FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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This is an interview with Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Niemi of 441 Pinemill Ct., Virginia, Minnesota, conducted by Adrian Niemi on April 18, 1975.

Mr. Niemi, can you tell us where your parents were born.

My parents, Alex and Hanna Niemi came from Finland in the early 1890's. Dad came from (?) and Mother from (?). My mother told us that she first saw my father in a boarding house where she was working. She said that there was the man that she was going to marry. Mother said that it took two years, but she married Dad. They were married in East Tawas, Michigan where Dad worked in the salt mine for awhile and from there they moved to Kenton, Michigan where Dad worked in a lumber mill. I was born there in 1901. When I was two years old we moved to Winton, Minnesota, for a few years before coming to Virginia, Minnesota where a new lumber mill was being built, the Virginia & Rennie Lake Company. Dad worked there as a lumber weigher and scaler.

Do you remember why your parents left Michigan? Why they came to Minnesota?

Well, I think Dad heard about lumbering and he preferred lumbering to salt mines. Salt mines, he said, was kind of a dirty job...it was wet job underneath in the mines so he wanted to get up in the fresh air.

Do you know how long you were in Winton?

We were in Winton about two years, I think.

Then you came to Virginia?

Yeah, when I was two years old we moved to Winton, Michigan...Minnesota for two years before coming to Virginia, Minnesota, and I attended Sunday School and was confirmed at the former Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church. Victor Koosistu was the pastor at that church at that time. And I went to school here through the eighth grade. I started to work in the lumber mill when I was fifteen years old. I had to lie about my age so I could get a job at the boxboard yards; and at sixteen years of age I had a full-man crew loading lumber into cars which were to be shipped out. I was grader and scaler. Would you want to know about the working conditions?

Okay!

Well, there was a mixture of nationality working at the milling yards...
Finns, Swedes, Norwegians and Greeks. There were more Finns than others...I had a crew of all Finns and during World War II...World War I rather, I had a Finnish girl tallying for me. I started working in 1916 at two dollars and seventy-five cents a day which rose to three twenty-five a day which was the standard wage for common labor then. During World War I wages rose to five dollars a day...we worked ten hours a day. Then they hired women to work at that time too in the boxboard yards and in the mill. There were two mills at the Rennie Lake Company which was the largest white pine lumber mill in the world. The big mill had five band saws and one resaw and the other mill had two band saws and one resaw. And then in the winter when shipping was slow, I scaled loads at the mill. I estimated the board feet in each load that came from the mill and ticketed the load as the lumber piler was paid by the amount they piled.

I: How did you estimate how much wood there was?

R: Well, I knew the amount of board feet in each board and then I estimated how many boards were on that load and I just multiplied by width by the length by the height. That put, in twenty-four hours from the mills, approximately six hundred thousand board feet of lumber in twenty-four hours. Each mill worked two ten-hour shifts so there had to be a lot of space to pile that lumber to be dried. There were three yards altogether with tramways built about eighteen feet high with double tracks on top of each tram and single tracks below the tram so that the lumber piles could be piled high to dry and take less space. There were regular railroad tracks between the trams so that cars could be loaded there. The tracks below the tram were narrow-gauge tracks and those on top also for the four-wheel trucks to travel on. There were miles and miles of tracks in the yards.

I: Do you remember what a typical work day was like?

R: Well, we started to work...the day shift started to work at seven o'clock and we worked until twelve then we went over and took an hour for dinner and we came back and worked from one until six; and them were real long days especially in the summer time and even more so in the winter time when it was cold.

I: Were there any attempts at labor organizations...socialists organizations?

R: Yes, they tried but they never got anyplace. They couldn't get enough men to join the union. They tried to get eight-hour days there, but they couldn't make a go of it...until of course then when everything else went eight hours like the mines, well then the mill went on eight hours. They had battery-driven motors to pull these four-wheel trucks with loads of green lumber from the mill to the tram...the tramway where they were to be piled and on top of these trams there were what we'd call teamsters. They had one horse with a chain on and he pulled each green load to the pile where it was to be piled. They had about...in each yard they had about four horses and he had to take care of all those loads coming from the mill. Course it wasn't too much of a job, but it kept him busy all morning from the night shift loads that came out of the mill. And the motors that they pulled the dry lumber being loaded on top and below the tramways to the planing mill where the boards were planed and finished off in many different kinds of building
materials. And from there they were loaded on railroad cars from the planeing mill, of course. The output from the planeing mill was about two hundred thousand board feet a day. And it was nothing unusual to see oh about thirty or fifty carloads of lumber both rough and dressed being pulled out of there from the Rennie Lake Company yard, every day in the summer time. Now I'll tell you a little bit about the logging camps.

