian then.
R Well I had to go to church with them but I don't know if I was ever a member.
I Were your parents Lustadian?
R No, they were not but the people I stayed with were
I How long did you live in Franklin?
R Till I was 16.
I Then you moved to Ely?
R Yes.
I Why did you come to Ely?
R Because my mother was here.
I Was she working here?
R No she was living there with her family. See my parents were divorced and she was remarried and living in Ely.
I Divorce is really unusual among Finns, it must have really been a traumatic experience too say the least.
R Oh yes.
I Do you know why your family came to the United States?
R The same reason as everyone else
I Better land, better country?
R Yes.
I Life was tough in Finland.
R I suppose.
I Small farms and that sort of thing.
I So do you remember anything that your parents said about life in Finland?
R Well it's pretty hard for me to know because I wasn't brought up by my parents. After the divorce father went his way and mother went her way. So I don't remember very much about that.
I So you didn't have the home memories of what the home country was like.
I Do you remember what the life and farming was like in Franklin, they had pretty good land there.
R There was some pretty good land and some good farmers there.
I Was there a lot of dairy farming in Franklin?
R They farmed everything that all the other farms have and there was some dairy farming but I don't know to what large extent.
I How big were the farms in Franklin if you happen to remember, were they good sized farms?
Pretty good sized. I think they ran about forty acres.

This Franklin settlement was one of the older Finnish settlements.

It was.

It's sort of like Kingston and Cocato where my wife comes from.

Well I think a lot of those people who first came to Franklin first settled around Red Wing. Then from there they came on to Franklin. At least the people that I stayed with did. Her name was Mrs. Anderson. I think when they first came they came to Red Wing and then onto Franklin from there.

Here's a question that you might not be able to answer but give it a try anyway, what do you think your biggest accomplishment in life was? I suppose there were many but can you think of one that stands out in your mind?

I don't know.

Raising a family I suppose.

Yes, raising a family and being a good citizen.

Being a good solid citizen.

Yes. And a good Suomalainen.

And a good Suomalainen, yes, I guess that's how I remember you, the maki's were solid citizen types.

We always tried to do the right thing.

That's right. What schooling have you had?

None _______________ that was it.

____________ that was it, is that right. And yet I hardly consider you uneducated, are you self educated then?

I read a lot, I've always loved to read.

What have you read, the Finnish newspapers?

Everything, I did go to school for three years so I passed into the fourth grade.

Three years of school where?

In Franklin.
I So you had some elementary education.
R It wasn't much. I walked three miles to go to school every day.
    That was quite a chore then.
R That's right.
I You talked about reading newspapers, what newspapers did you read when you lived in Ely?
R I read ________________
I I take it that given your good use of English you read English newspapers also?
R Oh
I And I noticed that your library had a lot of books, some of the newest best sellers, kind of a well rounded reading program.
R I always loved to read.
I This is one of your biggest joys, reading.
R I had some trouble when I had a cataract and have to have it removed. That is when it bothered me the most because I couldn't read.
I That's what my grandmother says too if only the eyesight would remain
R Oh yes, it's a wonderful thing to have.
I Now your English is unusually good, where did you learn English?
R By the way.
I By the way, is that right.
R Yes
I Did you have to work hard at it?
R I don't think so, I wanted to read and that's how I learned it. Taking part in different things and going to different organizations that's how you learn.
I You know one of the things that we discovered when we did the study at the University of Minnesota which I was involved in. It was called education of the new immigrant on the Mineral Range in Minnesota and one of the things that we found out was that all the immigrant groups even in the first generation, those that came from the old country,
I learned how to speak English very quickly with night school and so
I especially feel that people in the Iron Range and especially now
in Ely learned English quickly than people in the other parts of
the country. But most of the people I know from Ely for example kn-
how to speak English.

R I agree with you on that.

I And the remarkable thing is you don't really have a bad accent. I've
seen third generation kids with accents so thick you could slide them
with a knife. You have hardly an accent.

R I know.