I: Just a minute...do you remember any unusual events in the lumber mill. were there accidents, for instance.

R: Oh yes, there were two men killed. Two breakmen on these motors... there were two breakmen on each motor and they were coming down a hill one day, kind of a slant tramway; and it was a wet morning and the breakman jumped off to get...to turn the switch and he slipped and he was killed right there, run over. And it happened twice that way. That's about all I can think of. I don't know of anybody else being killed.

I: Any serious injuries?

R: Oh yes, twice I had a man get through finish loading a carload of lumber and he was standing on top and we used to put stakes up on each side of the flatcar and they used to load that up between the stakes and then we'd put wire across from the stakes and tie them down so they'd hold the lumber on the cars; and he was pulling on the wire one day and he fell off. He didn't get hurt though, he walked it off and seem as if anything was wrong and nothing happened to him. I know of one man who fell off of a lumber pile and well, he didn't get hurt bad either. Just lucky, I guess.

I: Will you tell us about the lumber camps

R: The logging camps which supplied the logs to the mill were about oh sixty miles north of Virginia. There were hundreds of men working at the lumber camps and the marjority of them were Finns. It was all hand sawing in those days...no chain saws. The logs were shipped to Virginia by rail and were unloaded on the lake here. There was a tressel onto the lake with two tracks from which the logs were unloaded. Hundreds of cars of logs came here every day from the logging camps in winter and summer. The lake was kept open in winter by steam being blown into the lake.

I: From the mill?

R: Yeah, from the mill and the mill was all steam...run by steam. They made their own steam to power...get the electricity to power their machinery there.

I: What did they burn to get the steam?

R: Sawdust and shavings...they used up all that. They didn't waste anything there.

I: Were the horses working at the mill yet?
R: Horses?
I: Horses working at the mill?
R: Oh yes, they had them there. Not too many, just on the tramways pulling the loads around pulling them from the mill to the pilers who piled the lumber down.

Stop in tape.

R: The mill shut down in 1929 because they didn't have anymore logs left out in the woods. They sawed everything down and they didn't replant anything like they should have done. They'd be sawing right now if they did; but they sawed everything down and everything was torn down.

I: Was the mill moved someplace else?
R: Well, the mill...well no, they resold everything and some of the personnel moved to Burnt, Oregon, with the Heinz Lumber Company which owned Virginia-Rennie Lake Company. He had another mill out there. Some of the personnel went out there to work and some of the men. No, there's nothing left there now but many memories. There aren't many men left that worked at the mill...I could count them on the fingers of my hands. And then after the mill shut down, I worked on different jobs...even worked at an aircraft plant in Englewood, California for almost four years during World War II. Then after the war was over, I came back here with my wife and I worked for United States Steel for nineteen years as breakman on the diesel engines hauling ore from the pits to the crushing plant where the ore was loaded onto ore cars and sent to Duluth to be loaded on boats to the steel mills. There were three mines in Virginia; The Reichileu, The Minnowas, and The Sauntree and also mines (?). I retired eight years ago from there.

I: Could you describe in more detail what kind of work you did at the mines?
R: Yes, I was...well, we had a fireman, an engineer and a breakman and I was a breakman; and we usually had about ten cars, what we call dump cars, and they'd go down to the pit and we'd spot at a shovel and I hadda get out there and then they'd load a half a car at a time and then I'd give the engineer a signal to move and he'd move a half a car ahead and then when that car was loaded, I gave him another signal and he'd move another half a car ahead until all ten cars were loaded. Then when they were loaded we take them up to the crushing plant and there they were emptied into a crusher or mixing plant and loaded into ore cars and sent to Duluth or Two Harbors, wherever they went, mostly to Duluth and from there they were shipped to the steel mills out east of Pittsburgh and Gary, I guess, Indiana.

I: Where was the crusher plant?
R: That was just south of Virginia...between here and Eveleth, it's still there...the plant is still there. They use it in the summer time, but most of the mining is done now with taconite mining and that's mostly mountain iron and the taconite mining is getting low-grade ore and
bringing it to the crushing plant where it's crushed and it's only about twenty-five percent ore. But after they get it crushed and it's magnetized, the ore is magnetized out of the rock, so that eventually it's about sixty-five to seventy percent ore and it's made into pellets. It's burned and rotated into big wheels...big drums...very large drums, and they keep on rolling it and they come into marble sized pellets. Then they're loaded...those pellets are let cool...are cooled off and are loaded into ore cars and then they're shipped to Duluth and then to boats.

I: Did you use to work summer and winter here? And you were on night shift sometimes? Was it pretty cold at night...winter nights?

R: You can say that again. In the mines we worked three shifts, eight hours shifts and it used to get cold in the winter time. I used to stand out there to load eight or ten cars of ore or even rock in the winter time I loaded rock, surface you know to get the rock out of the pit so they could get at the ore, then that was hauled out to the rock dumps...well that used to be a couple of miles out...and it used to get so darn cold sometimes. But we were dressed pretty well...we hadda be

I: Was it very dirty work?

R: It was dirty...it was very dirty work and I was gonna say, sometimes it'd get as low as forty below out there and I'd stand out there with the wind blowing forty below and if you get a...like sometimes in the winter time you get a car off the track, run into an icy rail or something and get a car off the track and we hadda carry what they call camel backs and put them under the wheels and that used to be a dirty job. By the time I got home, I was ore from head to foot.

I: Did it happen very often that cars went off the tracks?

R: No, not too often. I'm surprised but it didn't happen to often. And then, I was gonna say, at the crushing plant out there, it was the dustiest place to work. All dusty because everything was crushed and the dust just floated all around. The men had to practically take a shower bath after every shift. They had shower baths down there and washrooms down there where the men could wash up if they wanted and most of them did. I guess they all did for that matter otherwise they'd go home black...it was so dirty. Well, I can't think of anything else.

I: Any unusual events that happened in the mines?

R: Oh, we've had runaway cars down there especially they get down into the pit there, sometimes there'd be about oh a half a mile would be a gradual slope down into the pit and I seen a car break away from a train, a loaded car, and go down there...and you can't hear those cars, I'm telling you, they come so quietly...just like they're on rubber tires. You can't hear them at all and if you're on the track you're bound to get run over; but as luck would have it, nobody's been really hurt down in the mines, you know, killed. There's been a few narrow escapes.

I: So you've lived in Virginia most of your life then.
R: Most of my life, yes; and that's seventy-three years. Seventy-three years almost seventy-four.

I: Do you remember anything about early days here? What it was like growing up in Virginia?

R: Yes, when I was a kid, times weren't very good, wages were low, well of course, foodstuffs was cheap, but even then it took just about everything a man could earn to keep a family going and I used to go out...well bunch of us kids used to go out and pick up rubbers and sell them to the Jews in town. The Jews used to pick rubber and then they'd sell them and we used to get oh two - three cents a piece for a rubber, that was enough to go to a show. That was the only way to get money to go to the show. And then sometimes we used to follow a load of kitchen wood that they used to haul from the mill to different families, you know, and they'd dump them outside and we'd go and ask the people if they wanted it dumped into their basement. Well of course they would because it was kind of hard work to carry that stuff in and haul it into the basement and we'd get twenty-five to fifty cents for just hauling that into the basement. That didn't happen very often though; but once a week we'd earn that much money and we thought it was quite a bit of money in those days.

I: Do you remember anything about celebrations or Fourth of July celebrations?