I Gus's English was very good too and he had to learn it of course be-
cause he was a merchant. Working for Mike Murphy he had no choice but
to learn good English.

R Oh yes. Patty Vale was his first boss and he owned it with Mike
so he worked with him until Patty went to Virginia and then he worked
for Mike until he took it over on his own.

I I see. What was the attitude of your parents or the people who raised
you towards formal education, did they believe in education?

R Well they were just ordinary people, they didn't stress it. They didn't
have the job of educating me, just keep me until I was able to go on
my own.

I What was your attitude toward education when you raised your own family?

R I always wanted them to have an education because I felt that's
thing you can never throw away.

You sent all your children on to college?

R They all had a chance to go if they wanted to. Of course they couldn't
go too far.

I So education was a very important part of your life

R Very important. Gus and I wanted our children to get their education.
Like I said before that's one thing you can never throw away.

I I think we have a tendency to think of education as that which only
happens in public schools it's obvious to me, you've had three years
of education but nobody would guess that. You seem to have as much
education as people who have college degrees. So obviously you are
self educated and you've done this by reading. What else educated
you? Any societies you belonged to, Kaleva for example.

R I suppose Kaleva, Eastern Star where we had a reading part and then
the group that your mother belonged to
Right ________________

R  We still have that going.
I  That's still going. It was kind of a Ladies Aid but a Reading Ladies Aid.
R  The Ladies Aid is different, this was just a group of women.
I  I see they got together to promote reading.
R  We had a regular program.
I  A Book Review of some sort.
R  Not necessarily but we had a program of some poetry, or some current topic or something like that.
I  That's remarkable
R  We still have that going and that's been going pretty close to 40 years.
I  Who started this?
R  Well I'm one of the charter members.
I  Okay, now this is important why did you decide to start a ____________
R  Well I don't know we just had this idea and there were five of us who were the charter members.
I  Was it a love of learning?
R  Well yes, but we just wanted to know what was what.
I  That's rather remarkable I think and it was known as the ____________?
R  That's right
I  How many members are left?
R  We have about nine.
I  That's really something.
R  We had as many as twenty years ago but there's only nine of us now.
I  Part of the reason for such good education is there are excellent schools here in Ely.
R  Oh yes.
Did your children go to the Ely Junior College?

Yes.

Then they went on to the University and that sort of thing?

Yes.

Do you know how much education your husband had?

I think he had about four or five grades, but not much more than me.

That's all.

Yes, that's all.

Do you know how old he was when he came to the United States?

Nine.

Where did his parents move?

To Ely yes, his father was a shoemaker.

Now tell me a little bit about your employment history, you worked as a young woman where?

At the Vale Hotel.

At the Vale Hotel which is now gone.

That burned down. Then the same party took over the Exchange Hotel I worked there. Those were my main working places.

Then after that you married and settled down to raise a family.

Yes.

And become involved in community life here.

That's right.

Tell me about your husband Gus's employment history, what did he first do as a young man?

He was working at the mine shops.

Then from there where?

Then Mr. Vale got him to work in the store.

He had a clothing store.

Yes, Mr. Vale had a clothing store.
Then after he worked for Vale's you said he worked for Mike Murphy.

Yes, after Vale's moved to Virginia. Murphy took over the store so then he worked there.

Then after that he started his own store which was known as what?

Maki Clothing.

He did reasonably well as a merchant?

Very well, I think he was very well liked.

He was very well liked, I had that feeling about him too.

I think he liked people and people liked him.

A mutual sort of thing.

That used to be a kind of a place to meet. There was always a gang of guys there.

You mean it was like a _______________?

That's right.

Oh, I see. Did he specialize in any kind of clothing, miners clothing or camper's clothing?

Everything. He carried a very good line of clothing.

He took pride in himself as a clothing merchant then.

Oh yes. He had been working with clothing for such a long time that it was just like part of his life.

I don't know if you want to answer this question and you don't have to but were you good friends of the competitor, Billy Mills who was a local Finn?

Oh yes.

There was no animosity at all?

In fact you both belonged to the same church and the same organizations.