R: Well, the Fourth of July celebrations were about the same as they are now except in those days the city would allow carnivals to come and put their tents right on Main Street and they'd have side shows and all kinds of games of chance and like that and then of course at night they'd have the usual fire works on Big Lake over here and everybody went there because there was no other place to go. Nobody had cars...very few people had cars in those days to go anyplace. And (?) those days they used to have up on what they call the Auburn Hill over here. Used to cook outside on an open fireplace...they'd cook all their coffees and stews and everything there; but they used to get big crowds there. We used to walk from...well it wasn't too far from here, about half a mile...we used to walk up to the hill there and they had all the program there and then, I think, in the evening they used to have them in the church or what was it they had them in the Memorial Building, I don't remember which. I think they had them in the Memorial Building...they had a recreation building here in town and they used to have the programs there in the evening... (?) programs.

I: There have been a couple of big fires in Virginia long ago...were they before your time?

R: That was before my time. I don't remember any...we had a few swamp fires out here...I remember one night we were all called out to fight a swamp fire out there. The wind was blowing towards the mill and if that had ever gotten away, it would of burned...well I imagine Virginia would have gone then. But I don't remember the early fires.

I: Was there any danger of fire in the mills...starting in the mills?
R: No, they never had any serious fires in the mills. Well, coming back to (?), in those days people used to come from all over, mostly by train, you know, because there were so few cars then. And they figured about ten thousand people at that (?) celebration in Virginia or any of these range towns; and there were lots of people.

I: Do you remember anything about local characters...unusual personalities.

R: No, I don't

I: For instance, doctors or ministers?

R: Quite a few Finnish businessmen in town like John Ketola. I was gonna say, Virginia burned down twice but that was before my time. I was talking about the Virginia businessmen, John Ketola, Saarom and Dr. Peterson and Jacob Mattson. There are quite a few Finnish businessmen in town...Conrad Mattson and John Mattson the baker...Conrad Mattson was in the real estate business I think...Dr. Reiha, he was a well known doctor.

I: What happened to the Finnish Zion Church in Virginia?

R: The Zion, well it was a Finnish Evangelical...it was the Zion that merged with the First Lutheran Church, Swedish church, and now they call it...it's the Zion Chapel now. But their main church is Gechemie Lutheran Church where we all go. And the ladies within the Zion Church have their regular coffee socials twice a month.

I: Do they still have services in Finnish?

R: Oh yes, Finnish services twice a month. We get quite a crowd. There's quite a few Finnish yet that like to hear a Finnish service. We go there quite often...to Finnish services.

I: Okay, is there anything else you'd like to talk about...any time in the past?

R: Well I can't think of anything except when I was a kid I remember the wooden sidewalks we used to have. Boy they were something. If you had a wooden sidewalk on your block, boy that was something. Then they tore them up and put cement sidewalks and paved the streets.

I: This is an interview with Mrs. Niemi...on Side 2
Mrs. Illma Niemi

I: Mrs. Niemi, will you tell us where your parents came from.

R: They came from Finland Ganuus, Finland. Both of my parents were born in Ganuus...they were married in Ganuus. They were both nineteen when they were married and my father came to this country first and while he was here their first child, my brother...older brother, was born and Mother and he followed my father here when he was aged eight months...about eight months. They came to the Dakotas.

I: Do you remember what year they came over?

R: Well, Mother came in 1906, so I suppose my father came about 1905.

I: Do you know why they came?

R: Oh, to the land of plenty, I guess. Thought there'd be good times and a lot of money which there weren't at the time. They went to the Dakotas and worked on a farm...my father worked on a farm and it was a big farm where they had a lot of hired help and my mother helped with the cooking.

I: Did your parents ever talk about what life was like in Finland before they left?

R: Well, Mother was from a very well-to-do home and she had a good life in Finland and Father was...well, not poor people; but I guess they wanted to get out and get on their own being young. And I guess Mother always regretted leaving Finland because she did have a much better life there than she had here.

I: She didn't expect to work on a farm when she came here, was that it?

R: No, I guess she expected to be a lady...didn't do much of anything and often she said she never worked so hard in her life as she did working on farms here and then after they came to Minnesota and they came to Sparta and Eveleth and from Eveleth they moved to Payne, a little farming place.

Do you know why they moved around so much?

R: I'm not sure, but I believe my father worked in the mines in Eveleth and there were so many strikes going on and a lot of trouble and that, so he decided to buy his own farm. My mother didn't like that she had to go.

I: Do you remember what year that was? 1913 or '14?

R: Well, I was four years old then when we moved to the farm. That would be thirteen...about 1913.

I: How many were in your family then?

R: My parents and three children. Two older brothers and myself and we lived in a...when we first moved there we lived in an old...
Mrs. Ilma Niemi

I: First of all do you remember anything about Eveleth? You lived in Eveleth before you moved to the farm, right?

R: Well, I remember some things. I can remember back when I was about three years old or even less and we used to go to Midsummer Festivals and I remember one year we walked from Eveleth to Elly Lake, my mother pushed me in a buggy, and our neighbors and friends, their mothers pushed their little daughter in a buggy and the rest of the family walked, my two brothers walked and my parents walked.

I: Do you know how far that was?

R: About four miles from Eveleth. And I remember the road was just filled and packed with people walking and horse carts and wagons and carts and people going.

I: Anything about the house you lived in in Eveleth or your neighbors?

R: Well, we did rent, I remember, and then my parents bought their own home and those days I think they had two rooms and they rented the rest of the house to two or three families and I believe they all had about two rooms and they all had two or three children. And then when my father decided he wanted to go into farming, they sold the house and we went to Payne, Minnesota, and well, that was all...

I: Where did you live when you first moved there?

R: Well, there was an old big run-down saloon...it had been a saloon at one time...a big building and we lived in there while my father was building our home. There was another family living there. They moved about the same time and we each had our own little two or three rooms each family. And school was started there in that building. There wasn't any school there, school building or any teachers. The school was...in order to get a teacher, the county to send a teacher there we had to have at least seven students...pupils. Well, they didn't have enough so when I was four years old, Mother had me sit in the school for two years doing nothing just so I'd be the seventh. And I hardly spoke any English then but I did learn English there then by the time I started school I spoke quite well.

I: Do you remember your father building the house?

R: Yes, I remember him building it. We used to go there every day and visit and watch. My mother would bring him lunch...it was real exciting getting a big house.

I: What did he build it out of?

R: Logs

I: Logs that were cut down right there?

R: On his own property...he had logged some of his own property and what do they call these corners they built then?

I: Dove-tailed?
R: Dove-tailed corners, he had that on the building and I always remember it being a real nice house...the arrangement of the rooms and for that time it was considered quite a nice home.

I: You didn't have electricity there then did you?

R: Oh no, I don't think we had electricity there all the six years we lived there...I don't believe we had any.

I: So, what kind of lights did you have?

R: Kerosene lights

I: Did you heat with the wood-burning stove?

R: I believe it was all wood that we burned.

I: How about refrigeration?

R: We had a little hallway where the stairs went up to the second floor and in that little hallway we had a little trap door in the floor to the basement...there wasn't any basement, there was just a dugout a little...and my mother used to keep all our milk and butter...it was cool. Kept everything down there and that's all the refrigeration we had.

I: Did your mother make most of the food and clothes that you used?

R: My mother made everything and she baked and canned and as we grew older we all picked berries all summer and all winter we had different sausages and blueberries, raspberries, strawberries and then they grew their own vegetables and mother did all her canning and she did sewing. She sewed for the neighbors too. She did that while we were in Eveleth too. She was a very good seamstress. At her home in Finland, going back to that, Mother's home...she did all the sewing for the family. She had to sew the clothes for her father, mother and all her brothers...all the clothes and her mother and older sister weaved the material and that was their different jobs. But Mother said she liked to work outside some so she didn't like the inside work especially in the summer time; but in the winters it was all...everybody sewed and they made their own boots. But Mother was a very good seamstress and sewer...she did a lot of sewing. She could have made a living by sewing if she had wanted to.

I: Do you remember that your mother cooked any foods that might be described as Finnish?

R: I think we had all Finnish foods...all sorts of different (?), and (?) and all that stuff and of course we had (?) and soups and then of course there was the American way...well maybe in Finland, I don't know...they cured their own hams, made head cheeses. When they butchered cattle they did all that and canned their own meat. We didn't have too much fish there, I don't think, there wasn't good fishing around any place there. And cheese, she used to make this Finnish cheese.