Oh yes.

Of course a lot of people traded both at Maki's and Mills

Oh yes.
In fact I remember in our family we had to be very careful and go fifty, fifty.

You had to.

Talking about the Maki Clothing I take it you traded at the Finnish
Company too then.

Oh yes.

I forgot to ask you earlier about the Finnish Stock Company but were you a member of the Stock Company?

No.

You were never a part of that.

No.

It was kind of a unique store, kind of a general store that catered to Finns of course. They kept a big line of merchandise I remember.

Oh yes

Talking about employment, do you recall any of the strikes in Ely? Let's see you left Ely in 1904 or 1905?

1904 or 5

Do you remember at all the 1907 strike?

That was the year that we were married.

Do you remember much about that strike? Were people from Ely blacklisted for example?

There were some.

Was there a lot of bitterness in Ely over this?

Well I don't think so, there was some but not too much.

Tell me about the strike in 1916? Do you remember any incidents about that strike?

I didn't know too much what was going on because I had my family to take care of.

You were plenty busy then.

I was busy with my family and we had a house full of roomers at that time.
Would you care to say what your husband's attitude was toward the strikes?

Well he tried to do the best he could.

He didn't get involved in strike breaking or anything like that?

No, he tried to keep away from it.

Well it would have been dangerous for him to get involved anyway because he needed the good will of the people if he wanted to survive as a merchant.

That's right.

This business of the strike and this whole business of the Finnish worker becoming a radical, what sorts of things do you remember about the Pink Hall in Ely?

Well they used to have entertainment there.

Drama's and stuff like that?

Oh yes.

After 1914 this group became IWW?

Yes

Were they nasty people or did they create any problems in Ely?

I think they tried not to. A lot of them had to get their bread and they had to be nice.

There was no use in fighting the hand that feeds you.

That's right.

I'm testing this question out and I'd like your opinion. I don't think the Red's in Ely were very strong. One of the reasons that they weren't very strong is Ely was sort of off the beaten path anyway. Another reason was the white elements in Ely were very strong overpowering people. In my mind as a youth these were terribly strong people, they were good leaders, they were involved in community affairs and respected.

Well there were so few families that went to Russia.

The ____________________________ went to Russia.

Oh yes. After they got there they found out it wasn't as rosy as they thought. When he got there he wrote to ___________ and asked him to try and get some names to support him to try and get him out.
Is that right?

He did.

He got out?

He got out. Gus wouldn't sign for him. He felt he was always anti-
Red so he wouldn't sign for him. He never came to Gus's store after
he came back.

Is that right?

Yes, he knew who signed for him and his wife got into Finland and they
got back here. She's living but he's dead now. I think ________
is still living with his daughter in St. Paul.

Did they change their attitude at all when they came back?

No, I don't think they changed their attitude at all.

I know Matt Laitala and some of the Laitala's and I know they were
both Church and Socialists. I know Mutti was both that way and this
is an unusual family who mixed the two things together.

It sure is.

It's kind of hard to make a mixture out of it but somehow they did.
Do you remember the days when Mutti Laitala made speeches in the Ely'
High School about Socialism?

Oh yes.

That must have been quite a scandal.

Oh yes, but they were very strong church people once they got going
in the church.

They were, they were some of the meaning people in the church.

They were very nice people.

Yes, they were good people and fine people. They were strong people.
This is a loaded question but do you think Socialism was a bad thing
for Finns in America? Looking back on all these years what did you
think of the Socialist activity which was terribly strong especially
in Virginia.

I don't think it did any good for the Finns.

You don't think it helped the Finns?
It brought them down?
It brought them down.

You would feel the kinds of things that brought the church up would be the Temperence Societies and the Kaleva and especially the Church

That's right. The Temperence Lodge you have to give them alot of credit, they did an awful lot.

They sure did, they salvaged alot of people in those days.

They sure did.

Were you involved in the Temperence movement here in Ely?

Oh yes. I was a member for 40 years and then for a few years after that.