I: What kind of crops did you grow there?
R: Well, potatoes and of course we had...for cattle what would you grow there? Would that be barley and all that for cattle? Do cattle eat that?

I: No

R: I remember we had a fields of that

I: Oats?

R: Oats, I suppose, we had some of that and then of course vegetables and a lot of pickles. I remember the usual things, carrots and beets.

I: Anything you want to say about Payne?

R: Well, I think...I had fun there.

I: Any funny stories?

R: Oh, a lot of funny things happened...I mean in our childhood and I liked Payne because I didn't have to be out in the fields or do any hard work yet...I was too young for all that and my brothers worked hard. They helped out in the fields and they were janitors in the schoolhouse. I remember when we lived in that big old saloon building and like I said, we each had our own rooms, the two families, and there were just board walls between with I imagine had been papered some time...but they had knotholes in them and this other family had a girl just about my age, probably a little younger, and she was kind of a mean thing. And these were bedrooms and we were on the second floor upstairs and I remember one day I stuck my finger through a knothole and the girl on the other side bit it and I still have the scar on my finger from that day. And oh, a lot of little things like that. Then if I talk about cows, I remember we had a mean cow that the horns had been...do they saw them off...cut them off I guess...and that cow was always chasing me and it cornered me once near a tree stump and it just came around bucking and just rolled me all around that stump. And I don't know why I am deathly scared or afraid of cows, but I don't know why it was after me...but every time it seen me it would chase me. And then I remember Mother made me a new coat and we went to our neighbors...my brothers and I probably one Sunday afternoon because we were all dressed up...and I had my new coat and we were playing...it was early spring...and we were playing out in the yard and then I hung my coat on the fence post. And when I got through playing I was going to get my coat and here a cow was eating it. The only thing left was the sleeve hanging from it's mouth. And that was awful because we didn't get new things very often and here my brand new coat...I think that was probably the first time I'd worn it. Oh, and then there were a lot of happy times. The neighbors used to meet at Christmas time at different homes. I remember one home...well I don't think there were more than six or seven families there and we were all at a neighbors by the name of Johnson and they had us all there for Christmas and the curtains caught fire. The candles on the Christmas tree caught the curtains on fire during that time. There wasn't much...many gifts to be given around or passed around. We were so happy, I remember one neighbor lady gave me a bag of cookies one Christmas. We used to get pencils and apples and oranges and maybe
a tablet and that's about it

I: Did you get to towns very often...like Eveleth or Virginia?

R: Yes, we came here quite often. My mother and I came quite often...took the train and came to Eveleth. We visited with friends there because we knew a lot of people and had a lot of company from Eveleth. People would come down in the summer time and spend a week with us. I remember when I got...my mother and my father bought me a piano in Payne and boy that was something to have a piano. I think the little school teacher had a piano, a Mrs. Evans, and then us; and I took a few lessons from her but I don't know why...I guess we couldn't afford it or what, but then we came to town...when we moved to town I took piano lessons for a couple years and my teacher Miss Hayden, she told me that my parents were wasting money on me...I'd never be a pianist. And so, I didn't have anymore lessons.

I: How long did you live in Payne?

R: About six years, I believe, I was in Payne. I think we lived there about not quite six years.

I: Where did you go after that?

R: Well, we moved to town on Eighth Street, South, in Virginia. And there were some of my family's old friends they had met in Dakotas and there happened to be a little house for sale just a few doors down from them, so my father bought the house and we lived there. And it was small and he remodeled and made a two-story house and we lived upstairs and rented the downstairs. While we were in Payne, my father was in logging and that used to be a treat. Every Sunday we were allowed to go to the logging camps and we used to get raisin pie over there. We used to get it at home too, my mother used make pies; but it was such a treat to go over there and had a horse that we'd ride on...with one of these low things, just a runner on boards...sleigh kind of a thing, used to ride on that to the lumber camps. My mother used to cook for that...going back to her working cooking, she used to cook for the lumber camps some. I think she did all the baking...they had a cook there, but I think she did all the baking and she used to wash their clothes all by hand and all the family of five of us she washed clothes and I had an uncle who was a bachelor who lived oh about a mile or so away from us, and she used to do all his baking and washing his clothes. She used to be busy. She got up at four o'clock in the morning and worked until almost midnight. And then she was great at writing and reading...well then later at night when everybody else would be in bed, well that's when she done all her reading and writing and so, she didn't much sleep in those days. But I guess she enjoyed it.