Forty years

Yes, and then there were only five of us who could come to the meeting so we decided we were going to disband. But that lodge had been going for 70 years at that time. So we called each member even though they didn't attend and see we had this insurance that we gave each member $100 at the time of their death and we had this money in the bank so we divided it between the members. Each member got their hundred dollars and whatever was left we gave to the Minnesota Temperence Fund.

Where are the records?

They're in the Archives in Hancock.

So the Temperence was very much important.

Yes, very important. For a young man I think it was one of the best things that could have happened.

Are you suggesting that alot of these guys had a liquor problem here in America then?

Well that's a loaded question

They must have had some kind of a problem

They must have.

I've never seen so many bars in my whole life as in the city of Ely. Obviously somebody is doing some drinking here.

I guess they do.
I  It seems like the Temperence was a good thing.
R  It sure was and I always stuck up for it. I joined the Temperence when I came here I joined.
I  I know Mrs. Leino was always a member of it and part of the mythology in our family was she wouldn't even use vanilla because there was alcohol in it. I think that was a myth but she was somewhat like this and I guess you have to admire the activities of a group like this. They stuck up for certain kinds of principles that were beneficial to the life of the Finns here in this country.
R  Oh yes
I  Tell me about the Depression era, for example, what was business like at Gus Maki's clothing store during the depression.
R  Well I guess we all had our share of that.
I  It was tough going?
R  It was tough going, but we made it.
I  Did Gus have to extend a lot of credit to people?
R  I suppose of course that's the way it is whenever you're in business. He ever get taken by Finns?
R  Oh some of them.
I  Most of them paid their bills
R  Most of them. They were mostly honest and good people.
I  What about the miners in Ely during the Depression did they have work?
R  I suppose whatever they could get
I  From what I understand the guys would work maybe one or two days a week.
R  They would work in the woods or they had gardens and there was a lot of poaching going on, they shot meat and they used to net fish.
R  Oh yes.
I  So the Depression hit Ely pretty hard.
R  Oh sure because we were just ordinary working people.
Do you think Ely will survive as a community, do you think it is strong as a community?

Looks like it.

Because of the Babbot development for example.

We were just commenting on that a few days ago, that within a year and a half they have about twenty new establishments here.

Twelve?

Twenty.

You mean small businesses and that?

They wouldn't come here unless there was some future here.

That's it, there has to be something.

So you have hopes for it.

Oh yes.

There isn't much future for iron ore anymore because it's all underground and too deep.

No

Why did Gus get involved in politics?

Can't make out.

So he was one of Ely's leading citizens.

Well he tried to do his best.

Were there a lot of Finns involved in politics here in Ely.

Oh, there were quite a few.

One of the things that I've noticed and I've interviewed a lot of people on the iron range that people of the Finnish origin were less involved in other communities. The Slovaks usually ran this

I suppose they are the majority there as the Finns are the majority here.

The Slovaks have kind of taken over.

Why have the Finns fallen back to the wayside what's your theory about that?
Well I don't know, we still have some of them that are still interested in politics but not too many.

I wonder if the Finns tend to take the back seat when it comes to politics they aren't really aggressive enough. Do you agree with that theory?

I think in some ways and I'm terribly interested in politics and I've tried it myself I had the theory that the Finns could have done better in politics. When you think of the eighth district you think of Bill Ojala and a lot of people don't like Bill Ojala because his politics are quite radical. But really who represents the Finns in the Congress. None of these men representing us are Finns and really the Finns should have been more active in politics. I think in Ely there was an unusually amount of political activity.

I think before we used to have so many people involved in politics now we haven't.

Now the next question I have is a loaded question and don't answer it if you don't want to because it's so obvious. Did the Depression of the thirties change your political opinion at all.

No, I don't think so.

Okay, one of the things I learned on the Iron Range is that I learned a lot of tolerance to other people. I had a lot of good Slovenian friends and my feeling is that the nationalities got along pretty well in Ely.

I think anyone who has a family you just have to get along and tolerate them, you just have to.

Well this has been a most interesting interview and thank you.