I: What do you remember about Virginia at the time you moved here?

R: Well, by the time we got here...we moved here, everything was paved streets...no we had tar-log streets and the sidewalks were paved. I don't know, it was quite advanced in those days. And going back to Payne, we had one man that went into the service in World War II.
I: I think there was only one from there.

R: World War I?

I: World War I...yeah, sorry. And his name was Gus and we were so proud of Gus being in there and then he returned from the Army. So as the song goes that was so popular at the time..."When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again"...we all sang, "When Gus comes marching home again" and I think the school children would sing that maybe at the school program that they had. We were so happy. He was a bachelor..."And Gus came marching home again!" That was the only man that served in that. I don't know why my father wasn't called to service, neither were all the neighbors but they were in about that age group maybe...around their thirties.

I: What do you remember about growing up in Virginia? What were some of the memorable experiences?

R: Well, I think the church was the most important thing and the biggest thing in my life. Ever since we came here I went to church and Sunday School and all the doings. And we were real active at Luther Leagues and all that. And when I was confirmed I started teaching Sunday School and we used to have big confirmation classes and then we had a lot of church choirs...our Junior choirs and Luther League choirs, small children Luther League choirs and then the Senior choir and then I met my husband. We were in choirs...he was in the church choir, in what was called the Bierkman's choir...mixed chorus, is that what they call that...I can't remember; and we were both in that for many years. And my husband was in a double quartet...he had a very nice singing voice in those years. Was in a double quartet in church for many years. They used to sing on the radio too. And well, we've just been real active in church...well all the Finnish doings for that matter. We have always taken part in all of them.

you spend a night in a lumber camp once?

R: Oh yeah, that was in my...let's see...I must have been about fifteen or sixteen and my brother and his girl friend and I were going to go visit some friends that her father operated a lumber camp. It's located what's near Phifer Lake now, they used to call it Oggwom Lake. I don't know if that was the real name for it, but they called it Oggwom. So, we took the train to Britt and then we had a walk from there and it was a real cold...one of the coldest bitterest cold days I think that I've ever had...a strong wind and we walked from the station to the lumber camp and the only road there was a logging road that I suppose horses used to pull wagons to go to the railroad track. Well, we didn't make it up to the lumber camp during that day then. I don't remember what time the train came in...I think it must have been some time in the afternoon. So we stopped at the lumber camp at night and that was a cold night. It was a big camp...I think there were about eight or ten lumberjacks working there and they all had their bunk room and then an enormous big kitchen. The cook slept in the kitchen, she had a cot there and she had a table and stove and my brother was lucky, he got to sleep in the bunk room with the men while his girlfriend and I, we sat up all night at the kitchen table and just froze to death.
We couldn't have slept anyway because there was so much snoring going on. It was well, just like bull frogs, you know, you listen in a swamp the high pitch and low pitch and well they just snored all night long. And we were freezing and cold but we still had giggles over it too...listening to them. And then they all had their lumberjack clothes heating around the stove...the had a stove in that room, in that bunk room and it was warm in there and the odor was real bad coming from all their oily sweaty clothes. Well then in the morning the cook got up oh I imagine it was about four or five o'clock and we told her we'd been so freezing all night and she said that that served us right. Why didn't we put a fire in the stove; but we didn't dare start putting a fire in the stove at night. And we got up and had breakfast with them...I remember they had fried potatoes and great big slabs of pork chops or just salt pork...great big slabs and real thick...I often wonder if they even got cooked thoroughly, they were nice and brown; but it was good...and coffee. And well from there we continued on to the lumber camps or to the home where this girl's parents lived. I think we were there for about three or four days. That was during Christmas vacation. Then we got a ride back by horse and a sled. They took us all the way to Britt to the railroad station.

I: Do you remember anything about the ? Brothers? They used to live some place around there.

R: Well, I remember hearing about it and we used to drive past their place and they had these odd queer-shaped buildings. They were kind of like Japanese style. With the roofs extended out something like...and they're built up like that and some of them were sod roofs...I think they were sod on top that they used as a roof and one thing I remember, they had a...it was their wheelbarrow, two-wheelbarrow but it was bigger and an ordinary two-wheel trailer and they used to handle it by hand and they claim...there were two or three brothers, three I believe originally...and they were real powerful and strong men supposed to have been real big men...I remember seeing one or two of them in the yard once when we drove by and they were pushing that big wheelbarrow uphill and they claim that they were so strong that when the railroad started building the railroad there, they used to go and steal the rails...carry them home. And they used them in their buildings or someplace for foundations and all that. And they carried them many miles. Well, then they became old and in those days there weren't any nursing homes or any hospitals to send them and they didn't have any relatives, so they were sent to Luce Lake. So a lot of people thought that they were either that senile or mental cases. But then others say that they really weren't but there just was no other place for them to go when they became old. But there must have been something queer about them because of their buildings. I think there's one cabin left...I think there is and we have pictures of one building, I don't know what it was...maybe a barn or hayloft or something.

I: Were there any other unusual characters like that around?

R: Well, there's a family that lived near these people where I mentioned about going to their home that operated those lumber camps there, and they lived in a little two-room shack. Altogether they had had twelve children but when we got to know them they had four or five. And he was supposed to have been very well educated in Finland. They claim
that he was a college graduate in Finland and he did talk as if he had
and he did read a lot and you could tell that he had been educated; but
he was lazy. He didn't do anything around there. His wife did all the
work and some of the neighbors said that she used to carry in fifty
pounds of flour on her back from the store in Angora which was...gee,
I'm not sure how many miles that would be. Eight - ten miles probably.
And she used to carry flour there and they claim that she even carried
a kitchen stove there. And they didn't have any horses or any other way
of getting it. He did absolutely nothing there. Well then as the
children grew older they moved away, they got rid of that old farm
and they bought a farm further down the road which is a fairly nice
home. And the children all grew up and did quite well. Some of them
have been educated.

I: How about people in Virginia? Any outstanding characters that you
remember?

Well, no.

I: In the early days in Virginia, did you and your family associate much
with Finnish people?

R: Yes, we were mostly with Finnish people and I think that's one reason
why my mother never learned much English; although she taught us to
read English and that. And like in Payne she used to help us a lot
with that because when she came from Finland, well they moved to the
Dakotas which was all Finnish people and all her life she had, well
just worked, she worked in the...just among the Finnish. Not worked,
...they belonged to the same churches and the temperance society
which was all Finn where these people that came in from Finland they
got to work out and they all learned English. Like my mother-in-law,
she spoke good English because she went into family work for different
families and boarding houses and that's the way they learned English
but my mother never got to do that. She did start night school one
time...well, she spoke well enough that she could get by shopping and
visiting people. People could understand her she spoke that well.

I: There were enough Finnish businessmen in the stores around here to get
by with Finnish?

Oh yes, they could buy everything in Finnish.

I: Have you lived in Virginia all the rest of your life?

Most of my life. When we were married we moved into my parent's home.
Like I say, they used to rent the downstairs...when my husband and I
moved downstairs and my parents lived upstairs and then World War II
in '41 we went to California and we both worked there at North
American Aircraft, I worked there too, for about a year and a half.
And then we returned and lived at Lake Vermillion for four years and
we rented out a few cabins over there and then my husband went to work
for U.S. Steel, so we moved back to town and we've been here since.

I: You lived in the house on Eighth Street then again.

R: We lived in the same house on Eighth Street we moved into from the farm
and so altogether I have lived fifty-five years about since we first moved in that house. So I was gone away from there actually about eight years then.

I: Who was the minister at the Zion church when you came here?

R: When we moved to Virginia, I think Marijarvi was the minister because my brother was confirmed by Marijarvi and then Koosistu came in and I was confirmed by Koosistu.

I: Do you remember anything about Bouhistu?

R: Yes, I liked him very well. All the other people thought he was too strict and a real square.